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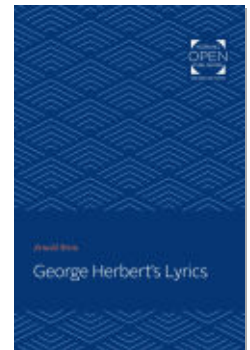
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Arnold Stein

George Herbert's Lyrics

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*George Herbert's
Lyrics.*



ARNOLD STEIN

George Herbert's
Lyrics.



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To Douglas and Hazel Bush

Preface

The principal aim of this book is to show, with as much clarity as I can command, why Herbert is one of the great masters of lyric poetry. As a writer he is brilliantly original and varied in his technical inventiveness. To improve one's understanding of his technique and its effects is to reconstruct, however modestly, his poetics, and to acquire in the process the means of relating these details to larger critical concerns. I am thinking particularly of questions raised by his diction, imagery, syntax, rhythm, by his organization of the imaginative materials of time and self-consciousness, by his development of a rhetoric through which he can master the intimacies of personal failure and (what is far more difficult) can express in language of convincing sincerity states of positive religious achievement. Of challenging interest to our own time is Herbert's quiet success in creating lyric forms which endow fixed beliefs, values, and arguments with the full individuality of poetic life and tension.

The book is intended to interest not only students of seventeenth-century poetry but also those readers who regard a major achievement in the lyric of any age as rare and valuable. One premise of such an undertaking is that every true poet must solve his own creative problems and that the solutions, though they cannot be appropriated and applied directly, nevertheless constitute a record of permanent value. It should not take long to discover that the charm of Herbert's being different from ourselves means little and resembles the holiday diversions of a cultural tour. Much of what he feels and says can still speak to us if we listen. His most deeply felt concerns have different

PREFACE

names from our own, but that barrier is one the true poet can easily teach us how to cross. Among those virtues of Herbert's poetic achievement that may perhaps communicate most directly to the modern reader, and will be demonstrated in this book, are the following: the dignity and force of human desire felt in his poetic acceptances; the quality of the effort he makes to arrive at a fully imagined present; and the distinctness within the unity of the multiple forms he creates, which demand from us a fresh sense of all the internal movements of a poem as both separate and related. George Herbert's lyrics are the expression of a complex and subtle mind, uniquely aware of itself and its fertile deceptions, yet trusting the depths of feeling, and trusting his own power to invent and order imaginative explorations of personal experience. Few, if any, lyric poets as fully use all their resources, or as intimately reveal themselves through the liberating mastery of artistic discipline.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to the University of Washington for the freedom of a sabbatical year and to the Graduate School of the University of Washington for assistance in preparing the manuscript.

A condensed version of Chapter One was presented as a Turnbull Lecture at The Johns Hopkins University and is published in *The Poetic Tradition: Essays on Greek, Latin, and English Poetry*, edited by Don Cameron Allen and Henry T. Rowell (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968). My study of Herbert's prosody has appeared in *Language and Style*. I am grateful to the editor of this journal and to The Johns Hopkins Press for permission to reprint this material. By permission of the Clarendon Press, all quotations from Herbert are taken from *The Works of George Herbert*, edited by F. R. Hutchinson (the revised edition, published in 1945).

My friends William H. Matchett and Thomas G. Rosenmeyer read some early pages of the manuscript, and I have profited from a number of their comments. My wife endured the daily pages over a couple of hundred lunches and was helpfully unconvinced by many things.

Contents

Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xiii
Chapter One: The Art of Plainness	1
Chapter Two: The Movement of Words	45
Chapter Three: Complaint, Praise, and Love	85
Chapter Four: Questions of Style and Form	137
Index	213

Introduction

The background study of certain attitudes toward expression that bear on Herbert's practice as a writer is presented here as no more than a sketch—a sketch that aims to be suggestive, a way of showing that these issues have some claim on our literary interest and that they are relevant to problems Herbert had to face in writing poems. If these matters are to be dealt with at all, they require a continuity of exposition that will not be possible once Herbert's poems become the center of our study. This Introduction will therefore have little to say directly about Herbert, and some readers may prefer to begin with Chapter One.

Perhaps a further prefatory note may be useful. What we gain from direct study of historical concepts and distinctions concerning the plain style will make an indirect message clearer. When we consider the poems that demonstrate Herbert's own art of plainness, and the questions of style and form that he raises and answers, we shall see the relevance, but also the relative inadequacy and crudeness, of the historical formulations.

Herbert is a self-conscious and articulate master of style, and especially of what has come to be called the plain style, a kind of writing far easier to recognize and admire than to describe or define. He is remarkable for the number of poems he writes about poetry and the writing of poetry; indeed, expression itself is one of his great metaphors, which both asks and answers questions. As a religious poet he must find and control the right style to address God, or to address himself in God's hearing. Sincerity, though essential, is not enough.

INTRODUCTION

Sincerity is a simple state, an ultimate goal reached by a process of endeavor which must overcome, not merely avoid, real difficulties. The standards that judge a process which may include some triumphs of negotiable, uncompromised failure on the way are no less exacting than the standards that measure ultimate attainment. If sincerity is thought to be always the same, always perfect, then we shall have to stand "like Janus in the field of knowledge," murmuring that "there is more than one kind of same." The silence of thought may be invulnerable, but no poet can be sincere in expression if he lacks art, and he will need to traffic with the risky materials of words and rhetoric in order to make good his individual sincerity.

To say that Herbert is a master of the plain style is to admit, among other things, the presence of skill and application, and in these admissions to imply differences in the quality and achievement of control. Mastery involves choices among materials that have a public history; the details, however perfect, lie partly open to inspection. One unbroken historical strand locates plainness in the humblest of the three traditional kinds of literary style. During the Christian centuries the plain style acquired additional importance as the proper vehicle of moral and intellectual virtues. The distinctive emphasis of Christian rhetoric we shall come to shortly, but since the main features of the style were taken over from classical theory and practice, let us look at these first.

The initial commitment was to clarity, as in dialectic and Socratic teaching. The discovery of truth was the acknowledged end, not persuasion; the approval of the gods, not the applause of men.¹ A characteristic manner was patient and good-humored, gently purging the mind of its conceited wisdom as one of the necessary tasks of education. But the problems of a mixed audience of both gods and men were hard to ignore. If the art of political life had been like the art of geometry, then Aristotle's *Rhetoric* would not have needed to distinguish between the discourse addressed to a subject and the discourse addressed to a hearer.² The stiffer Stoics characteristically

¹ Plato *Phaedrus* 273^o.

² 3. 1. 1404^a.

Introduction

refused to make the distinction and identified speaking well with speaking the truth.³

Whatever theory might say, in practice the plain style was composed of many features, not all of them perfectly realized or present in the same combination, nor were the ancient experts unanimous in their pronouncements. It was generally agreed that the style was modeled on the spoken language and deserved praise for its unaffected charm and absolute purity of speech. Not everyone, however, was fit to judge the faults and excellences of colloquial language, for the standard was one set by the most cultivated speakers, who would surely owe something to the discernment of their reading. Though plainness could be recognized by the many, only a few masters of taste, refinement, and the right kind of inner discipline could produce the admirable effects of naturalness and simplicity. The ancients, living in a world whose great and varied literature still flourished, were less disposed than their inheritors to draw pedantic lines of demarcation. It was possible to differentiate the moving powers of the most elevated style from the milder pleasures of the middle style without legislating the differences. The particularities of pleasure could be discriminated in regard to their practical function without insistence on the claims of moral distinctness. While being instructed by a good argument one might also be moved, perhaps permanently; and if the ordonnance and pace, and also the inseparable rightness of language and thought, gave pleasure, it was not an occasion that required one to suppress the consciousness of delight, or to justify oneself by declaring that all other pleasures derived from language were trifling or deceitful.

The working definitions did not prohibit a reasonable amount of traffic on the margins, with some liberty for discreet exchange and combination. Furthermore, the advertised simplicity of the plain style could support its share of the mysteries of expression. Contradiction and paradox managed to maintain their unofficial residence without noticeable embarrassment. For instance, mastery of the plain style presupposed discipline, a controlled integration of materials and a

³ G. C. Fiske, *Lucilius and Horace* (Madison, Wis., 1920), pp. 78–79.

INTRODUCTION

controlled relationship between the materials and the man giving them expression. The results were marked by naturalness and ease. But though details might be described and perhaps analyzed as part of a process of deliberate training, they could not be lifted out and directly converted to personal use and imitation. Such writing furnished valuable standards of achievement. The naturalness and ease were the product somehow of discipline; they were not superimposed and were therefore not detachable; nor could they be explained as a form of illusion: somehow they were really there, intrinsic, through and through. The conditions are perhaps no harder to understand than what Socrates told Charmides about the discipline of temperance, that in some of its aspects the virtue was characterized by energy, quickness, and facility.⁴

Discipline, skill, moderation, balance—these do not always by themselves promise naturalness and ease. Matters are plain enough when it is an Aristotelian mean, which avoids diction either too effeminate and mild or too harsh and rude, that is being sought.⁵ Matters are less plain when the element of chance is added, and controlled, as in the famous phrase applied to Horace by Petronius, that luckless luck of “*curiosa felicitas*.”⁶ But if it is hard to achieve ease, writers are not likely to keep that knowledge languishing in secret. Horace proposes to turn commonplace, familiar materials into poetry. “But you just try it, and see how much you sweat failing. And it’s really only a matter of order and connection. Still, one may be helped by knowing a few things, like how to get a new effect from an old word by where you use it.”⁷ The challenge of display and achieve-

⁴ *Charmides* 159–60.

⁵ “Quibus in rebus duo maxime sunt fugienda, ne quid effeminatum aut molle et ne quid durum aut rusticum sit” (Cicero *De officiis* 1. 129).

⁶ Petronius, 118.

⁷ I have put together and paraphrased lines 240–42 and 47–48 from the *Ars poetica*:

ex noto fictum carmen sequar, ut sibi quis
speret idem, sudet multum frustra que laboret
ausus idem: tantum series iuncturaque pollet.

dixeris egregie, notum si callida verbum
reddiderit iunctura novum.

Introduction

ment is one thing, but there are certain authentic difficulties that will not trouble a master less merely because he knows more about them. One mark of the plain style is brevity. “Be brief whenever you are instructing,” Horace declares, “so that what is said quickly the attentive mind can seize entirely and hold fast. One word too much will not be absorbed. But poets, alas, are taken in by how things look: I work hard to be brief and I get to be obscure.”⁸

In secular literary theory the local laws of appropriateness and the universal law of decorum exacted constantly varied demands. Even with no thought of the occasion or the audience, one had to know when the nature of the unfolding materials required modulating the style, in one or more of many ways, to what degree, and by what means. Such delicate maneuvers called for a swiftness and sureness of tact beyond the mere ability to write well in one style or to shift successfully from one style to another. The example of Socratic irony, to mention a single prominent consideration, encouraged certain kinds of flexibility in the art of being simple. To say one thing while meaning another, that was acknowledged as the best way to steal into men’s minds. Cicero thought the dissimulation most pleasurable and effective.⁹ And dissimulation, we know, can do other things, such as exaggerating the plausible until it gives up and comes apart, or sounding a note too high or too low in order to rescue plain truth from the company of dangerous friends.

These matters are capable of endless refinement and adjustment. When we come to Herbert we shall try to look at some concrete details for their own sake and for their larger significance as well. But let us now turn to an interpretation of the plain style in Christian rhetoric. For our purposes we shall not need to consider historical

⁸ *Ars poetica*, ll. 335–37, 25–26:

quidquid praecipies, esto brevis, ut cito dicta
percipiant animi dociles teneantque fideles:
omne supervacuum pleno de pectore manat.

decipimur specie recti. brevis esse laboro,
obscurus fio.

⁹ Cicero *De oratore* 3. 203. The device worked best not in formal oratory but when “*sermone tractatur*.”

INTRODUCTION

developments and fluctuations; the main issues and emphases are handsomely laid down by Augustine in the fourth book of his *De doctrina Christiana*. There he recovers and gives distinctive expression and emphasis to the best traditions of classical rhetoric. He assigns to each of the typical styles its regular function, that of teaching, or pleasing, or moving. But the middle style is carefully de-emphasized, and its function of giving pleasure is transferred, as much as possible, to the more trustworthy purposes of persuasion. Nevertheless, in the winning of souls, persuasion is a halfway station only; the goal is to move. And the high style called for is not an elaborate one deliberately removed from the everyday; instead, its elevation is primarily derived from the personal fervor with which the saving truth is expressed: "and if the beauties of eloquence occur they are caught up by the force of the things discussed and not deliberately assumed for decoration" (4. 20. 42).¹⁰ If the plain style receives the most important part of Augustine's emphasis, it was after all the style which apostolic writing most resembled, and therefore any argument seriously defending the excellence of Scriptural style would need to bring forward the traditional reasons for preferring and admiring the plain style. But since Augustine can ignore all the concerns and most of the techniques of artful hypocrisy, the separateness of the styles presents fewer problems to him than to his predecessors.

He can reduce barriers and propose flexibility. The Ciceronian distinctions relating subject matter to the level of style are not binding on a Christian orator, since all aspects of revealed truth are important and all are related. Granted, it is best to instruct in a subdued manner, to praise or condemn in a moderate manner, and to use the grand manner if one "is moving an adverse mind to conversion" (4. 19. 38). But the opportunities for flexible choice are constantly emphasized. "It is important to consider what style should be used to vary what other style, and what style should be employed in specific places." For instance: "it is within the power of the speaker that he say some things in the subdued style which might be spoken in

¹⁰ *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York, 1958). I shall use this translation throughout.

Introduction

the grand style so that those things which are spoken in the grand style may seem more grand by comparison and be rendered more luminous as if by shadows" (4. 23. 52). An effective part of his message qualifies the traditional separateness of the styles and curbs the dangerous tendency of the middle style to please for the sake of pleasure.

Most important of all, the true basis of Christian rhetoric is the unity of eloquence and wisdom. (The formula is one we shall refer to often, and it will prove useful when applied to Herbert.) When he speaks God's word, a simple shepherd like Amos provides an example of oratorical excellence that the converted teacher of rhetoric can analyze with obvious satisfaction. Even in the less figurative translation by Jerome the formal beauty is unmistakably there for examination, and at least one trope, of great power and beauty, can be singled out as being, to the best of Augustine's knowledge, not covered by the standard books on rhetoric. The real lesson, though, is that one is moved not so much by recognizing the technical skill of the passage as by "pronouncing it energetically": "For these words were not devised by human industry, but were poured forth from the divine mind both wisely and eloquently, not in such a way that wisdom was directed toward eloquence, but in such a way that eloquence did not abandon wisdom" (4. 7. 15–21). The authors of Scripture are both wise and eloquent—by inspiration. They use an eloquence which in part resembles that of pagan orators and poets, but "through another eloquence of their own," as it were. They neither avoid nor display eloquence, for they do not condemn and they do not seek it: "And in those places where by chance eloquence is recognized by the learned, such things are said that the words with which they are said seem not to have been sought by the speaker but to have been joined to the things spoken about as if spontaneously, like wisdom coming from her house (that is, from the breast of the wise man) followed by eloquence as if she were an inseparable servant who was not called" (4. 6. 10).

It was not Christian rhetoric that first discovered the unity of style and subject. What is effectively new is the assertion that this literary ideal can be taken for granted as a standard feature of the Holy Scriptures and of those other writings that reliably reflect their influ-

INTRODUCTION

ence. Inspiration, truth, wisdom, not infrequently discussed by the ancients, but with some diversity of approach and conclusion, are now given a unified definition. God inspired the Scriptures; every word is true and significant—the product of wisdom, the expression of wisdom, and in those who understand, believe, and act accordingly, creating wisdom.

Christian wisdom is no longer the knowledge of things both human and divine. Whatever St. Paul meant by “vain philosophy,” the warning could be adduced to cover, more than adequately, all of the claims of merely human understanding. And when he rejected the “wisdom of words” and the “persuasive words of wisdom,”¹¹ he made available a firm distinction easy to apply but a little too decisive should one wish to employ it as a critical tool for making any of the finer discriminations. When Augustine writes that “it is a mark of good and distinguished minds to love the truth within words and not the words” (4. 11. 26), he is echoing good and distinguished minds without regard to their knowledge of Scripture. He himself makes energetic efforts, immensely influential but no more than moderately successful, to explain the process by which truth emerges into words. In the formation of language within man’s tripartite soul, whenever the language is true a higher faculty has preceded the apparent activity of a lower faculty:

For spiritual vision is superior to corporeal, and intellectual to spiritual. For corporeal vision cannot exist without spiritual [which mediates, as it were, and interprets the reports of the senses] . . . but, on the other hand, there can be spiritual without corporeal, since the likenesses of absent objects appear in the spirit. . . . Likewise, spiritual vision needs the intellectual that it may be judged; but the latter has no need of the lower spiritual.¹²

¹¹ 1 Cor. 1:17, 2:4.

¹² *De genesi ad litteram*, 12. 24. 51; *Patrologia Latina*, XXXIV, 474–75; quoted from M. W. Bundy, “The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Mediaeval Thought,” *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, 12 (1927): 171. Augustine goes on to affirm that intellectual

Introduction

Truth in the word of Scripture, though a fact, has the advantage of acknowledging the presence of mystery, and therefore of encouraging some speculative caution and a certain allowance of generosity toward well-meaning colleagues. Truth in the words expressing wisdom of the world cannot expect equal treatment. The problems, however, were not unknown to pagan thinkers. In the *Phaedrus* Plato writes of “the word of knowledge which has a living soul, and of which the written word is properly no more than an image.”¹³ The metaphors sink deeply into Western thought, survive repeated use, and emerge, with slight adjustment, as a new insight that seventeenth-century rationalism can proudly hand on to the eighteenth century. Theories of style and decorum could not pretend to explain the transmission of truth into words, but poets and critics were quite used to distinguishing words that seemed more or less alive. The advice of Horace echoed through the centuries with a brisk and cheerful clarity that might have dismayed but did not. “The beginning of writing well,” he revealed, “is to be wise. The Socratic writings will make your materials available, and once you have thought these through the

vision alone never errs; in its final possession we love what we see and have what we love, but among its other attributes it is “ineffable.” On a lower scale, not even the shortest syllable can be pronounced unless it has been anticipated by an internal image. In *De Trinitate* (14. 16. 22) he comments on 1 Cor. 14:14 (“But if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful”): “For he speaks thus, when that which is said is not understood, because it cannot even be uttered, unless the images of corporeal sounds precede the oral sounds by the thought of the spirit.” Some of these matters are treated by Joseph A. Mazzeo in *Renaissance and Seventeenth-Century Studies* (New York, 1964), pp. 1–28. For a different approach to Augustine and the plain style see Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1965), pp. 27ff. In *Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study of the Plain Style* (Stanford, Calif., 1962) Wesley Trimpi presents an ambitious but often eccentric and arbitrary approach to the plain style. Since completing my manuscript I have read Douglas L. Peterson's judicious and patient study, *The English Lyric from Wyatt to Donne: A History of the Plain and Eloquent Styles* (Princeton, N.J., 1967).

¹³ 276^a (trans. Jowett, 4th ed. [Oxford, 1953]).

INTRODUCTION

words will come all right. Then, after you have graduated from imitation, look to the life and thence draw living words.”¹⁴

What are “living words,” and what can we make of distinctions between the “word of knowledge” and its “image,” between the “body” and the “soul” of a word? The interpreters of Scripture, though they repeat each other tirelessly, do keep returning to a set of problems that poets and critics are more likely to mention in passing. According to Wolfson,¹⁵ from whom I shall borrow most of the following examples, Philo is a major source for many of the attitudes and directions that come to be taken. From Philo the Fathers adopted the belief “that the Platonic ideas in their totality were contained in an incorporeal mind called Logos.” The hidden meanings of Scripture, unlike the shallow myths of the poets, are “modes of making ideas visible, bidding us resort to allegorical interpretation guided in our renderings by what lies beneath the surface.” What lies hidden is the inner meaning, unexpressed, the “soul” of the literal outer meaning, which is the “body.” The “mere letters of Scriptures” are like “shadows of bodies”; the meanings which can be drawn out correspond to “things which truly exist.” Paul’s contrast between the letter that “killeth” and the spirit that “giveth life” is a declaration that the true meaning of the written law has now been interpreted by Jesus and is now the new oral law, the living word.¹⁶ Paul’s remark, “But though I be rude in speech, yet not in knowledge,” pointed toward a breach between eloquence and wisdom, and Augustine would need to linger over the statement and qualify it.¹⁷ But the contrast between “letter”

¹⁴ *Ars poetica*, ll. 309–11, 17–18:

scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons.
rem tibi Socraticae poterunt ostendere chartae,
verbaque provisam rem non invita sequentur.

* * * * *
respicere exemplar vitae morumque iubebo
doctum imitatorem et vivas hinc ducere voces.

¹⁵ H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, Vol. 1: *Faith, Trinity, Incarnation*, 2d ed. rev. (Cambridge, Mass., 1956). The quotations are from pp. 96, 48, and 31.

¹⁶ 2 Cor. 3:6. I am following Wolfson, *Church Fathers*, p. 95.

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 11:6; *De doctrina Christiana* 4. 7. 15.

Introduction

and “spirit,” between “speech” and “knowledge,” like Paul’s pairing “all utterance” and “all knowledge,” could also be taken as a distinction between the literal and the allegorical meaning of words.¹⁸ For the living word of the new oral law continued to reveal further truth within it which also needed to be drawn out, and as the New Testament came to be interpreted by methods that had been applied to the Old, the range of philosophical allegory became wider and more assimilative.

The allegorical meaning, then, is philosophical and spiritual, the saving life, the soul of truth in words. The words are, by one of the radical metaphors that have, for better and worse, taken hold of men’s minds, mere bodies, made up of letters which are the “shadows of bodies.” Nevertheless, we are expected to believe that the living words of salvation are appropriately clear and immediate to the intended audience of common sinners. There also happen to be certain meanings held in reserve, though they are at the same time eternally present and available to the wise, who may have to prove their worthiness and be assisted by inspiration. The problems of reconciling such clarity and profundity, the fine points of immediacy and comprehensiveness, belong to experts in faith-and-reason. But the background which we have been sketching requires that we take a special look at the relationship between “making ideas visible” and the art of concealment. And since the apologists for allegory often raise the question of pleasure, we may begin by returning to Augustine’s treatment of the middle style, which was traditionally committed to the art of giving pleasure.

In the cautions he expresses, in the evident desire to curb the freedom often permitted the “delightful persuasion” of the middle style, Augustine reflects the best traditions of classical rhetoric. In view of the fantastic pedantry that preceded and followed him, one should perhaps ask no more. But one may still wish to observe that in the suggestions for regulating the middle style he is for the most part negative; toward the other two styles he is both positive and flexible. The desirability of ornament and pleasure is allowed a minor function

¹⁸ 1 Cor. 1:5; *De doctrina Christiana* 3. 5. 9.

INTRODUCTION

that can be treated as externally applicable, and that can be divided up and distributed between the other two styles. At certain moments the grand style can assimilate the qualities of the other two, for “who is moved if he does not know what is being said? Or who is held attentive that he may hear if he is not delighted?” (4. 26. 58). Similarly, the plain style of teaching can be persuasive and beautiful by the ways in which it brings truth to light, often unexpectedly. Nor is it denied some of the formal ornaments of language, if these can be made to seem natural and do not call attention to themselves. So the plain style may give pleasure by its own methods, and also by those more customary in the middle style. Indeed, truth “demonstrated, defended, and placed in triumph is a source of delight” (4. 26. 56). When all three of these tasks have been accomplished by the plain style, it has realized all of the aims of persuasion, is in fact three styles in one, and has been heard, “not only intelligently but also willingly and obediently” (4. 26. 58). On the other hand, the middle style of persuasion and pleasure, though it may assume characteristics of the plain style, must avoid the grand. Drawn upon by the others, the middle style is nevertheless carefully hedged in, limited, even isolated.

Augustine, one may say, does not have much to contribute to the questions that concern the interrelationships between pleasure and religious art. In his book on the Trinity the powers of the human soul are organized in a triple relationship answering his intellectual desire to achieve a model that is both integrated and fully reciprocal. But in treating the process of expression, with its hierarchy of corporeal and spiritual imagination, and the partly separate faculty of intelligence, as in his treating the three levels of style, Augustine is apparently content with drawing his triads into a much looser internal organization. Where he leaves himself particularly open to question is in his recognizing that the art of concealment leads to pleasure. At this point the rather arbitrary assignment given to the pleasurable middle style helps compound some of his difficulties.

In offering a passage from the Epistle to the Galatians as an example of the grand style which is plain and unadorned, Augustine pauses to comment: “Although these apostolic words are clear, they

Introduction

are also profound, and they are so written and commended to posterity that not only the reader or hearer but even the expositor has a task to perform if he is not content with their surfaces and seeks their depths" (4. 21. 45). The implication, clearly, is that the "surfaces," however admirable, are less rewarding than the "depths." There would seem also to be a suggestion of merit attached to the intellectual work itself. Augustine has in mind the philosophical and spiritual meanings that underlie the inspired truth, prophecy, and wisdom of Scriptural language. There are circumstantial differences that raise particular problems for the learned believer, since these deeper meanings may be sought beneath both apparent clarity and apparent obscurity. Obscurity, to be sure, is a plain sign that work is required. In a book where every word is presumed to have a particular meaning and purpose, whatever defies understanding commands effort. Indeed, the very presence of obscurity must be interpreted as indicating God's intention that man search and revolve the meanings of Scripture. The allegorical meanings discovered were ample reward in themselves; they also, as in other human enterprises, helped establish a rational justification for the methods employed. If the truth chose to reveal itself by these means, then the means must be part of the providential order of truth itself, a scientific method sanctioned by being necessary for the work in hand. As for certain passages that completely baffled understanding, they could be interpreted as a clear sign of God's reminder that not everything in Scripture was to be taken literally.

Augustine's critical remarks on the Scriptural art of concealment are not intellectually vigorous. The traditional attitudes of belief make a searching argument unnecessary, and the explanations offered seem directed toward the kind of question that is raised when the more central questions have either been settled or have not yet been recognized. His remarks may be taken as presenting three explanations that are, at best, loosely related. The first is a practical point of view and offers moral and pedagogical reasons for the parabolical style of the Scriptures. It was part of God's purpose "to conquer pride by work and to combat disdain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless" (2. 6. 7). Indolence and pride are rebuked; work is encouraged, and

INTRODUCTION

sweetened both on the path and at the goal, for no one doubts “that things are perceived more readily through similitudes and that what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure” (2. 6. 8). A second explanation for the figurative language of the Scriptures comes, a little surprisingly, at the end of the following passage, in which Augustine has been specifying the sweet uses of obscurity but reminding expositors that *they* must be clear and not “offer themselves for interpretation.” The “canonical authors and teachers” have on occasion “spoken with a useful and healthful obscurity for the purpose of exercising and sharpening, as it were, the minds of the readers and of destroying fastidiousness and stimulating the desire to learn, concealing their intention in such a way that the minds of the impious are either converted to piety or excluded from the mysteries of faith” (4. 8. 22). I shall postpone comment and proceed to the third explanation, which occurs in the following passage:

What the Apostle says pertains to this problem: “For the letter killeth, but the spirit quickeneth.” That is, when that which is said figuratively is taken as though it were literal, it is understood carnally. Nor can anything more appropriately be called the death of the soul than that condition in which the thing that distinguishes us from beasts, which is the understanding, is subjected to the flesh in the pursuit of the letter. . . . There is a miserable servitude of the spirit in this habit of taking signs for things, so that one is not able to raise, above things that are corporal and created, the eye of the mind which is to drink in eternal light (3. 5. 9).¹⁹

The moral part of the first explanation—that the necessity of hard work in reading rebukes indolence and pride—goes beyond the ordinary resources of the rhetorical tradition; it can apply only to literary works of established authority. The defense of difficulty as a stimulus that disciplines and gratifies the mind is part of the common inheritance of classical pedagogy and therefore of rhetoric. The interpreters of Scripture advance the point often, but without significant development. In Augustine’s use it is less than clear how the pleasure derived

¹⁹ I have taken some liberties with the last sentence of Robertson’s translation.

Introduction

from figurative language is to be kept distinct from the pleasure traditionally associated with the middle style. The only guaranteed distinction lay in the implied assurance that one kind of rewarding pleasure received the additional reward of learning a truth.

The third explanation reflects Augustine's determined preference for the abstract, supersensible order of intelligence. His accepted goal may be that of "making ideas visible," but here, as not infrequently, the intellectual passion seems to be directed toward the invisible. The eye of the body is contemptible and imposes mere "servitude" on the spirit. Augustine's emphasis in these matters may be felt throughout the Middle Ages as part of the consistent effort to distinguish the order of contemplation from the lesser activities of the mind. (Herbert, as we shall observe, occasionally strikes an austere pose reminiscent of this Augustinian extreme, but it does not last long. It is hard for a poet to believe effectively in an absolute disjunction between the eye of the body and the eye of the mind.)

The second explanation is one that will lead us to the seventeenth century. By the art of concealment, Augustine said, the impious are either converted or "excluded from the mysteries of faith." We may assume that if they are converted it will be in part because the truth has stolen into their minds, as it were, in the unobtrusive manner of Socratic irony. Unable to position their wretched defenses, they may find themselves suddenly taken from within as the truth reveals its hidden meaning. Even the pleasure of finally understanding may contribute to their capture. The basic point seems clear and is traditional in rhetoric, though the context of spiritual conversion is new and special. Our concern is the justification of concealment as a means of protecting the truth by excluding the impious. As a reason it sounds impromptu, the product of local conditions, but in some of its forms it must have been ancient long before there was any organized thinking about written expression. It is an indispensable part of the argument in medieval apologies for poetry, and maintains itself stoutly as a public argument into the seventeenth century. Then, it would seem, the case for protecting and excluding no longer could be argued out in the open and directly.

But some human attitudes do not require public permission or

INTRODUCTION

support in order to persist. There has never been a lack of writing that gives pleasure, at least in part, to an audience able to compliment themselves on the purity or rarity of their taste, or on their classical or other education, or on their fierce adherence to the one really important insight that matters, or on their being one of the few with a happy case of insomniac industry. There is no lack of modern coterie and other writing which helps distinguish between those who are in and those who are out. An occasional magazine will manage to create a similar atmosphere, to the great benefit of the circulation. In some novels, kindred spirits will transmit their cryptic messages and establish their mutual recognition, to which we may or may not desire to testify. The preceding account is hardly exhaustive, and what is mentioned here in terms of literary expression enjoys a wider currency in many forms of social expression, alas.

If literature expresses forms of exclusion, it does so from attitudes and motives that seem more at home in other kinds of expression. Augustine's concern, for instance, is immediately relevant to the need for preserving the inviolable separation of the sacred, and also relevant to the practical problems of maintaining the distinctness of early Christianity. But the desire to exclude may be more than merely protective; it can also combine in a positive way with the kind of difficulty that stimulates those who would know. A statement by Clement of Alexandria takes one step more than Augustine's and anticipates the kind of argument that later will be used to defend the value of secular poetry: "But from the fact that truth appertains not to all, it is veiled in manifold ways, causing the light to arise only on those who are initiated into knowledge, who seek the truth through love."²⁰

"The truth through love" is a brief definition of wisdom. Whether wisdom is a knowledge of things human and divine, or of one by the other, or even of one alone, whether wisdom rises from the human or descends from the divine, it is motivated by a force universally recognized in man, variously attributed to God. In the history of speculation the balance between human love and divine love, like the

²⁰ Quoted by Wolfson, *Church Fathers*, p. 47.

Introduction

balance between the rising and descending of wisdom, whenever it shifts, even subtly, carries with it intricate changes in established relationships.²¹ Medieval humanists defending secular poetry needed to base their arguments upon the wisdom to be found in that poetry. Their texts, of course, could not be approached as if they were sacred, like Scripture, but they could be shown to possess valuable truths discoverable by methods resembling those applied to the hidden meaning of Scripture. Boccaccio, in the fourteenth book of his *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, assembles all of the main arguments used by his predecessors. The points he makes in defending the alleged obscurity of poets come down intact to the Renaissance, where they will be opposed by a new argument that reflects an altered balance in the relationships of wisdom.

Surely no one can believe that poets invidiously veil the truth with fiction, either to deprive the reader of the hidden sense, or to appear the more clever; but rather to make truths which would otherwise cheapen by exposure the object of strong intellectual effort and various interpretation, that in ultimate discovery they shall be more precious. In a far higher degree is this the method of the Holy Spirit; nay, every right-minded man should be assured of it beyond any doubt. Besides it is established by Augustine. . . .²²

In support he quotes Petrarch's graceful defense of the majesty and dignity of poetic style, which "are not intended to hinder those who wish to understand, but rather propose a delightful task, and are designed to enhance the reader's pleasure and support his memory. What we acquire with difficulty and keep with care is always the dearer to us." Those who would understand the "difficult involutions" of poetry are advised to apply methods which were traditionally employed in the interpretation of Scripture. Boccaccio does not mention that fact, but he concludes by recalling the divine command

²¹ See Eugene F. Rice, Jr., *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958).

²² My quotations are taken from Boccaccio, *On Poetry*, trans. Charles G. Osgood (New York, 1956), pp. 60–62.

INTRODUCTION

not to cast pearls before swine. The wisdom of secular poetry, defended by the recognized procedures of divine poetry, would seem to have even greater latitude in concealing its truths. For sacred literature was addressed to all nations, while poetry is "addressed to the few."

Poetic obscurity, then, rewards the worthy and excludes the ignorant. Serious writers on into the seventeenth century continue to link the reward and the punishment. As an argument the safeguarding of precious truth seems to depend almost entirely on the religious parallel from which it draws its justification. Most of the writers' constructive energy goes into demonstrating the dignity of humane letters by vigorous explications of the hidden meanings they contain. When the strategy of exclusion is not wholly defensive, it does little more than assert its positive value in a flurry of minor raids, taunting the ignorant because of what they are missing, and at the same time distinguishing the higher forms of literature from their contemptible rivals—the easy and vulgar kinds of entertainment, the jigs, the tales of bawdry, and the like.

From one point of view it would seem reasonable to expect that the modern literatures, once they had securely established their own accomplishment, would no longer need to seek justification in terms of the parallel with sacred writing. Yet varied forms of the old justification, however secularized, continued and still continue, slowly modifying and assimilating new forms of rational opposition and successfully discovering new kinds of confirmation in the hidden meanings of art. During the Renaissance, however, there was a notable increase of interest in proposing new questions for old answers. By the end of the seventeenth century not many serious writers would choose to defend poetry by praising the grave mysteriousness of its hidden meaning. As for the claims that obscurity guarded poetic truth from the vulgar, these were examined, doubted, looked at for their limited and allowable rhetorical usefulness, qualified, and after a due interval of time confidently declared to be a fraud and a scandal.

In England the most influential voice is that of Bacon. What he says about the uses of the mind and about expression are very much to the point, but let us focus upon his extraordinary defense of parabolic

Introduction

cal wisdom in the preface to the *Wisdom of the Ancients*.²³ There he scorns the rigid skeptics who hold that allegorical meanings are always adventitious, never “original and genuine.” He is undeterred by the ductility of fables, and he remembers very well “that there has been old abuse of the thing in practice; that many, wishing only to gain the sanction and reverence of antiquity for doctrines and inventions of their own, have tried to twist the fables of the poets.” He knows how the Stoics made the ancient poets bear the weight of their own opinions. But in spite of “all the levity and looseness with which people indulge their fancy in the matter of allegories,” Bacon values them, and this is the preface to a book devoted to interpreting the hidden wisdom of the old myths. Part of his defense touches on a traditional standard of Scriptural interpretation. If there is no rational meaning evident, nothing probable that a man might imagine and relate but only the absurd and the foolish, then the stories may be presumed to “give notice from afar and cry out that there is a parable below.” The parallel with religion is not omitted, for religion itself sometimes “delights in such veils and shadows and to take them away would be almost to interdict” all commerce between things divine and human.

Bacon’s own purpose concerns things human, however, and he translates the traditional praises of Scriptural coherence into a language handsomely appropriate to demonstrating authority in humane letters. He finds such singular proportion between the similitude and the thing signified, and such apt and clear coherence in the “very frame and texture of the story,” and such “propriety” in the use of symbolic names that “one cannot help believing such a signification to have been designed and meditated from the first, and purposely shadowed out.”

Two standards of judgment are involved here, only one of them as yet even partly explicit. What Bacon means by “purposely shadowed,” which will prove to be radical in effect, depends upon our understanding of what lies behind the weight of his emphasis on the

²³ Quotations are from the *Selected Writings*, ed. Hugh G. Dick (New York, 1955). All quotations not otherwise identified come from the Preface to the *Wisdom of the Ancients*.

INTRODUCTION

authors' intention. If the hidden meanings of the fables are really there, substantial, coherent, and the product of deliberate intention, then the interpreter is at least working on solid matter. There is no need for him to spin cobwebs out of his own substance, patching together an order and significance owing more to his own ingenuity than to the original. He can begin his task with something of the initial assurance of an enlightened natural philosopher. Though he may have to work without a proper scientific method, if what he is looking for *is* there and he can show it by clear analysis, then the proof will be established both by the authenticity of the materials and by the persuasiveness of the demonstration. The argument is perhaps not one of the most distinguished examples of seventeenth-century rationalism, but we have not yet learned how to improve upon it in any really basic ways. It is important to observe that in Bacon's argument the author's intention, which is proved in the oldest and newest way, by the coherence to be found in the text, would not by itself establish the ultimate authority of the hidden meaning.

Something more is needed. Beyond all the evidence that points toward the probable expectation that great or high matter can be discovered in the fables; beyond the signals of apparent absurdity; beyond the coherence, upon which, rather loosely, belief in authorial intention depends; beyond the fact (slipped in, not argued) that a good expositor can produce much strikingly relevant, up-to-date sense, and the more we like that sense the more we shall be convinced that it was there—all of this evidence finally depends on a deeper source of conviction: namely, that the fables make available the oldest expressions of human wisdom to be found outside the Old Testament. The antiquities dating from the first age “(except what is preserved of them in the Scriptures) are buried in oblivion and silence.” After the silence came “the fables of the poets,” and after them all of the records from classical antiquity that have come down to us. In the veil of fiction, which interposed itself, we have what is left of the oblivion and silence of that first age.

In his own way Bacon is no less fascinated by the secrets of the primitive mind than we are, though his purposes, and the immediate confirmations he seeks, are different. He wishes to unseat those idols

Introduction

of the mind which promote an unexamined reverence for antiquity and command belief that everything knowable has been discovered, has come down to the present, and has come down in forms and “methods” which must not be altered. The opportunities for iconoclasm he finds in the fables resemble his tactic of using the pre-Socratics against Plato and Aristotle. (To some extent Bacon finds himself in the position he attributed to Luther, “enforced to awake all antiquity”—or at least one unexploited segment—“and to call former times to his succors to make a party against the present time.”²⁴) What he finds in the fables confirms his own belief in the value of aphorisms, in “knowledge broken” which invites inquiry and has not been reduced to methods that satisfy and stifle. Then too, as he reads the fables, they contain a hidden knowledge that contributes to the furthest end of human wisdom: “the benefit and use of men.”²⁵ Finally, underlying all these purposes, there is an element of unmistakable intellectual passion in his belief that the earliest expressions of man, unspoiled by the intrusions and accommodations of later experience, embody valuable truths, and that these truths may be made to act as a corrective upon man’s present understanding of himself and of the reality outside him. We may recognize and for the most part ignore the inevitable differences between an attitude that marks the beginning of an era and a similar attitude flourishing three and one-half centuries later—partly transmitted, partly revived, influenced by different social, historical, and intellectual experience, and affected by the acquisition of new and more accurate knowledge of the subject. Nevertheless, the twentieth-century belief in the wisdom of myth rests on an assumption, like Bacon’s, that the expressions of the “pre-logical” mind criticize what the civilized mind has made of itself and that the original is somehow real in a way that the conscious intellect is not.

We do not really need the modern perspective, except as a reminder that certain aspects of our subject have a long and continuing

²⁴ *Advancement of Learning*, in *Selected Writings*, pp. 180–81 (hereafter cited as *AL*). A similar tactic is that of commending poets in order to rebuke philosophers (*AL*, p. 246).

²⁵ *AL*, p. 193.

INTRODUCTION

history. To help fix our focus in the seventeenth century it may be worth pausing to emphasize that the seventeenth-century interest in returning to the sources had particular motives and pressures characteristic of the age. One need but mention the great religious issue. Then, too, the development of historical consciousness and perspective increased the desire to know things in their first and intermediate stages. Even skepticism, after completing its radical offensives, tended to fall back upon a belief in established institutions as the most reliable custodians of any truth there might be. Donne's third Satire makes the skeptical point as modestly as possible: "though truth and falshood bee / Neare twins, yet truth a little elder is." Students of legal and political theory, influenced by Neostoicism, counted on truth being much older. In Cassirer's words, "all the political theories of the seventeenth century, however divergent in their aims and means, have a common metaphysical background."²⁶ They all "try to prove their point by going back to the same fundamental hypothesis." Though the method itself was not historical, but rather "analytical and deductive," the effort to establish the infallible "Euclidean" axioms of political theory rested upon the belief that these first principles needed only to be recovered. The answer was that "they have been found long ago. It is enough to reassert and reformulate them, to express them in logical language, the language of clear and distinct ideas."

Now that we have examined the attitudes underlying Bacon's emphasis on the author's intention, and have traced the authority of that intention to its origin in man's "first age," we may turn to the standard of judgment implied in his conviction that the authors of the fables "purposely shadowed" their meanings. His point is radical and cuts the ground out from under the unexamined reiteration that poets conceal the truth in order to protect it. Received opinion, he says, is that parables "have been used in two ways . . . for contrary purposes"—a situation that to a man of reason and irony is "strange." Parables are thought both to conceal, "to disguise and veil the mean-

²⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, 1946), p. 165. The following quotations are from pp. 172, 165, 166.

Introduction

ing,” and to reveal, “to clear and throw light upon it.” He brushes aside, with brief scorn, the purposes of concealment: these would convert the fables into “things without any definite purpose, made only for pleasure.” The only allowable explanation is that “these were used not as a device for shadowing and concealing the meaning, but as a method of making it understood.”

Bacon’s reasons are worth considering, for they concern some of the problems of expression that we have been following, and concern as well relations between the plain style and figurative language. Concluding that the fables are “sacred relics and light airs breathing out of better times” which were inherited by the Greeks (in his disparaging phrase, fell into their “flutes and trumpets”), he observes that Homer and Hesiod relate the myths “not as new inventions . . . but as stories already received and believed.” In trying to explain why the fables “sought to teach” as they did, he draws on an argument from historical rationalism, though in doing so he reveals some inconsistency in his own attitude: since in primitive times many things now familiar were new and not widely known, “the world was full of all kinds of fables, and enigmas, and parables, and similitudes.” And since men’s minds were then “rude and impatient of all subtleties,” only arguments that addressed themselves to the senses could quicken their reason and bring about understanding: “For as hieroglyphics came before letters, so parables came before arguments.”²⁷ In his protopositivism he comes close to undermining the authority of the truly ancient; having leaned so far in one direction, his normal gravity toward the “veil of fiction” reasserts itself. He would use the ancients against the authority of the Greeks and against modern idols. The ancient wisdom was incapable of expressing itself in clear and distinct ideas; modern wisdom is better, and can recover the ancient, and can patronize the conditions of primitive expression—or so he would seem to be suggesting.

There is perhaps no great conviction in some parts of the historical argument Bacon offers—elsewhere he expresses himself with rather

²⁷ Aristotle does not neglect the fable as a useful substitute for the enthymeme (*Rhetoric*, 2. 20. 1393^b–94^a).

INTRODUCTION

aloof diffidence on certain of these points.²⁸ His interest in recovering and exhibiting the wisdom of the ancients, as rebuke and confirmation, draws him into kinds of emphasis somewhat at variance with his leading ideas. What is constant in the nature of man is the fact, illustrated by the fables (a fact that is more like a limiting flaw which must be recognized and turned to advantage), that the most practical path for recovering the old or advancing the new is the necessary path of indirection, through figures. And so the defense of the rhetoric of parabolical writing turns out to be a rather tame repetition of pedagogical and rhetorical principles which had never been seriously challenged: "I mean the employment of parables as a method of teaching, whereby inventions that are new and abstruse and remote from vulgar opinions may find an easier passage to the understanding. . . . And even now if any one wish to let new light on any subject into men's minds, and that without offence or harshness, he must still go the same way and call in the aid of similitudes."

The position Bacon takes is basically one derived from the combining of Platonic and Stoic criticism of the imagination. By the time that criticism reaches him, it is well consolidated. To justify the value of the fables, however, he must assume the view, derived from another Platonic and Stoic tradition, that allegorical meanings are "modes of making ideas visible." But he makes the assumption as unobtrusively as possible and by way of compensation emphasizes, rather more than the triteness of the point warrants, the utilitarian value of similitudes. Poetic fictions to Bacon are for the most part human inventions that answer man's desire for pleasure and his desire to assure himself of the harmony between what he wants to think and the reality outside him. Bacon characteristically makes a severe distinction between the theater and the palace of the mind, between pleasure and truth, and he pushes the distinction, a little casually, into the theater itself. If the purposive "shadowing" of the fables is not "grave and sober, and free from all vanity; of prime use to the sciences, and sometimes indispensable," then the alternative is that fables are vagrant things, "made only for pleasure." Similarly, the fictions of the poets may be subjected to a strict either/or analysis, and if they are to be dismissed,

²⁸ *AL*, p. 246.

Introduction

they may be described as “but pleasure and not figure.”²⁹ Bacon has little interest in relating pleasure to truth. Though he acknowledges that in the “commerce” between the human and the divine religion itself sometimes “delights in such veils and shadows,” he is committed to keeping business and pleasure separate in the employment of “human wisdom.”

Figure, at least when it is philosophical allegory, may be considered to have some inwardness, like Plato’s “word of knowledge which has a living soul, and of which the written word is properly no more than an image.” Bacon exploits the distinction and establishes it as a triumphant commonplace of critical truth: “It seems to me that Pygmalion’s frenzy is a good emblem . . . for words are but the images of matter; and except they have life of reason and invention, to fall in love with them is all one as to fall in love with a picture.”³⁰ The disciples of Bacon, by one of the secret laws of progress, become increasingly clear and rigid. Some of them aspire to drive metaphor out of the temple of reason. They apply, not without some sense of righteousness, that analytical distinction between the body of words and the soul of meaning—as if their test of orthodoxy were not itself a metaphor, granted an honorary conversion the merits, motives, and sincerity of which were not to be subjected to review. The most striking effects of such severity were realized in the prose. Poets, of course, were not backward in responding to the spirit of the age, and when it came to making pronouncements the art of poetry was not to be outdone in undoing itself. Fulke Greville can recommend

Onely admitting precepts of such kinde,
As without words may be conceiv’d in mind,³¹

and Cowley, against the grain of his natural gifts, can proclaim his purpose

T’ unbind the Charms that in slight Fables lie,
And teach that Truth is truest Poesie.³²

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *AL*, p. 182.

³¹ *A Treatie of Humane Learning*, Stanza 106.

³² Abraham Cowley, *The Davideis*, I, 41–42.

INTRODUCTION

In comparison, Bacon is old-fashioned and conservative, acknowledging that words may have “life of reason and invention.”

Before we leave Bacon we may note one other matter in which his practice indicates more conservatism than his influence. He can demonstrate his own clear grasp of the specific uses of purposive obscurity: “When the secrets and mysteries of religion, policy, or philosophy are involved in fables or parables,” then the intention will be to “retire and obscure” the meaning.³³ He cites the authorization of “divine poesy,” but he must have had in mind also the rules that are authorized by common experience. In human affairs, whether they concern power over men’s minds as expressed in philosophical thought, or power over men’s bodies and fortunes as expressed in “policy,” considerations of tact, discretion, and the nature and force of the opposition will require varying degrees of concealment and indirection. To blurt out naked meaning is to invite failure and danger.³⁴ Bacon surely knew, from study and experience, that in political and diplomatic exchanges even the expression of apparently naked meaning is governed by a stable body of conventions and by some particular set of circumstances; one can say nothing so naked and direct that it does not represent one of several possible choices, and the manner and matter of the expressions not chosen will need to be surveyed and interpreted before the meaning and purpose of the apparently direct expression can be clearly understood. Kafka enjoys making tragic fun of such matters; to Bacon they simply are a part of how things are.

But though Bacon is conservative here, and is merely recognizing a kind of concealment firmly fixed in rhetorical traditions, it is plain that the history of his influence is to be read in that other emphasis, which scorns “dark keeping.”³⁵ The practical side of protective obscurity will not be forgotten by his disciples, and the literary justification, particularly in the art of satire, will maintain some dignity; but the triumph of clear and distinct ideas demands small traffic with con-

³³ *AL*, p. 245.

³⁴ See his fable of Cassandra.

³⁵ The scholastics, custodians of “unwholesome” learning, do not advance knowledge but are instead “fierce with dark keeping”; like the fable of Scylla they “end in monstrous altercations and barking questions” (*AL*, p. 185).

Introduction

cealed significance. The reigning presumption will be that what was hidden was, by incapacity or design, vague, unformed, erroneous, pretending to mean more than was understood, and seeking to escape the inspection of clear reason, newly emancipated and looking about for exercise. If the truths of religion could be demonstrated by reason alone, the truths of poetry could not expect favored treatment.

As a rhetorical concept clarity was always considered relative. In oratorical prose or sermons or letters, the nature of the audience, its level of sophistication, practical limits of time, and the purpose of persuasion would all have a general influence on the techniques and standards of clarity. During the seventeenth century the audience grew wider but more fixed and limited in the range of its expectations and more determined to tolerate only certain kinds of clarity. But outside this dominating tendency, and in other kinds of prose, where the purposes of expression were more personal and exploratory than public and declarative, the permissible adjustments in the methods of clarity related to other goals. The influence of the audience and the purpose of persuasion counted for less; the particular nature of the subject to be expressed and the personal relationship of the writer to his material counted for more. The intimate details of candor, out of the workshop of a soul faithfully recording unfinished and intermediate stages in the process of working out problems—these also responded to an ideal of clarity; but it was not the relative clarity of old-fashioned prose and verse, and to the new taste gaining ascendancy it would seem no less willfully obscurantist than the poetic rituals of manufacturing hidden meanings. Many of these “candid” writers wrote in a plain style strongly influenced by Neostoic traditions of thought and style. To write the exact inward truth was to write well, and to express the very movement of thought as it occurred was the best way to be truthful. Standard forms of rhetoric would be avoided on principle, but this could lead only to the development of other forms—at the worst, to stereotypes of clarity, affectations of plainness, varieties of brusqueness, and an austere brevity of parts making the whole seem long and ornate.

When the stylistic aims were not perverted by excess and affectation, however, they did represent a significant ideal of clarity. A

INTRODUCTION

limiting factor is the Neostoic sense of alienation and privileged inwardness, which helps legitimize his rational scorn for the capacities of the vulgar, but this kind of intellectual posture is at most intermittent in seventeenth-century writers. On the positive side we find an ideal of clarity that is committed to the intensities of personal, detailed, individual expression. It is a clarity that seems to believe in itself most surely when it emerges from struggle, from the serious effort to express the difficult. But the aim—except when perverted by affectation or obsessed by feelings of alienation—is to reveal hidden meaning, not to protect or conceal that meaning.

In effect, we have a new intellectual sensibility expressing itself. Part of its orientation is old, reminding us of Clement of Alexandria's formula: "But from the fact that truth appertains not to all, it is veiled in manifold ways, causing the light to arise only on those who are initiated into knowledge, who seek the truth through love." But the knowledge now sought (in terms of the dynamic balance between things human and divine, between wisdom descending and wisdom rising) is to be derived largely from the wisdom that rises from a knowledge of human affairs. The commanding new insight of these writers is that the unveiling of truth, *especially* to those "initiated into knowledge, who seek the truth through love," is a difficult process; it is no quick, complete revelation but requires the faithful, detailed, and strenuous cooperation of the individual seeker. If there is obscurity in the expression it is genuine and necessary, not intended to conceal and protect truth but to unveil it. One may perhaps apply Bacon's measured rule of approbation to the obscurity of philosophers: those who write plainly and clearly are helpful to us when we "have any use of such knowledge in civil occasions, of conference, counsel, persuasion, discourse, or the like." Nevertheless, "to the severe inquisition of truth, and the deep progress into philosophy, [plainness] is of some hinderance; because it is too early satisfactory to the mind of man, and quencheth the desire of further search, before we come to a just period."³⁶

In the importance of the inner experiencing of truth by individual

³⁶ *AL*, p. 182.

Introduction

pursuit and expression we may recognize a further shift in the concept of wisdom (which does not appeal to Bacon himself), a knowledge of human affairs laying particular stress on the detailed movements of individual thought. The style in prose which these writers represent has been called "Attic" or "Senecan," and more recently "baroque"; it was given more concrete characterization by its hostile contemporaries. But whatever the mannerisms they fall into, at their best these writers are modern in their intention to bring the difficult meanings out into the open. Yet in one respect we may see that what they offer is old and unchanged. They are conscious in their writing, and in their expectations of the reader's experience, that intellectual pleasure rewards the effort to understand the difficult.

When we turn to the metaphysical poets we find that much-advertised obscurity. But one cannot often or usefully distinguish between the effort to conceal and the effort to reveal. We are faced with a new kind of obscurity marked by evident relish in its manner of expression and received by its fit readers with apparently correlative pleasure. Such obscurity has little to do with the kind of allegory which the rhetorical tradition considered a continuing metaphor. Instead we find, as the nearest equivalent, subtle forms of sustained argument setting forth a fictional proposition, spinning its continuity with fine threads that cross the apparent interruptions, or mark, on either side, where fit readers are to make the imaginative leaps. (Some of Herbert's allegories are highly compressed and subtle arguments.) If we approach these writers from the study of rhetoric, as Rosemond Tuve does, we may agree that their subject material and chosen manner, which is appropriate to that material, calls for the plain style. Their diction (in the generally accepted sense of that word) and their syntax fall within the usual range of the plain style. More important, perhaps, is that these poets turn away from the expansive subjects, attitudes, and types of expressiveness characteristic of their predecessors. We may note the recurrence of a familiar cycle of taste insofar as the new poets show impatience with the nobly vague and elegantly threadbare, preferring to take a hard, critical look, without the old visual aids, at the basic subject, "*quidquid agunt homines.*" Their poems are characterized by hard, fine, intellectual

INTRODUCTION

discriminations, whether in the “foreconceit,” in the strict development, or in the shrewd obliqueness intimated in passing.

We may bring forward other historical reasons for locating the metaphysical poets within the traditions of the plain style. They argue with great skill and acuteness, and instructive argument lies within the acknowledged competence of the plain style. Though their reputation for obscurity would seem to contradict the traditional importance of clarity for the purposes of instruction, they nevertheless instruct the fit reader and give him the full due of his pleasure in comprehension, not neglecting to provide significant challenge and commensurate reward. Sensuous adornments are by no means neglected, but they are used moderately, and at their best are quietly subordinated to the argument. Coming to these poems from a richer eloquence, one may at first be deceived into thinking them wholly unornamented. In any event, they satisfy the old standard, according to which a good argument in the plain style provides delight and does not require any of the regular literary devices in order to please.

The metaphysical poets respond to the revival of that old debate between matter and manner, *res et verba*, by joining the moderns in putting their emphasis on matter and things. Since figurative language was by custom divided into figures of thought and figures of words, a style dominated by figures of thought could take credit for dealing with things—as in Sir John Beaumont’s couplet praising

Strong figures drawn from deep invention’s springs,
Consisting less in words and more in things.³⁷

The “less” and “more” of words and things we recognize as an expression that responds to the intellectual bent of the times, but it pays only limited homage to the confident abstractions of philosophical empiricism. The compromise is one that stops well short of embracing the absolute concreteness of “things”; it does not surrender to

³⁷ “To His Late Majesty, Concerning the True Forme of English Poetry.”

Introduction

the new rationalism the empirical experience of an intellectual poet conscious of his craft and of the stubborn problems that lie in expression. One may call the formula conservative, like that affirmation of "deep invention's springs," which recalls Bacon's acknowledgment that words may have "life of reason and invention" and that even the protective obscurity of philosophy may have some limited justification. But the larger issues involved here go beyond our present purposes. It is enough to observe that the figures of thought drawn from the depths are intended to convey a considerable density of meaning, and that our interest in the words will be subordinated to our interest in the important things they present to us. Baldly reduced so, the formula only repeats what has always been said about good writing. But the historical context makes the emphasis new, and what is old looks chiefly toward the traditional concepts of the plain style.

Finally, let us turn once more to the old concept of hidden meaning, which does achieve, in the literary practices of a new historical context, a distinctively new form of expression. If we are to choose metaphors, we can say that the metaphysical poets attempt to express the living soul of thought underneath the body (or images) of their words. Whatever our reservations toward these metaphors, we are not likely to think that our expression is made more accurate by a choice that leads us to speak of the fictional or stylistic veil attracting and holding the reader, slowly exposing to the worthy the deeper recesses of hidden meaning. Expansive subjects, tested materials, and the continuous metaphor of allegory work well together in the veiled fiction. Metaphysical poets prefer different subjects and materials and the continuity of an imaginative argument, whether that argument provides the overt structure of a poem or plays beneath the surface of some narrative or other fictional occasion. To miss the argument is to miss the life of the design, even though some compensations will present themselves in those details that are grasped and in the parts of the surface that maintain, as it were, an independent interest. Still, the degree of aesthetic compensation will be far less than from a good allegory that supplies attractive continuity at the surface level and that, by acknowledged agreement, proposes to mystify some readers at some points but never to leave them stranded. The continuity of

INTRODUCTION

argument in a metaphysical poem is less likely to be smooth and leisurely, more likely to be intense and characterized by abrupt shifts and compressions. The distribution of hidden meaning will also be different, less often collected at key points but rather distributed throughout, with the stricter standard of relevance appropriate to a tighter form. But in spite of the differences, we may assume that the readers of both kinds of poetry would need to expend effort and would expect to be rewarded by the pleasures of understanding.

Without venturing into the obscurities of pleasure itself, we may nevertheless infer from their practice that writers do not conceal the signs of their own creative pleasure. The metaphysical poets resemble the writers of Neostoic prose in their serious efforts to express the difficult, but the poets give plain and direct evidence that they enjoy the strenuous manner of their expression, for they delight in their humor, and in the play between the soul of thought and the body of words, and they fully exercise their ancient privilege of proposing the truth in fiction and the fiction in truth.

*George Herbert's
Lyrics.*

CHAPTER ONE •

THE ART OF PLAINNESS



IT IS NOT UNCOMMON for lovers of language and expression to feel, like other lovers, the opposing force of repulsion. Poets may hate what they have said and what compelled them to say it. They may also hate the necessary struggle for expression and decide that they have created only lies to undo themselves and others. A few destroy their words; others order them destroyed and leave the act, or the decision itself, to reliable friends. Nor can the debased currency of bad and mediocre verse be counted on to increase the value of genuine achievement: a poet may see in his own work, as in the work of others, only a faint dividing line, easy to recognize but hard to analyze, between the specious and the admirable. With such experience, accompanied by the many open invitations to the poet to doubt his motives and ends, one may expect hostile scrutiny to be encouraged. The verbal arts and words themselves are subjected to a wide variety of common daily abuse; only a fool does not learn to distrust them, but only a shallow skeptic will construct a permanent position on the basis of so obvious a discovery. In spite of all the difficulties, however, a poet must believe in his words and in the art of expression even while he practices an art of distrust learned from reading others and from choosing and rejecting his own words. It is no wonder that he occasionally falters under the strain and surrenders either to belief alone or to distrust alone. The latter in its advanced stages may lead to a radical silence, but it is more usual to express disenchantment with the materials and manners of poetry by writing poems, even anti-poems.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

Poetry itself is one of Herbert's major themes, and that fact alone, if it were well understood, might endear him to the modern age. But it is hard to understand what he says about poetry; or, rather, certain things that he says are too easy to place and may invite sympathy, patronage, or outright rejection—all of which, not excepting the sympathy, will prevent our understanding him. As a religious poet Herbert addresses God directly or writes with the intention of being overheard by Him. For traditional and contemporary reasons, both religious and secular in origin, he aspires 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. He is impatient with art but must practice patience. He distrusts rhetoric—as who does not?—but in order to speak sincerely he must master a rhetoric for sincerity. Some of his more severe claims and assertions concerning poetry begin to look a little different in the whole context of his work, and we may begin by looking at what he says about poetry.

The two sonnets that, according to Walton, were addressed to Herbert's mother and the pair of sonnets entitled "Love" (I and II) all express a fervent disapproval of secular love poetry. Poetry has gone wrong in wearing "*Venus* Livery" and praising the mere effects of mortal beauty:

Wit fancies beautie, beautie raiseth wit:
The world is theirs; they two play out the game,
Thou standing by.

These lines, from "Love" (I), would seem at home in many of Herbert's best poems; they have the right kind of detached wit, a characteristic friction of word against word, and the phrases move with deliberate grace, posing together by turning toward and away from each other. But these effects are so much subdued by the dominant tone of the poem that they are as good as lost; we recognize them chiefly from our acquaintance with his other poems.

Indeed, one could use these four poems, a little perversely no

The Art of Plainness

doubt, as a basis for establishing Herbert's poetics. Taken piecemeal, and both supplemented and contrasted, many of his characteristic attitudes, themes, and stylistic features are crammed together here—without much literary distinction. For instance, the contest between human and divine love is presented in these poems as if it were a moral scandal, to be treated only in terms of extreme contrasts and a single range of emotion. Everything is externalized, as if a safe imaginative distance were the only proper course. But in other poems the contest is granted inward dimensions and resonance; human and divine love speak to each other in tones of complex emotion. The external details of courtly, chivalric love, prominently abused in these poems, are quietly assimilated by the representatives of both human and divine love in one of Herbert's greatest poems, "Love" (III): "Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back." "The Temper" (I), which follows the two sonnets on love in Hutchinson's edition, sounds at first like the four poems we are using as examples:

How should I praise thee, Lord! how should my rymes
Gladly engrave thy love in steel.

But the attitude and tone, though they are striking and may suggest the opening of a passionate psalm, are disavowed by the poem, discredited as the earnest but willful voice of human love seeking to assert itself. Yet some lines from the second sonnet on love accurately describe the progress of "The Temper" (I):

And kindle in our hearts such true desires,
As may consume our lusts, and make thee way.

Indeed, the kindling of true love and the consuming of false love—that simple-sounding, difficult formula—underlie the motive, purpose, and structure of many of Herbert's best poems. It is an essential secret of his art of plainness.

Let us continue by looking at some lines from the second sonnet to his mother, quoted by Walton:

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

Why should I *Womens eyes* for Chrystal take?
Such poor invention burns in their low mind
 Whose fire is wild, and doth not upward go
 To praise, and on thee, Lord, some *Ink* bestow.
Open the bones, and you shall nothing find
 In the best *face* but *filth*, when, Lord, in thee
 The *beauty* lies in the *discovery*.

The rejecting of "poor invention" anticipates better poems of rejection. The sustained rhythm goes a little out of balance and terminates in awkward syntax: "and doth not upward go / To praise, and on thee, Lord, some *Ink* bestow." One recognizes a characteristic understatement in that last clause, but it seems mechanically applied, with the detached superiority of mere sarcasm. In other poems the slightly overwrought rhythm and the awkward syntax might well be superimposed on the expression of a false or pretentious attitude; here, because of the angry inflexibility of the tone, the faults cannot be separated from the speaker's own expression. And the ascetic contrast between face and filth, which Burton gaily recommends as one of the proved remedies for love, is insisted upon by Herbert with emphatic humorlessness.

But the most important distinction concerns his use of the word "discovery." That word may be said to underlie and motivate many of his poems. It symbolizes the personal search for God's felt and understood presence, arrived at slowly or suddenly, and often lost, willfully or carelessly, or for no discernible reason. The word also stands for ultimate reality, here set off against the world of appearances—reality the attributes of which include the unity of beauty and truth. In other poems the discovery of God is approached with complex emotion and refined tactfulness, not as an idea but as a presence, while "discovery" in this sonnet evokes an abstract manifestation; much of the meaning is dependent upon the word itself and its rather pedantic usage. Herbert's ideas are seldom so tied to a single word for their release. Even without knowing that the unexpressed word underlies many of his poems, one would recognize the heavy directness of the usage here; but we may confirm our recognition by

The Art of Plainness

drawing on a single poem and the piece of historical luck it preserves. The song that is the more distinguished part of the poem called “Easter” exists in an earlier and cruder version,¹ the second stanza of which reads thus:

The Sunn arising in the East
Though hee bring light & th’ other sents:
Can not make up so brave a feast
As thy discoverie presents.

The final draft of the second stanza reads:

The Sunne arising in the East,
Though he give light, & th’ East perfume;
If they should offer to contest
With thy arising, they presume.

The resurrection of Christ is not presented directly, as “thy discoverie,” but indirectly—by the delicate wit that smiles at the inadequate glory of the rising sun, and agrees in advance, for the record, as it were, that it *would be* presumption *if* the sun and the fragrance it releases “should offer to contest.”

Singleness of tone, directness, and assertiveness mark the four poems I have been using as examples. If plainness has anything to do with forthrightness and with the manner attributed to “plain dealers,” then we must acknowledge a kind of plainness in these poems, though they lack something in art. In making the case against their sincerity one would have to point out that the attitude assumed by the author, however eloquently expressed, does not cost him very much. It is an attitude easily learned by the young, or by the new convert; he may receive, repeat, and vary it without ever opening the package in which it came. In such writing the desire to believe lends energy,

¹ Quoted by F. E. Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1945), p. 42 (from the manuscript in Dr. Williams’ Library). I have normalized the spelling. Unless otherwise indicated, all page references to Herbert’s works will be to this edition.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

vividness, and sharpness to the expression but at the expense of precision, fineness, and depth. When we speak of Herbert's plainness or sincerity, it is not with these poems in mind.

Before we turn from this group of poems I want to indicate one further quality that is absent from their unremitting singleness of tone. In his poem "Dulnesse" Herbert is again searching for the discovery of God, intent on praise and the expression of beauty. But the rejection of secular love poetry does not guarantee that the poet will sing of divine love, and the reason lies within, not without. The wanton lovers, in spite of having been read a full lecture in these four poems, return and offer a wholesome rebuke to the religious poet, who is writing a poem of complaint that he cannot write a proper poem. In spite of all the differences between Herbert and them, the wanton lovers are better poets in their deceit and grief:

Lovers are still pretending, & ev'n wrongs
Sharpen their Muse.

Let us turn to another poem, which does not offer a stiff rejection but raises questions and in a very mild and casual manner seems to present a radical solution. The poem is "A true Hymne," which begins:

My joy, my life, my crown!
My heart was meaning all the day,
Somewhat it fain would say:
And still it runneth mutt'ring up and down
With onely this, *My joy, my life, my crown.*

Herbert then goes on to defend these words, which "may take part / Among the best in art" if they are "truly said." We may suspect that the naïvete is in part cultivated; it is plainly meant, however, and comes from a refinement of knowledge rather than a lack of knowledge. These words are symbols; they represent precious wisdom, the soul of living truth which the speaker may pronounce

The Art of Plainness

without possessing. It is hard to say them “truly”; the heart was “meaning” them all the day, but even the heart is uncertain—“Somewhat it fain would say,” and it runs “mutt’ring up and down.” The value of these words, then, whether in private thought or in art, depends on understanding what they mean and saying them truly.

Herbert ends the second stanza with a firm declaration:

The finenesse which a hymne or psalme affords,
Is, when the soul unto the lines accords.

This statement, though it has an admirable ring and expresses one clear concept of poetic sincerity, does not quite face the problems that have been raised. The accordance of the soul may assume that the heart has understood and that the words have been “truly said,” but we are not told how these vital steps are taken, or even that they have been taken. Instead, we have been given a partial definition, which is then extended by a charming example of negative illustration—a whole stanza that shows how not to do it:

He who craves all the minde,
And all the soul, and strength, and time,
If the words onely ryme,
Justly complains, that somewhat is behinde
To make his verse, or write a hymne in kinde.

The amusing incoherence of the stanza parodies the plight of the ambitious poet who starts with high resolution and finds himself hung up, forcing rhyme, splicing syntax, and barely staggering through. After the brave opening, the only words that ring true are “Justly complains.” Furthermore, the ground has been shifted, and the problem of how the words are to be “truly said” or how that accordance of the soul is to be achieved remains unexplained.

The last stanza presents a solution that is indirectly relevant to the problems of literary expression but directly relevant to the heart seeking to address God:

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

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.*

We now see that the writing of poetry has been, in spite of its prominence, chiefly a metaphor to express an experience of religious life. In life, if not in art, the "somewhat scant" expression of the sincere heart may be amended and completed by God. When God writes "Loved," the desire to articulate and the desire to love are at once fulfilled. Their ends are achieved without the ordinary steps of a human process. By authoritative acknowledgment virtual expression becomes actual.

If we look at the poem from one point of view, a miracle has taken place; but from another point of view we need recognize only an inspired compression—always possible in dialogue if the correspondent understands, approves, and fully reciprocates the intention. We may observe, therefore, that Herbert is not simply invoking a miracle, for the ends of expression may often be realized without the full use of normal means. What we cannot do, however, is take the metaphorical analogy of writing poetry as if it were literal. Sincere feelings do not of themselves produce good poems. Herbert surely knew this as well as we do. But he must also have believed that whenever he felt a poem of his to be successful, God's hand had guided his in the composition; and if he felt a poem to be successful, that feeling was the sure sense that the expression had realized its end—that God had blessed the end and authorized his feeling. The humility of the man of God and the humility of the artist might both acknowledge that a fumbling, "muttering" intention had in some unexpected flash been clarified, and that the awkward wrongness of initial and intermediate stages had somehow been transformed into the triumphantly graceful and right. In retrospect, even the labor of composition—like some fictional by-product of the creative process—might seem to be compressed into a decisive instant of time. (Poets are notoriously inaccurate in reporting on these matters and

The Art of Plainness

prefer to believe that their perfect poems were “dictated,” which is what we all prefer to believe when the evidence to the contrary does not force itself upon us.)

There are at least two ways, then, of looking at the issues raised by this poem. I have been emphasizing the “normal” conditions of the creative process because I am primarily interested in the poet Herbert and because I am convinced that the religious lyric, though it must fulfill special conditions, must also, and does, answer all the questions we ask of other lyrics. From a literary standpoint the central metaphor of the poem can be interpreted as analogous to the ways in which inspiration figures in the writing of poems. Inspiration is, of course, the kind of concept that can easily cross the line from the secular to the sacred, and for Herbert so too does the act, or the metaphor, of writing poems. In this poem we are free to interpret the analogy, so long as we recognize that it is a metaphor and is not to be taken literally. But we must also recognize that, for Herbert, though the metaphor may apply to the writing of poetry it has been superseded, as it were, by the higher form of expression to which it refers. The wisdom descending from God crowns, not with understanding but with love, an apparently clumsy human effort to understand and express. We do not expect Herbert to be dissatisfied with the attainment of such an end simply because the means do not seem to justify it. However, we do not therefore think Herbert believed that this was the way to write poems, and that the individual details of thought and expression might safely be ignored because they would leap intervening stages if only “th’ heart be moved.” Herbert knew better, both as poet and as man of God. He hoped, humbly, for the easier path of inspiration—one does not need to be poetic or religious to feel the attraction of that course.

But Herbert’s metaphors are capable of moving in more than two directions. The central fiction of writing poetry, which may refer to the real writing of poetry and to something real in the experience of religious life, may have still a third reference. In presenting the fictional account Herbert is at the same time confessing his own unworthiness and desire, and intimating the authentic joy which he would feel if what he is describing should happen to him. In other

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

words, the narrative is also a concealed prayer, composed by one of the modern masters of that difficult decorum and rhetoric by means of which one may properly address God and suggest to Him certain courses for human affairs.

So when taken together the cultivated clumsiness of the poem, the shifting of grounds, the apparent naïvete, and what may have seemed to be a radical solution to the problems of writing poetry are something else, or several things else. But if I am at all right about the poem, it cannot be taken as a simple assertion about poetry; what seems to be assertion is ultimately part of a complex and tactful statement. Yet we cannot stop here, at the satisfying literary position. We must remember that, for Herbert, the metaphor of writing is superseded in the poem by the fulfillment of the end of expression—here a confirming act, which writes and rhymes as poetry but means as metaphor. If he himself believes in the fiction of his poem, then he will find its conclusion a happier one than most of his poems provide, and toward the slower, labored uncertainties of most composition he will feel some understandable impatience.

The word "Loved" somewhat resembles the word "discovery" in Herbert's second sonnet to his mother; that is, both have unusual weight and by what they mean draw together and resolve issues. "Loved," however, is no bookish word and has no touch of pedantry. The meanings which are compressed and released by the word represent a train of psychological action which in turn stands for, or may be given, an abstract formulation; but the word directly invokes the action, and only later, for those of us who wish to press on, the abstraction. "Discovery," I thought, depends more nearly on the abstraction. It is like those words "My joy, my life, my crown," which compress meaning but do not release it directly. In "A true Hymne" the problem of how to make poems out of such words is not solved, though it is transcended by the whole action of the poem, which is realized by other words. Nevertheless, the problem itself remains for a religious poet who must believe that certain symbolic words in his treasury are more valuable, "If truly said," than any actions he can invent.

The Art of Plainness

The difficulty is (to draw on the old Platonic metaphor) that the most valuable “word of knowledge which has a living soul” may refuse to be fitted out with a proper living body. Yet such a word, unexpressed or merely muttered, may endow other words with poetic life. No less troubling is the fact that some thoughts or feelings may be too strong or too fine to lend themselves to direct expression, although as the force behind some indirect expression they may generate remarkable power and so satisfy themselves, or may even find a way to emerge in their own names. It may be worth imagining that the great symbols can act as unmoved movers, generating expression through executive metaphors, which have all the advantages of not representing the life of thought officially but of carrying on their tasks in the life of action as private agents, free to fail or succeed on their own and to act spontaneously.

Herbert is capable of making some good poems by using symbols directly, but for the most part he works indirectly and through metaphor, as in “A true Hymne.” When he occasionally, impatient with the common procedures of art, produces an official symbol for the purpose of rebuking unconverted poets, he is, if we take him at his word, not very convincing. “Jordan” (I) ends by challenging the college of poets (who have been beautifully mocked) to withdraw his license to practice:

I envie no mans nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with losse of rime,
Who plainly say, *My God, My King.*

In context the challenge is part of a temperate and superior comic defense. Still, if we carry through the implications of his challenge, we are faced again with the problem of how to plainly say anything in poetry. In the poem Herbert seems to take the severest Platonic line, rejecting “fictions” and ornament and wittily charging poems with idolatrous reverence for pretty, imitative objects. “Is there in truth no beautie?” he asks, but not “Is there no truth in beauty?” And the question “Is all good structure in a winding stair?” would seem to be

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

plainly answered by his final challenge. So too the question that has often been taken as a good, brief description of metaphysical poetry but is not:

Must all be vail'd, while he that reades, divines,
Catching the sense at two removes?

Certainly one does not make poems by plain saying "My God, My King." However truly said, it must also be truly said in art. But Herbert is not offering his phrase as a poem. Though the substance of his challenge may lie in the Platonic emphasis of his rebuke to the conventional love poets, his argument also depends on the charge that their poetry celebrates the wrong subjects in an unsuitable manner. We may assume that their winding structure and veiling are also at fault for literary reasons, because they are inappropriate; they are superimposed upon untrue material as if to lend it dignity, and the results are intended to display the writer's art and to flatter the reader.² Herbert's attitude is not old-fashioned here, but up to date; he would agree with Bacon that the true fable is composed to reveal its hidden meaning, not to conceal it. Herbert does not doubt that Scripture veils its meaning, teaching "more and more" to the earnest pupil "and ever outrunning the Teacher";³ but if winding structures would be inappropriate and affected, so too would be the sense of deliberately playing aesthetic games with fictions. Herbert practices more than one kind of concealment in his own poems, but part of his justification, presumably, rests on the subject, the truth which he intends to reveal but which must work its way through natural and personal obstructions. It is interesting to note that when Herbert excludes the profane he does not produce the traditional veil of protective obscurity, which theologians invoked to keep the crowd

² As Herbert wrote in "Sion," "All show'd the builders, crav'd the seers care."

³ "Briefe Notes on Valdeso's *Considerations*," pp. 309–10. Herbert does not like the train of reasoning and comparison encouraged by the metaphorical division of the word of Scripture into carnal and spiritual significations. Both are necessary, and neither can "ever be exhausted" (p. 309).

The Art of Plainness

away from holy mysteries and critics borrowed to keep it away from literary things too good for it. The first stanza of his poem “Superliminare,” which leads into the main body of *The Church*, is an invitation to those who have submitted to the discipline of “The Church-Porch,” with its seventy-seven stanzas of homely wisdom and outlandish proverbs. But the second stanza sets up barriers with some generous, and characteristic, exceptions:

Avoid, Profanenesse; come not here:
Nothing but holy, pure, and cleare,
Or that which groneth to be so,
May at his perill further go.

Herbert’s assertions in “Jordan” (I) invite us to query his own poetic structures—his own efforts to get the truth out plainly, and to express the beauty in truth. But if we look to “The Church-Porch” we must not expect to find answers to any of our important questions. Herbert is being self-consciously plain here in ways that tell us little about his art of plainness. The best lines and stanzas manage to be directly instructive to an intended audience of modest intelligence, for the most part probably rustic. But the concept of plain style being followed is that side branch authorized in antiquity by the Cynics and rebuked by the Stoics⁴—one that does not refuse the common and coarse and does not seek the refined simplicity of *urbanitas*. Robert Burton, as part of his clowning in the preface to his great *Anatomy of Melancholy*, describes a mixture of Stoic and Cynic features in mock defense of his own style:

a loose, plain, rude writer, *ficum voco ficum, et lignonem lignonem*, and as free, as loose, *idem calamo quod in mente*, I call a spade a spade, *animis haec scribo, non auribus*, I respect matter, not words. . . . I neglect phrases and labor wholly to inform my reader’s understanding, not to please his ears; ’tis not my study or intent to compose neatly, which an orator requires, but to express myself readily and plainly as it happens . . . now more

⁴ Fiske, *Lucilius and Horace*, pp. 84–85.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

elaborate, then remiss, as the present subject required or as at that time I was affected.

The description is at least partly relevant to the style of "The Church-Porch," and there are some things to be learned in the poem, which is not without interest, but they are almost all things that can be learned from more attractive poems. The faults of dull rhythm and language and of strained wit are not instructive, nor do we need to study, in Herbert, examples of coarse or flat colloquialism in order to distinguish these from the superior precision of refined colloquialism. What is worth keeping in mind, however, is the marked interest he shows in proverbial, aphoristic expression. Of *sententia* Hoskins wisely observed that "if it be well used, [it] is a figure—if ill and too much, it is a style. . . . It is very true that a sentence is a pearl in a discourse; but is it a good discourse that is all pearl? It is like an eye in the body; but is it not monstrous to be all eyes? I take Cyclops to be as handsome a man as Argus."⁵ The point as it applies to Herbert is that *sententia* is a powerful figure in his art of plainness and one that he uses to admirable effect, especially at the ends of poems, to draw together and clarify complex materials.

In "The Church-Porch" Herbert would seem to be interested in the abrupt, easily understood expression of practical, homely truth. The question of beauty in truth does not come up. (Herbert's own best answer is the permanent evidence of his best lyrics.) But he offers another implied answer that may be connected with the stylistic intentions of "The Church-Porch," with Cynic style, and with a particular Christian problem concerning style. When Augustine was demonstrating that Scripture provided a satisfying model of eloquence as well as wisdom, he had to confront the charge that some New Testament writers violated the decencies of style and even of idiom. Some did not, he is happy to show, but his defense rests on the superior importance of truth and the practical needs of instruction—it is better to say the truth in faulty, vulgar language that will be understood than to miss the purpose of expression.⁶ Augustine does not put much heart into the argument, but there is no better one and

⁵ John Hoskins, *Directions for Speech and Style*, ed. Hoyt H. Hudson (Princeton, 1935), pp. 38–39.

⁶ *De doctrina Christiana* 4. 10. 24.

The Art of Plainness

so he makes it. Though the point touches on a vital problem of the relationship between eloquence and wisdom, he understandably prefers to make his main advances on another front. In considering such a question the intellectual partnership of ethics and aesthetics cannot avoid a sense of strain.

At certain moments Herbert accepts, and may even flaunt, a division between truth and beauty. The most difficult and interesting examples are not quite covered by this rather blunt description, but minor examples can illustrate more easily the simple point that he sometimes prefers to exhibit the division between truth and beauty, to the credit of the former.⁷ For instance, "Grief," turning from an attempt to present a feeling apparently too strong to be contained or expressed by art, translates that feeling into a metaphorical act, which renounces the poem to fall back on a broken exclamation. We are probably intended to understand that the exclamation is what the poem was trying to "say"; if so, the mannered excesses arranged in fluent quatrains and brought up smartly with a couplet do not advance the real subject very well. The poem ends thus:

Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise
For my rough sorrows: cease, be dumbe and mute,
Give up your feet and running to mine eyes,
And keep your measures for some lovers lute,
Whose grief allows him musick and a ryme:
For mine excludes both measure, tune, and time.
Alas, my God!

A much slighter example is the deliberate lapse into plain saying of "The Rose":

Or if such deceits there be,
Such delights I meant to say;
There are no such things to me,
Who have pass'd my right away.

⁷ Poems of this kind are at the opposite extreme from pattern poems, which, responding to the "wisdom" attributed to the hieroglyph, seek to achieve the visible unity of external shape and the soul of internal meaning.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

The last stanza of "Home" violates form in order to assert a truth of the feelings, but the assertion is a gentle one, more like a prayer than a lament. The effect might have been similar if God's hand writing "Loved" at the end of "A true Hymne" had chosen that word even though it failed to rhyme:

Come dearest Lord, passe not this holy season,
 My flesh and bones and joynts do pray:
And ev'n my verse, when by the ryme and reason
 The word is, *Stay*, sayes ever, *Come*.

Finally, there is the most familiar example of this practice in Herbert, in which an expressively dangled line is carried throughout each stanza of the poem and brought into the form only in the last stanza. "Deniall" opens with a disordered third line and an unrhymed fifth line:

When my devotions could not pierce
 Thy silent eares;
Then was my heart broken, as was my verse:
 My breast was full of fears
 And disorder.

The fifth lines of the next four stanzas continue to stand apart, trochaic (as the other lines are not), unrhymed, and foreboding. The last line of the poem fulfills the form by rhyming and saying so—"And mend my ryme"—but that completion does little more than offer a token solution to the problems of the poem. A direct prayer simply requests the gift that will reorder what has been a moving disorder. By the standard of Herbert's best poems the conclusion is a piece of arbitrary wit.⁸

These expressions of a division between truth and beauty do not finally say anything distinctive or resonant. The gestures of sincerity by which art is used to expose art can at best have but limited effect. A

⁸ Some poems which partly resemble these in their use of expressive disproportion will be discussed later in the book.

The Art of Plainness

better and more characteristic performance is “The Forerunners.” Whatever else he is saying in the poem, Herbert is bidding a fictional farewell to poetry, to the “sweet phrases, lovely metaphors” which he has rescued from the poetic “brothels” and brought back into the Church, repentant and renewed: “My God must have my best, ev’n all I had.” The excitement and affection of his address could serve as well for arrival as for departure: “Lovely enchanting language, sugar-cane, / Honey of roses,” he exclaims, as a preface to imagining the unfortunate relapse when poetry returns to its old ways. He argues against what he knows will happen and in so doing indicates both the separation of truth and beauty and the bridge of normal relations that leads to their unity:

Let follie speak in her own native tongue.
True beutie dwells on high: ours is a flame
 But borrow’d thence to light us thither.
Beutie and beauteous words should go together.

Here Platonic solution is emphasized, rather than Platonic division. The statement is handsome and, as well as we can judge from the context and from other poems, heartfelt—a major poetic belief, but not therefore the guiding inspiration of every lyrical utterance.

“Yet if you go,” he adds, meaning when you go, as the poet prepares to settle down for a final accounting:

Yet if you go, I passe not; take your way:
For, *Thou art still my God*, is all that ye
Perhaps with more embellishment can say.

And so a significant division appears, if not between truth and beauty, at least between “true beauty” and what can be said in words. That words are dismissed as if they were no more than a conventional, detachable garment of style may seem a little disappointing, but Herbert does at least say “perhaps.” Besides, in the context of the poem, “Thou art still my God” *is* an ultimate expression, one that can be and is developed in other poems, but not here. Its meaning cannot

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

be improved upon, and the man preparing to give up everything will not need anything else. The expression is complete, syntactically and otherwise, as the plain saying of "My God, my King" and "My joy, my life, my crown" are not. Nor does the poet's own attitude toward poetic language remotely resemble the stiff certitude with which he elsewhere rejects the misguided efforts of misguided poets. He is not rejecting here but parting, and with fine reluctances and such sweet sorrow.

In "The Forerunners" the act of writing poetry stands for the means, made visible and audible, of communing with God; it is a human invention motivated by a borrowed flame "to light us thither," a means of returning to the source of beauty. The house of the Church, the house of poetry, and the house of life, the "best room" of which is the heart, in the poem are all reduced to an essential state. As the Visible Church stands truly, beautifully, but imperfectly for the Invisible Church, so the "sweet phrases, lovely metaphors" express imperfectly the "True beautie" on high. In its plainness the essential expression "Thou art still my God" will fulfill the end of expression, "And if I please him, I write fine and wittie." The essential quality of the expression, when one contemplates its meaning, alone and in the context of the poem, would seem to be better established than the poet's assurance of writing "fine and wittie." That claim one may perhaps regard as a little assertive, markedly different from the persuasive tact with which art demonstrates the limitations of art in the argument of the poem.

The distinction is a fine one, but it must be made. I mentioned earlier that if Herbert felt a poem to be successful he would need to believe that the expression had realized its end of pleasing God, and that God in reply had authorized the poet's feeling. But he does not practice the art of silence or the art of discovering only the essential expression, which he can then merely "mutter." He writes poems, even when their aim is to express the inadequacy of poetic expression. We may perhaps regard "Thou art still my God" as a symbolic plainness, an ideal to which his poetic art of plainness may aspire, but it is not itself an expression of that art. I think we can put matters in the right perspective by drawing a distinction between the symbolic

The Art of Plainness

plainness of an ultimate expression and the plainness of a complete poetic action. The latter may (and in Herbert often does) move toward a clarification that resembles the symbolic plainness. But if the poetic action is complete, its conclusion will be the result of a process of expression. Though the "true beauty" of "Thou art still my God" may be traced to the compressed inner meaning that the expression holds for Herbert, nevertheless that statement does appear three times in the poem, and it works both with and against other statements.⁹ In "The Flower" Herbert makes another absolute statement: "Thy word is all, if we could spell." Some of his poems are advanced spelling lessons. If "The Forerunners" were, say, a poem like "Aaron," its process might have included some parsing of the implicit relations between "thou" and "my," or between "art" and "still."

In his personal lyrics, which respond to many themes, moments, and feelings, Herbert does not give us a single, consistent attitude toward expression. In "The Forerunners" poetry is referred to as an art of embellishment, but he can also make poems by stripping off the garments and veils of inexact language in order to perfect the shape of his thought and feeling. In "The Quidditie" the definition of poetry is presented in flaunting negatives, and then a comprehensive affirmation:

But it is that which while I use
I am with thee, and *most take all*.

In "Jordan" (II) he mocks the "long pretence" of his own self-conscious art and concludes with a simple solution:

*There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:
Copie out onely that, and save expense.*

But few of his best poems model themselves on that advice.

We come now to a fundamental attitude which underlies many of

⁹ If we do not regard the structure of this poem as "winding" and the sense as "veiled," it is chiefly because Herbert has tainted these metaphors and made them suggest affectation in art. That he is here oblique and complex, without affectation, few would deny.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

the expressed dissatisfactions with the human art of poetry. The overt statement is in "The Altar,"

Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workmans tool hath touch'd the same.

Here Herbert goes beyond the traditions of Platonic and Stoic distrust of the imagination, beyond the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy and the modern quarrel between mathematical and poetic expression. He is reflecting the Pauline disavowal of the "wisdom of words" and the "persuasive words of wisdom" and is reflecting the alert suspicion, writ large in the Old Testament, which anticipates the signs of idol worship and exposes the ingenious variety of techniques devised to advance the human interest in the name of God. The altar that Moses commands his people to build when they have passed over Jordan is an altar that will acknowledge them to be the people of God safely delivered into the promised land. The altar is to be built of "whole stones" upon which are to be written the words of the Law; "whole stones"—"thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them."¹⁰ The symbols are those of integrity and dedication, underlined by the sacrificial abstaining from any use of human tools. As a general standard rigorously applied to the making of poems this would eliminate most of the possibilities of individual expression. But even the fictive stones of "The Altar" are intended to praise God silently and continuously, "if I chance to hold my peace." In Herbert the act of dedication is absolute but does not exclude the use of the best human means available. What is central is the goal of integrity and dedication: the poet will try to exclude, but may need to transform, the affected, the flattering, and the insincere. One does not cross over Jordan every day, and poems that record spiritual conflicts must make the best of their faulty human materials. It may be well, by way of balance, to quote Herbert when he is advocating practical rather than ideal plainness: "They say, it is an ill Mason that refuseth any

¹⁰ Deut. 27:1–10. Rosemond Tuve has an account of the iconography (*A Reading of George Herbert* [Chicago, 1952], pp. 182–85, 197–200).

The Art of Plainness

stone: and there is no knowledg, but, in a skillful hand, serves either positively as it is, or else to illustrate some other knowledge.”¹¹ And:

The cunning workman never doth refuse
The meanest tool, that he may chance to use.¹²

In Herbert the sense of division between truth and beauty is most likely to occur in the personal lyric. When he is writing doctrinal poems celebrating order, there is not much occasion for argument. But he would be neither true poet nor true man of God if he did not experience and express division. And in such circumstances he is not likely to be satisfied with easy distinctions between truth and beauty. As poet he hopes to record impersonal and personal truth. He can believe and act much of the time as if eloquence and wisdom, beauty and truth, speak one language. But he is acutely aware of deception, evasiveness, and inadequacy within himself—and traditional attitudes toward language and art provide useful and established symbols for these defects. In the body of his whole work, however, awareness of deception is not a fixed attitude but the very material of his art. The inference I draw is this: Herbert sharpened his own sense of style and language against the duplicities of thought and language; though these duplicities were known to him as a cultivated, reflective man, they were most intimately known through his experience as a practicing poet.

There are some spectacular triumphs in Herbert’s expression of self and in his art of plainness, but if we measure other poems by these triumphs, and do so with insufficient regard to their uniqueness, then we are sure to introduce distortions. For instance, though he mocks his own “long pretence” in “Jordan” (II) and the lovers who “are still pretending” in “Dulnesse,” he is not to be thought of as excluding the legitimate “pretending” of fiction from his own efforts at expression. Many of the more assertive poems take up positions that he does not intend to carry through uncritically. A paradox that furnishes much of his poetic material may help explain why the single

¹¹ *A Priest to the Temple*, p. 228.

¹² “The Church-Porch,” ll. 353–54.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

attitude is often countered within its own poem and opposed by other poems. The "grosser world," toward the beauty and importance of which the poet feels conflicting emotions, is, in spite of his feelings, a fixed and orderly world regulated by the "word and art" of God. It is the "diviner world of grace" which suddenly alters and of which God is every day "a new Creatour."¹³

When Herbert concludes "Jordan" (II) by advising himself to copy out only the sweetness "readie penn'd" in love, we may easily overestimate the singleness of the declaration. Miss Tuve, who is very precise about the refined toughness of Herbert's own self-knowledge as dramatized in the poem, nevertheless tends to accept the "copying" as a fixed answer, as the enlightened imitation in which Herbert and the best poets of the time believed.¹⁴ But the word "sweet" is one on which he often rings changes, as in "The Odour," where he needs to exercise a "long pretence" and frankly work and wind and weave himself "into the sense"—but not because he delights in affectation or desires to embellish the plain. Herbert is, of course, influenced by Neoplatonic doctrines of recovering the truth, but these do not tell us enough about his kind of lyric endeavor. There is far more creative "groaning" than "copying" in Herbert, and perhaps the most effective comment on the conclusion of "Jordan" (II) comes from "Superliminare." He will admit

Nothing but holy, pure, and cleare,
Or that which groneth to be so.

It is a program which leaves room for, and grants validity to, individual effort without regard to cost and efficiency.

¹³ "The Temper" (II).

¹⁴ She finds "Herbert's theory of poetry," and much else, in the Jordan poems. In the second of these he is criticizing "his own intellectual pride, in his own earlier writing" (p. 190). "If he would look upon Love, the imitation thereof would be poetry. . . . It is the Sidneian idea of poetry; the 'erected wit' must contemplate universals, then only do the great speaking images of poetry body them forth" (p. 193). In her later study, "George Herbert and *Caritas*" (*JWCI*, 22 [1959]), the "idea" is "less about writing a poem than about living a life which copies out that love with which we first were loved" (pp. 309-10).

The Art of Plainness

We may approach these matters from another point of view. Herbert's country parson, "being true to his businesse, hath exactly sifted the definitions of all vertues, and vices; especially canvassing those, whose natures are most stealing, and beginnings uncertaine." As one might anticipate, "he greatly esteemes also of cases of conscience, wherein he is much versed." The parson has "thoroughly canvassed al the particulars of humane actions," and he chooses often "to descend to particulars: for exactnesse lyes in particulars."¹⁵ Herbert's emphasis on "particulars" and on "cases of conscience" accords with some of the major religious and intellectual currents of the times, and one may perhaps note parallels between his admiration for Bacon and his aversion to speculative and controversial theology—his firm stress on the parson's practical knowledge and piety and on the exact observations that assist the conduct of daily affairs. Herbert's own piety, which cannot be said to minimize man's dependence on God, nevertheless reflects the general shift in the seventeenth century from speculative meditation on divine things to particular observation of human things. He would have agreed with the redefinition of wisdom which Milton puts in Adam's mouth:

That not to know at large of things remote
From use, obscure and subtle, but to know
That which before us lies in daily life,
Is the prime wisdom.¹⁶

As a touchstone for what is deliberately false in Herbert's rhetoric, one might often employ a sentence of Ralph Cudworth's: "We think it a gallant thing to be fluttering up to Heaven with our wings of Knowledge and Speculation: whereas the highest mystery of a Divine

¹⁵ *A Priest to the Temple*, pp. 264–65, 230 (two quotations), 275. The parson advises elder sons "to frequent Sessions and Sizes . . . it is a great advantage to know the practice of the Land; for our Law is Practice." He urges them to enter Parliament, "for there is no School to a Parliament," and not to miss the committee meetings, "for there the particulars are exactly discussed, which are brought from thence to the House but in generall" (pp. 276–77).

¹⁶ *Paradise Lost*, VIII, 191–94.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

Life here, and of perfect Happinesse hereafter, consisteth in nothing but mere Obedience to the Divine Will."¹⁷

To Herbert "mere obedience" is not a platitude but a high mystery in that "diviner world of grace" of which God is every day "a new Creatour." In "The Thanksgiving" he takes inventory and records a series of declarations, all good and pious but too hopeful and glib. He solves here the contest with God, a serious, repeated theme, with casually inadequate gestures of dedication:

But how then shall I imitate thee, and
 Copie thy fair, though bloudie hand?
Surely I will revenge me on thy love,
 And trie who shall victorious prove.

At the last moment, when the plain intention to copy must finally face the subject of Christ's love and suffering, he gives up the game of pretense:

Thy art of love, which I'le turn back on thee:
 O my deare Saviour, Victorie!
Then for thy passion—I will do for that—
 Alas, my God, I know not what.

The next poem, "The Reprisall," takes a different path and is directly rebellious but emerges with the difficult, right answer:

 though I can do nought
Against thee, in thee I will overcome
 The man, who once against thee fought.

It is not an answer that can be copied, for it requires *man* to be a kind of new creator every day. Herbert does not choose to meditate on the mysteries of God's nature, though as poet he testifies to the manifestations of God's art in the design of the world. His most

¹⁷ *A Sermon Preached Before the House of Commons March 31, 1647*, facs. ed. (New York, 1930), p. 19.

The Art of Plainness

important subject is the mystery of God's art with man, a subject he confronts with great patience and inventiveness, with both passionate involvement and scrupulous detachment. That God's art with man reveals God's nature he takes for granted, and he assumes that the mysteries which God has concealed in man encourage the study of things human as an authorized reflection of things divine. He has no single, fixed answer to Christ's passion, but he is also puzzled by smaller, personal subjects—for example, the loss of "all the thoughts and ends, / Which my fierce youth did bandie."¹⁸ As for the pattern of his inconsistencies, the only honest explanation is that he does not understand the why of what he can describe with such commanding power and precision.

One of many parallels between the mystery of God's ways and the mystery of man's ways can be illustrated from "Justice" (I). It is a brilliantly original poem, brief, plain in its meaning, without a striking word or phrase, but subtle in its conception and worked out with fine attention to detail and structure. "I cannot skill of these thy wayes," he begins, and then follows with a quatrain demonstrating the hard ways of God:

*Lord, thou didst make me, yet thou woundest me;
Lord, thou dost wound me, yet thou dost relieve me:
Lord, thou relievest, yet I die by thee:
Lord, thou dost kill me, yet thou dost reprieve me.*

The development is repetitive, interlocking, circular. Man's complete dependence and complete inability to understand are hammered out in purposive rhetoric and rhyme. Then the first line of the poem is paired with a couplet upon which, as a hinge, the poem turns:

But when I mark my life and praise,
Thy justice me most fitly payes.

A parallel quatrain proceeds to demonstrate the hard ways of man:

¹⁸ "The Answer."

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

*For, I do praise thee, yet I praise thee not:
My prayers mean thee, yet my prayers stray:
I would do well, yet sinne the hand hath got:
My soul doth love thee, yet it loves delay.*

Man's rhetoric and rhymes are characterized by dissipation of purpose and force, by simple failures in which repetition does not bind but loosens. They are simple failures, but words like "mean," "stray," "would," "delay" have behind them a vast history of known human failure. To complete his poem Herbert has only to vary the first line by substituting "my" for "thy": "I cannot skill of these my wayes."

This single example may serve to illustrate a parallel between the incomprehensibility of God's ways and man's, and it may also serve as an example of Herbert's art of plainness. But our previous observation that Herbert does not give us a single, consistent attitude toward expression may be applied here as well. His art of plainness does not bear a single stamp, and his arguments with God are conducted with great freedom and inventiveness. Whenever as critics we take a single example as our model to copy, we become aware of statements on the other side and of stylistic demonstrations that force us to widen our definitions.

From one point of view we may be satisfied to locate the essential Herbert in the ringing declarations of "H. Baptisme" (II): "Let me be soft and supple to thy will. . . . My soul bid nothing. . . . Childhood is health." We know that the goal expressed so simply is a difficult one to achieve. Millions of human beings have, in effect, said the same thing and have both failed and succeeded. But our general knowledge must also "descend to particulars," for exactness lies not in any general statement but in the clarified order which poetry may achieve when particular expressions work with and against each other. In Herbert's poetry the soul has other lessons to learn, not all of them compatible with what is here presented as the sum of wisdom. Softness must be "tempered" and suppleness must exert itself in order to be what it is, for the soul that bids nothing may hear nothing; nor is that spiritual state exempt from posing and artful presumption. Childhood is not health at all in "Mortification," but is only one of

The Art of Plainness

several stages in the art of dying. That art would seem to be more valuable than spiritual health itself; for the art of knowing possesses more fully whatever it desires and gains, and Herbert never deviates long from this old principle, which represents the uneasy, but enduring and fruitful, marriage of Athens and Jerusalem. Childhood usually symbolizes the will in his poems, but the education of the will is the patient task of intelligence, and Herbert, to his credit, seldom trusts for long any of the attractive substitutes for intelligence. Even that most famous conversion of "The Collar"—"Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child!* / And I reply'd, *My Lord!*"—rests on the demonstration of an argument that has run itself into the ground.

As for Herbert's plainness, which is not all of one kind, it is above all an art by which he may tell the truth to himself and God. Its major devices are not traditional figures but psychological gestures and movements. The excesses of cheerful confidence and the defections of faith decked out as humility are given their full human voice, not as exotic monsters of thought and feeling but as common faults "whose natures are most stealing, and beginnings uncertaine," faults which are most tenacious when they are not allowed to expose themselves by speaking in their "own native tongue." Belief in the divine desire for human desire grants human feelings an essential dignity, even in error, and encourages a vigorous freedom of expression. This freedom comes under the general laws of art and is expanded, not restricted, by the necessities of religious tact and discipline—as it is enlarged by realizing the complex demands of poetic form.

2

I propose now to offer more than a token and less than a complete demonstration of Herbert's art of plainness by drawing upon three poems: "The Temper" (I), "The Pearl," and "Death." "The Temper" (I) begins with a declaration:

How should I praise thee, Lord! how should my rymes
Gladly engrave thy love in steel,
If what my soul doth feel sometimes,
My soul might ever feel!

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

And ends with a declaration:

Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust,
Thy hands made both, and I am there:
Thy power and love, my love and trust
Make one place ev'ry where.

The "plain intention" of the poem is to transform its initial attitude into its concluding one. If we borrow the point of view of "Jordan" (II), we may want to call the progress one of metaphorical working, winding, and weaving into the final sense. But we can hardly call the poem an expensive piece of pretending, wide of the mark and much better managed by simple copying of the right thing. The declaration of "Jordan" (II) is not demonstrated—except insofar as its acting out of the "long pretence" exhibits a convincing failure that establishes the need for an alternative. There it is a friendly whispering of advice; other poems will produce other alternatives. Perhaps one ought to resist the temptation to isolate the message in order to quarrel with it. My own quarrel is not with Herbert and the poem but with a critical position that tends to make too much of Herbert's poetic allegiance to the more rigid aspects of literary imitation. In a philosophical sense the solution of "The Temper" (I) is a kind of "copying." But the terms of the poem make such philosophical imitation inseparable from a process of transformation. The pretending and the exhibition of failure furnish the plot of the poem and are both the means to and the proof of the final declaration.

Our best approach, I think, is from the lines in "Love" (II) where God is asked:

And kindle in our hearts such true desires,
As may consume our lusts, and make thee way.¹⁹

¹⁹ I thought I remembered that Miss Tuve had made this connection, but I cannot find the page, if it is there. She once asked me whether I could really keep all my nice points in mind as they multiplied themselves, and was perhaps not wholly convinced by my answer. But I cannot be the only reader who might be helped by an index to her book on Herbert.

The Art of Plainness

Most of “The Temper” is devoted to the consuming of false love, but the kindling of true desire coincides with the opening lines of the poem, which speak in the high hortatory voice of love convinced that it is sincere and that it deserves to have its way. The “how should” and the “if” mark the fiction that represents real desire and invokes the conventions of literary and religious praise. Although the power and sweep of the language obscure the personal motive, which in the conventions of praise is not an illegitimate one, Herbert’s characteristic exercise of religious propriety never allows personal desire to speak for the whole man without some discriminating process of clarification. His “Gladly engrave thy love in steel” rings beautifully, but he pretends to forget that the only standard is God’s approval of the offering. The poet’s desire is not absurd, but he knows that its expression is, and he compensates in the second stanza by acting out his pretentiousness. If there are forty heavens, or more, when things are right with him he can “peere” over them all. At other times “I hardly reach a score.” And sometimes there is a general minus, without arithmetic: “to hell I fall.” The images of kindling and consuming are most intense in the next three stanzas, which clarify the issues and stand apart from the first and last two. The excesses of pride and humility clash in images of expansion and contraction and in the movements up and down of actual and psychological space:

O rack me not to such a vast extent;
 Those distances belong to thee:
 The world’s too little for thy tent,
 A grave too big for me.

Wilt thou meet arms with man, that thou dost stretch
 A crumme of dust from heav’n to hell?
 Will great God measure with a wretch?
 Shall he thy stature spell?

O let me, when thy roof my soul hath hid,
 O let me roost and nestle there:
 Then of a sinner thou art rid,
 And I of hope and fear.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

This last stanza (the fifth) is similar to the first in advancing personal desire while paying tribute to God. We may note that the eloquence of humility is no less moving, no less an expression of real desire, and no less wrong than the eloquence of pride. By now the two extremes have exhausted each other, and some *tertium quid* must be called on to make peace. The sixth stanza explains the emblematic title,²⁰ declares acceptance of the divine will, and advances the metaphor of music as a solution to the problem of praise:

Yet take thy way; for sure thy way is best:
Stretch or contract me, thy poore debter:
This is but tuning of my breast,
To make the musick better.

And so the stanza completes the action of consuming false love by translating the experiences of the poem into terms of acceptance which draw a moral. The metaphor of music discovers a retroactive purpose in the contradictions, a purpose which may also govern present and future action. But Herbert does not stop here, for the kindling and consuming have served "to make thee way," and the seventh stanza is the demonstration of what can happen when "way" has been made for God:

Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust,
Thy hands made both, and I am there:
Thy power and love, my love and trust
Make one place ev'ry where.

One might describe this metaphor of music as a rational discovery which orders, in a quiet, reasonable way, the passionate contradictions which have been expressed. But the final stanza establishes, without reference to music, a concord that is more comprehensive. In the

²⁰ For an intensive study of this topic, which includes a full-scale interpretation of the poem, see Fredson Bowers, "Herbert's Sequential Imagery: 'The Temper,'" *MP*, 59 (1962):202-13.

The Art of Plainness

language of religion the difference resembles that between intellectual acceptance and complete resignation. Herbert himself might well have thought that the old, restrictive terms were consumed in order to make way for the new, and that he was himself, in a minor, personal way, copying the process by which truth had once come to light—in Augustine’s summary statement: “the New Testament reveals what was concealed in the Old.”²¹ In “The Quip” Herbert ignores the arguments of his opponents for he has a single answer ready penned; here the arguments come from his own soul and he must work through them to reach his answer. The simple perfection of that answer cannot be anticipated but comes suddenly, and after a slight pause.

Although the final stanza may be said to express and demonstrate religious resignation, we may approach it from the traditions of rhetoric. First, we may draw on Aristotle’s statement that of the three “modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word” the most important, by and large, is “the personal goodness revealed by the speaker”; in fact, “his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.”²² Christian rhetoric accepts the point and advances it; where the unity of eloquence and wisdom occurs, we may assume the effective presence of inspiration as a proof of character. The chief goal of eloquence is to move, and Christian high style could be thought of as assimilating all the charac-

²¹ *City of God* 5. 18. 3 (“revelante testamento novo quod in vetere velatum fuit”), trans. W. Rhys Roberts.

²² *Rhetoric* 1. 2. 1356^a. In Herbert’s “The Windows,” speech alone is a “flaring thing”; it is the whole person of the preacher, whose life shines with the infused life of Christ, who is eloquent to the conscience. Such “eloquence of action” represents the integrity of the style and of the man which is a traditional ideal of expression, nobly demonstrated by Socrates but not limited on that account to the aspirations of plain style. Ben Jonson has written one of the more authoritative accounts of the process in defending the necessity of good workmanship, the second stage of inspiration. In his elegy on Shakespeare he adopts and reworks the familiar words of Horace:

Who casts to write a living line, must sweat,
(Such as thine are) and strike the second heat
Upon the *Muses* anvil: turne the same,
(And himselfe with it) that he thinkes to frame.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

teristics of the plain style, deriving its elevation primarily from the personal fervor with which the saving truth was expressed.²³

The last stanza will not fit into a rhetorical category of style. It is adorned and elevated, but the dominant effect is that of plainness and simplicity. The traces of art are subtle, though not inscrutable; and we could point to devices not in the handbooks of rhetoric (as Augustine is pleased to note of a passage from the Book of Amos), and perhaps not even in the annals of microlinguistics. But we may pass by that demonstration for now. The issues of the poem are resolved in a final expression that unites beauty and truth, eloquence and wisdom. There is no point of reference for distinguishing between what is said and the authoritative gift of being able to say it: inspiration is the proof of character. An expression as complete and as final in its way as "Thou art still my God" has emerged from a developing pattern of conflict; and although that expression can stand alone, it was created in the act of completing the poem, and it answers all the immediacies of conflict and form. It can stand alone but does not insist on its privilege, as a few ready-penned expressions make some show of doing. We may perhaps apply Herbert's metaphor of wisdom descending from above, the silk twist let down. Or we may say that in "The Temper" when the poet stopped, God wrote "loved" and spelled it out in a whole stanza.²⁴

²³ Augustine *De doctrina Christiana* 4. 20. 42.

²⁴ Hoskins can attribute Sidney's eloquence to his mastery of Aristotle (*Directions for Speech and Style*, p. 41). Of the parson preaching, Herbert writes: "The character of his Sermon is Holiness; he is not witty, or learned, or eloquent, but Holy. A Character, that *Hermogenes* never dream'd of, and therefore he could give no precepts thereof" (p. 233). It would be a mistake (not unprecedented) to measure poems by an ideal appropriate to sermons, but Herbert does encourage one to think that he is aware of both fulfilling and going beyond the rules of classical theory. For instance, in his *Rhetoric* (2. 23. 1400^b) Aristotle writes that those arguments "are most applauded of which we foresee the conclusions from the beginning, so long as they are not obvious at first sight—for part of the pleasure we feel is at our own intelligent anticipation." It is a rule that often applies to Herbert's poetic arguments, but not infrequently our pleasure and conviction must derive from what cannot be anticipated. In such poems Herbert's theory is best illustrated by reference to the sudden changes that characterize the world of grace in "The Temper" (II), or by reference to the law announced in "The Bag": "Storms are the triumph of his art."

The Art of Plainness

My next example is “The Pearl,” a poem with a simpler argument and a basic plot—that of rejecting the ways of the world, the flesh, and the devil, each in a stanza.²⁵ A final stanza explains why, clarifies the issues, confirms the character of the speaker, and in a simple statement organizes the procedures of the poem into their completed form. We find no acting out of inspiration at the end, but rather a quietly effective definition of the ways of love and understanding. In the penultimate stanza, for the sake of an ultimate plainness the poet unexpectedly elevates the plain style that has been serving him with perfect ease and variety.

The plot is basic and the formula for human temptation is the standard one, but Herbert’s conception and performance are markedly fresh and individual. The temptation of the devil he puts first, as intellectual pride. It is not a temptation at all but is little more than an inventory, not even an explicit rejection. By putting intellectual pride first but not treating it as pride, and by his casual manner and racy diction, Herbert exhibits a surprising and witty indifference to the traditional power of that temptation. Indeed, if we do not recognize the historical issue, the first appearance of the refrain, “Yet I love thee,” may seem a little forced and overemphatic. As the poem develops, and as we collect our bearings in its motion, we are supposed to recognize that pride is not being located in the intellect alone but is distributed throughout all decisions involving a choice between the love of self and the love of God.

In the second stanza the temptations of the world are rejected, again without the dignity of a formal recognition but in the course of drawing up an inventory of the ways of honor. The casual raciness becomes intensified, and the tone advances to open mockery:

I know the wayes of Honour, what maintains
The quick returns of courtesie and wit:
In vies of favours whether partie gains,
When glorie swells the heart, and moldeth it
To all expressions both of hand and eye,
Which on the world a true-love-knot may tie,

²⁵ Tve makes the same point in “George Herbert and *Caritas*,” p. 320n.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

And bear the bundle, wheresoe're it goes:
How many drammes of spirit there must be
To sell my life unto my friends or foes:
Yet I love thee.

Then the third and climactic stanza presents the temptation of the flesh, the ways of pleasure. One does not expect to meet sensitively intelligent Christians who are confident that they are untempted by intellectual pride and the subtle allurements of the world; one expects even less to learn that so rare a person is frankly responsive to the appeals of pleasure:

I know the wayes of Pleasure, the sweet strains,
The lullings and the relishes of it;
The propositions of hot blood and brains;
What mirth and musick mean; what love and wit
Have done these twentie hundred yeares, and more:
I know the projects of unbridled store:
My stuffe is flesh, not brasse; my senses live,
And grumble oft, that they have more in me
Then he that curbs them, being but one to five:
Yet I love thee.

These are not, to be sure, the common temptations of the flesh but reflect a refined, more philosophical, concept of pleasure—as though Herbert were revising Socrates' fable in the *Phaedrus* and attributing rebelliousness to the spirited horse of the psychic team.²⁶ A

²⁶ Herbert's order of temptation reverses the customary upward march from sensuality to intellectual pride. The wit of humility here demonstrates that, wherever one begins on the scale of self-mastery, the problems remain stubborn and refuse to dissolve without God's help. The music of pleasure, as we shall note in Chapter Three below, gets little formal emphasis in Herbert. On the other hand, Marvell, in his "Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure," makes music the height of physical pleasure. The tempted soul declares: "None can chain a mind / Whom this sweet Chordage cannot bind." The omen may prevail, but the tempter still proceeds toward further heights.

The Art of Plainness

twentieth-century reader might resent the antique novelty of assigning the products of culture to the ways of pleasure, but he might find some compensation in the formal emphasis on knowledge that echoes through the stanza: “mirth and musick *mean*,” and the introductory expression, “I know,” is used a second time only in this stanza. What is most distinctive, however, is the passionate immediacy, the full identification of the poet with the feelings expressed. The nonchalance of witty indifference abruptly disappears; and the stanza excludes, for the moment, those quantitative images of profit and loss which partly reflect the amused detachment and superiority of the speaker—the “stock and surplus,” “quick returns,” “gains,” and “drammes of spirit.” The controls of knowledge and love are not broken down, but they remain external and neither repress the feelings nor enter into their expression. As for the temptation itself, it is not considered in a formal way, but its presence and force are amply represented by the language of the speaker.

As a measure of Herbert’s boldness and candor I find it useful to quote an authoritative diagnosis of the symptoms and etiology of imaginative self-temptation. According to Augustine, when the soul slackens in its powers of determination, the body will try to advance its own interests. Delighted by “corporeal forms and movements,” the soul then “becomes entangled with their images which it has fixed in its memory, and is foully defiled by the fornications of the phantasy.” When the soul places the end of its own good in the sensuous, it “snatches the deceptive images of corporeal things from within and combines them together by empty thought, so that nothing seems to it to be divine unless it be of such a kind as this.”²⁷ Augustine’s diagnosis, with its adaptation of Platonic and Stoic features, may describe the rebellious imagination as we see it, for instance, in “The Collar,” and it may help identify an occasional lapse in Herbert’s spiritual nerve, but it is remarkably irrelevant to the “corporeal forms and movements” of his third stanza. The feelings expressed there have dignity; they are immediate and real, without defilement and resulting self-hatred, and without confusions of the divine. In fact, only the

²⁷ *De Trinitate* 12. 9. 14–10. 15.

ways of honor come directly under Augustine's analysis, for they are the artificial products of illusive symbolizing, the "deceptive images" patched together with "empty thought."

The first and second stanzas, we noted, resemble each other in their amused detachment. Their plain style is that of argument, which demonstrates indirectly, by witty analysis, that the major temptations do not tempt at all. The greater intensity of the second stanza by moving toward mockery increases the imaginative distance between the objects described and the speaker. The plain style of the last stanza will reverse that direction. It is argument, and intellectual, but not detached. Everything is drawn together, and toward the poet at the center of his experience. But the decisive change is initiated by the third stanza with its personal fervor and elevated style.

Let us compare in their relations these last two stanzas and the last two stanzas of "The Temper" (I). In that poem the penultimate stanza ("Yet take thy way; for sure thy way is best") presents an intellectual acceptance which is rather dry and detached but provides the necessary bridge to the comprehensive solution of the last stanza, which is highly charged with feeling but registers as an inspired clarification. In "The Pearl" the general procedure is the same but the parts are reversed. The conflict does not take shape until the penultimate stanza, where the climax also occurs; that stanza brings about the shift in direction from analytical distance to synthetic immediacy, as the necessary bridge to the comprehensive solution of the last stanza. In "The Pearl" it is the penultimate stanza which is elevated in style and charged with feeling. But its expression is, though intense and candid, consciously limited by the external controls of the context; it cannot speak for the whole man in the poem. Though eloquent and moving, the voice of the stanza cannot possibly bring eloquence and wisdom into the unison of a single speech. The last stanza names inspired wisdom as a presence which has governed the whole action of the poem, but which does not, as in "The Temper" (I), make a personal appearance. The clarification of love and understanding is quietly intellectual, not passionate, and includes the humble disclaimer that whatever has been accomplished by the poem was merely by following instructions:

The Art of Plainness

Yet through these labyrinths, not my groveling wit,
But thy silk twist let down from heav'n to me,
Did both conduct and teach me, how by it
To climbe to thee.

In this poem there is no pause inviting God to write the last stanza; an affirming act of the intellect builds on a moment of passion, rather than the reverse. But the proof of character lies in the integration and in the poet's being at one with what he says. There has been no spectacular inspiration, but everything has been drawn together, and the silk twist which has led him through the labyrinths has brought him to the expressive center of what he concludes.

Our final example is the poem "Death," which acknowledges no conflict. The fictional pretext is a slight and transparent one: the difference between the way we used to look at death and the way we look at it now. The plot is not likely to surprise, and since there is no formal conflict the poet's own feelings do not directly participate in the action. Coming to the poem after "The Temper" (I) and "The Pearl," one is at first perhaps most conscious of the differences, but the similarities are more significant.

As in many poems that are relatively straightforward and simple in statement, Herbert invents fine devices on which the materials turn, move, and develop—as if they were proceeding by means of the more familiar structures of argument, dramatic conflict, or narrative plot. Each stanza of "Death" is a kind of self-contained scene, into which the last line brings an unexpected effect. The reader is not likely to be aware that an argument is also being produced until he encounters the open "Therefore" at the beginning of the sixth and last stanza. There are three parts of the argument, arranged in a formal diminution of 3:2:1. The first three stanzas give us the old wrong views of death, the next two supply corrected present views, and the conclusion is drawn in a single stanza. Let us begin with the first three:

Death, thou wast once an uncouth hideous thing,
Nothing but bones,
The sad effect of sadder grones:
Thy mouth was open, but thou couldst not sing.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

For we consider'd thee as at some six
 Or ten yeares hence,
 After the losse of life and sense,
Flesh being turn'd to dust, and bones to sticks.

We lookt on this side of thee, shooting short;
 Where we did finde
 The shells of fledge souls left behinde,
Dry dust, which sheds no tears, but may extort.

The mementos of death are handled with remarkable verve and gaiety. Of "The Temper" (I) we could say that the intention of the poem was to transform its initial declaration into its concluding one. Here we have attitudes rather than declarations; and that strange, bluff greeting to death, though startling, original, and arbitrary, does not register at once as a "wrong" attitude asking for correction. Nevertheless, the tone is one of an exaggerated extreme which the development of the poem will transform. To borrow an observation from the study of "The Pearl" above, we may describe the speaker's opening attitude as detached and superior, as though he were enjoying his analytical distance from the object of his attention. In the fifth stanza this tone is countered by an opposite extreme of immediacy and identification. The argument, expression, and tone of the last stanza then transforms the extremes of psychic distance and immediacy into a final attitude. The second and third stanzas drop the concentrated focus on skull, bones, and grinning jaws, along with the harsh, summary definition of life as a music of groans and death as the arrested image of that music. The reason now given for that hideousness is not concentrated and shocking but leisurely and general, as befits an intellectual speculation prefaced by "For we consider'd." The error in human understanding is caused by our faulty sense of time. We think in spans of six or ten years from now and judge death by the physical changes of the dead. The detachment is quietly intellectual but does not for that reason eliminate some tension of divided attitude. The reader will not find that the studied casualness of rhythm, tone, and detail prevents him from considering any thought of his own death

The Art of Plainness

“some six / Or ten years hence.” Furthermore, the ironic turn in the last line of each stanza reintroduces the opportunity for personal concern and involvement: “Flesh being turn’d to dust, and bones to sticks. . . . Dry dust, which sheds no tears, but may extort.” And that beautiful euphemism for skeletal remains, “The shells of fledge souls left behinde,” is a little too successful; we admire the imaginative act and in so doing are reminded of the natural state of the material thus translated.

In addition to these psychological movements, which provide a sense of developing conflict, we may note the presence of significant attitudes toward time. The first stanza greets death as it was, not once upon a time but “once,” as it was in time past. But the imaginative time of that stanza is the feeling-present, which the shock of the image produces, in spite of the summary intellectualizing of the cause in the immediate past and the assertion that all of this visible effect is not what it seems to be but is what it was “once.” The assertion is left dangling as a challenge that is to be made good, but not in the formal time of the second and third stanzas, which does not go all the way back to the “once.” The feeling-present returns, though less emphatically, in the suggestions of personal death and in the reference to the dust “which sheds no tears, but may extort.” Still more elusively, a sense of future time enters these stanzas. There is an ambiguity in the “six / Or ten years hence”—are we considering the case of stanza one, or considering some case, perhaps our own, from a point in the past identical with our consideration and extending six to ten years into the future? But since the point in the past is not located firmly, the sense of future time is at best weak. Similarly, the flesh and bones “being turn’d” to dust and sticks presents us with a free composition of past, present, and future; any single dimension of time can dominate the expression, depending on the formal perspective. Finally, the “fledge souls” do evoke the future in a definite but small way; the transaction itself points ahead, and the habits of metaphorical thought on this familiar subject move naturally from the place “left behinde” to the far future.

All these considerations reappear, somewhat altered, in the next step of the argument, which begins in the fourth stanza:

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

But since our Saviours death did put some bloud
 Into thy face;
 Thou art grown fair and full of grace,
Much in request, much sought for as a good.

The verve and gaiety continue, but now the mementos of death are seen from the perspective of life after death. Out of the conventions of that perspective Herbert draws details that emphasize the imaginative nature of his presentation. The hideousness of the skull in the first stanza was the product of its appearance and our perspective and of the grotesque associations brought to bear on it. In the fourth stanza the perspective and associations are changed; a show of concreteness is made, but the literal, physical terms are dominated by their symbolic and metaphorical meanings. The language is matter-of-fact—"But since our Saviours death did put some bloud / Into thy face"—and more comforting than "Thy mouth was open, but thou couldst not sing," but both statements are self-consciously imaginative; they are two opposing ways of looking at death, each an exaggeration based upon a differing view of the truth. The stanza continues to emphasize its imaginative play as it moves further from the possibility of literal presentation. Both the face which is now "fair and full of grace" and the beholder's eye are altered, and the newness of the relationship is underlined by the pleasantry of "grace." The last line of the stanza draws back a little, with a kind of wry humor far gentler than the irony in each of the preceding last lines. Death is "Much in request," as if by a change in fashion.²⁸ That death is "much sought for as a good" introduces the language of philosophical metaphor with all its established authority to transcend the literal, "corporeal" meanings of words.

The "But since" which opens the fourth stanza is the sign both of argument and of time. Though the dominant time sense is the pres-

²⁸ Autolycus recommends one of his ballads by flourishing the same phrase: "There's scarce a maid westward but she sings it; 'tis in request, I can tell you" (*The Winter's Tale*, Act IV, sc. 4, ll. 296-97). John Hoskins mocks the courtly fashion that caused similitudes from mathematics to be for a while "in requests" (*Directions for Speech and Style*, p. 39).

response to the finished past of stanza one. Since that future is imagined as intensely present, the effect is that of a formal reply to the feeling-present of stanza one.

These answers composed of the oppositions of time and the oppositions of psychic direction are not conclusive. A quiet "Therefore" converts their striking emphasis into mere transition, as if the real answer has been there all along, waiting for the commotion to subside:

Therefore we can go die as sleep, and trust
 Half that we have
 Unto an honest faithfull grave;
Making our pillows either down, or dust.

Now the time is wholly the present: it is the unique product of imagined past and future but emerges also from the varying traces of the present which have been drawn like threads through the labyrinth to this open place. As for either analytical detachment from death or imaginative identification, the poem's final attitude rejects the terms of the contradiction but extracts an essential indifference from detachment and an essential acceptance from identification. The human present time of the last stanza is a copy of the calm of eternity, into which no agitations of past or future intrude. Death is neither an alien object exciting mixed emotions nor a lover to be sought and embraced. The imagination of the poem has made death familiar and neutral; it can have no place even in dreams when it has been made subject to a common, everyday idiom which says, "we can go die."

The activity of the mind is less prominent in "Death" than in the conclusion of "The Pearl," but, as in that poem, an affirming act of the intellect quietly builds on a moment of passion, and the mind that dismisses itself has demonstrated the power and clarity of its self-possession. There is no pause, as in "The Temper" (I), inviting God to write the last stanza. The spectacular inspiration comes in the prophetic vision of Doomsday, which is followed by the rarest kind of personal clarity, casual and laconic, as if inspiration were part of the everyday order and could be taken for granted. The final state of

The Art of Plainness

simplicity is not one of reduced but of alert, refined consciousness, one evidence of which is the attitude toward the body, which is no less than "Half that we have." And even more remarkable than calling the grave "honest" and "faithfull" is doing so with an air of saying nothing unusual. As in "The Pearl," the excited elevation of style in the penultimate stanza is followed by an authoritative descent to the plain style. In "Death" it is an assimilative plain style, confidently challenging comparison with the height of the preceding stanza. The power of that plain style lies in the passion excluded, in the resistance mastered, and in the deliberate grace of saying difficult things with ease. The grandeur and force of the high style are achieved while talking in an offhand, humble manner, in the common imagery of going to bed. An enlightened rhetorician would observe that this plain style does not austere reject ornament, which may persuade but must first provide aesthetic pleasure. He would add, I am sure, that these graces of style are so natural and fine as to seem in the very grain. The last line, "Making our pillows either down, or dust," awakens a delicate echo of the earlier ironies, as a farewell touch of recognition. And the order of "die as sleep" is beautifully reversed and balanced by "down, or dust."

I shall end by introducing another viewpoint for a moment. In reading Donne, Coleridge described the delight of "tracing the leading thought thro'out the whole," by means of which "you merge yourself in the author, you *become He*." Herbert he declares to be "a true poet, but a poet *sui generis*, the merits of whose poems will never be felt without a sympathy with the mind and character of the man." A true poet who requires a conscious act of sympathy would seem to have a different and lesser merit than the poet who compels you to "*become He*." Coleridge justly admires Herbert's diction, "than which nothing can be more pure, manly, and unaffected,"²⁹ but some of the thoughts are "quaint," he feels, and he does not try to follow a leading thought throughout. Identifying oneself with the author would seem to be a modern extension of the most important mode of

²⁹ These quotations are from Roberta F. Brinkley's *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century* (Durham, N.C., 1955), pp. 523, 534.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

rhetorical persuasion, "the personal goodness revealed by the speaker" in ancient rhetoric, or the inspired unity of wisdom and eloquence in Christian rhetoric. The merits of identifying oneself with the poet are debatable. But we can draw two firm conclusions from Coleridge's remarks. First, it is clear that Herbert is a master whose thought overcomes authentic obstacles which both test and refine the ultimate expression of that thought. Second, the rhetorical proof of character lies in the poet's convincing demonstration that *he* is what he says, that the flow and shape of his words lead to a unity of eloquence and wisdom, and that he is at the expressive center of that unity.

The temptation is to close here, adding only that there are many true poets but few masters of this art of plainness. But it may be well to remember that Herbert's art of plainness is an art, not a summary feature. If I have touched on its essential quality, good; but we can no more understand his art without a full apparatus than he could write poems by plainly saying "Thou art still my God."

CHAPTER TWO •

THE MOVEMENT OF WORDS



THE IMMEDIATE AIM of this chapter is to study the basis of Herbert's metrical rhetoric, the expressive movement of words by which he brings into focus and controls the particular discriminations of his meanings. For our purposes three prosodic elements are most important. These are stress, juncture (the pause and transition between syllables), and phrasing (the individual ways in which units of language are grouped together to answer the various demands of meter, idiom, syntax, and the shaping flow of the sense). As for the relevance of these matters to the larger critical purpose, insofar as any immediate movement shows itself to be related to other patterns of movement, the limited perspective I am adopting should serve to improve our general knowledge of Herbert's feeling for poetic form.

My instruments of analysis are in part homemade, in part borrowed from Trager and Smith.¹ Stress will be marked according to a four-level system, the lowest level of stress indicated by the figure 1 and the highest level by 4. In the meter they will always correspond to the lowest and highest extremes. The intermediate levels will carry the figures 2 and 3; in the meter they may correspond to either stressed or unstressed positions.

Stress is the standard feature we all recognize in English. The educated ear will register stress as one thing but will know it to be the

¹ George L. Trager and Henry Lee Smith, Jr., *An Outline of English Structure*, University of Oklahoma Studies in Linguistics: Occasional Papers, no. 3 (Norman, Okla., 1951).

product of many things, not all of which need to be present or present in the same proportions at any one time. The expressive speaker has available to him the natural stresses fixed by the habits of language, but he also has an individual ability to regulate his flow of words to increase or decrease particular stresses. He will not need to identify stress with the mere degree of loudness. For my purposes I think it may be sufficient to rely on the common recognition of stress, by which one syllable is more or less prominent than its immediate neighbors and differs because of the degree of intensity which it seems to project. The last part of the definition is intended to acknowledge a certain inescapable subjectivity in these matters—not all of which, if I may say so in advance, is to be deplored.

Before we have gained a sense of the speaker's voice and style and attitude, the first words on a page may be difficult to read with assurance because we hesitate over the placement of the relative stresses. The following sentence, taken as ordinary speech, may serve to illustrate: "Why do I languish thus, drooping and dull?" Natural stress, heightened by alliteration, would seem to fix the last four syllables

4 1 1 4

rather firmly: "drooping and dull?" But though the first syllable of "languish" is naturally stressed, the degree of stress will depend on how we read the other words. We may want to say: "Why do I lan-
1 2
guish thus." Or we may prefer "Why do I languish thus," or even
3 1 4 2 1 3
"Why do I languish thus." Nor are the possibilities of option eliminated when we recognize that the words are ordered into verse and make up a line of iambic pentameter, the first line of "Dulnesse." If we attune ourselves to a rigid pre-Elizabethan style we may read it so:
2 3 1 4 1 3 4 1 1 4
"Why do I languish thus, drooping and dull?" Or, attuned to Herbert and willing to do our best, we may pause briefly before and after "languish," and before "dull," holding the pitch, and may pause longer after "thus" with a rising pitch: "Why do I|languish|thus,
4 1 1 4
||drooping and|dull?"

In the second of these two metrical interpretations the iambic meter

The Movement of Words

itself does not come through in any distinct way. On the other hand, in the first interpretation only the fourth foot, "drooping," resists the meter. But if—to turn to the second interpretation again—we can be satisfied that the meter is there without being directly audible, we can perhaps attribute to its presence part of the sensitive regulating of the words. First, the fact that the line is verse increases the formality of its internal relations. The reader expects to give more distinct value to the syllables and to the intervals between syllables.² Then, knowing that the meter is there, he is not cast back into the loose uncertainties of the prose emphasis but can tighten up every syllable against the pull of the simple metrical pattern that is in his head. The line comes

² My own readings, particularly at the junctures, are strongly influenced by consonantal combinations. I cannot go from "and" to "dull" without marking a pause that overrides the syntax, though I should not, of course, need to pause in informal speech. In my view no one, including the poet himself, speaks with unassailable authority in these matters. The subtleties of rhythmical potentiality are as real as anything in art, but they may not respond equally well to the faculties that create them, perform them, and analyze them. My aim is to represent by symbols, as accurately and consistently as possible, certain significant features that I hear. What I hear is the result of individual endowment, systematic training, observation, thought, and love—an equipment that may be either like or unlike, better or worse, than that of my colleagues in such studies. The only authority I can claim is the cumulative persuasiveness I hope to acquire by demonstration. These are difficult matters, in which innumerable small details jostle each other into combinations that finally shift audibly; in which one man's reading may simply register as better than another's, but to know why may involve a strenuous theoretical effort supported by an appropriate apparatus. Yet it would seem to me a wrong procedure to average out the differences—as by the statistical results of a thousand readings. Some differences must be regarded as absolute, some as relative. In my own aim to be clear and consistent, but not comprehensive and exhaustive, I hope to reduce the number of *important* places where other readers will differ so absolutely that they cannot accept my terms for the sake of the larger demonstration and its potential value for employing prosodical analysis as an instrument of literary criticism.

One small practical problem should perhaps be mentioned. For my purposes I am trying to manage with a simplified apparatus. I hear, for example, many hesitations, as between the words "drooping and," which fall below the threshold of level pause that I indicate by the conventional symbol of a single bar (|). I shall indicate pause with a rising pitch by a double bar (||), pause with a falling pitch by a crossed double bar (#).

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

out taut and precise, but with greatly increased flexibility and with some new forms of internal reference and balance.

In sophisticated English verse the iambic foot is treated as a kind of necessary fiction, and the experienced ear is accustomed to accepting metrical phrases, which, like phrases and clauses in the traditional art of prose, are given their over-all emphasis retroactively, as it were, as the speech unit draws to a conclusion. We have no difficulty taking in two or three feet as a unit and sorting out their relations to the iambic measure during the transition between phrases. For special effects the ear may occasionally be required to hold in suspension still longer groupings. As for the moment of transition, it may help clarify the finer adjustments of stress; it may also protract the interval in which a definite rhythmical choice is being made and is about to be made. Nor can the good reader permit himself to be passive. He may have to confront the unexpected in the new phrase, and at the very least he will need to respond alertly in order to play his part in the decision. If he wishes he can at leisure rehearse phrases, lines, stanzas, and whole poems, and so experiment with, adjust, and refine his decisions. But in every instance he will be making decisions, whether good or bad, conscious or unconscious.

In the line I am quoting here the reader is free to hold the "I" until he decides what to do with "languish," and the stress he is about to give "languish" will partly affect the stress of "I." For during a transition the trained ear listens in both directions. The commanding movement is always forward to the next phrase, but in any crucial transition the influence of what has already been said may also be felt. For instance the "I" about to adjust to "languish" is also heightened by its repeating, and at the moment holding, the diphthong of "why." The other junctures of the line are less complex and less sensitive to what precedes them. But we can learn what may happen at any juncture by observing our characteristic response whenever the value of a stress comes out wrong. We stop, sometimes to listen ahead, sometimes to listen back, usually to do both and to begin again at an earlier phrase the interpretation of which we are not disposed to question. These remarks may serve, then, as a preliminary indication

The Movement of Words

of how the junctures help to regulate the relative stresses in phrases that precede and follow them.

It is perhaps too easy and limiting to think merely in terms of metrical versus countermetrical. Words do not simply make advantageous concessions to the arbitrary patterns of meter. Nor do they gain only by the fine precision with which the relative stresses are adjusted to each other. For instance, to neglect for a moment the advice of this paragraph, the most countermetrical unit of the line is "drooping." In a stiff, literal metrical style the word would be isolated rhythmically. I believe we may still make this judgment even after we have explained "drooping" by the precedents of metrical conventions, which permit a stress shift after the caesura on the analogy of the familiar option exercised in the first syllable of a line. If we go beyond this kind of explanation we may see that the words, under the immediate pressures of metrical form, discover the particular relations to one another that make up the new and unexpected patterns of the rhythm. We may not consciously hear all these details separately, for they overlap and blend in movement. And it is plain that we do not all hear the same things, even when they are there waiting for the right performance. Perhaps with a great poem, as with great music, only the performers exhaust themselves.

With these cautions I now proceed to arrest and identify some of the unexpected patterns, and I begin by turning again to "drooping." In its movement "drooping and|dull" may be heard as a variation and expansion of "languish|thus." Both begin the same and end nearly the same. I now mention, with some diffidence, a piece of overlapping that may perhaps be heard only in its arrested state: "Why do I" seems to be partly echoed by "drooping and." By itself the parallel may sound arbitrary, but we may approach it again from another auditory angle and find some incidental confirmation in the following pattern, which I present with more confidence. If we listen to the phrasing of the whole line, we may perceive in the six syllables before the major pause a diminishing proportion of 3:2:1—"Why do I|languish|thus||." The last four syllables form an abbreviated echo of the first proportion, as 3:1—"drooping and|dull." The pattern

may be heard more clearly if we substitute "Why do I|languish| thus,|why do I|thus?" Finally, if we turn our attention (as I shall not ordinarily suggest doing in this chapter) to the vowels, we may notice the following: "Why do I¹ languish⁴ thus,³ drooping⁴ and¹ dull."⁴

The pattern of stresses makes a cross-variation, as "do"¹ is advanced to "drooping"⁴ and "languish"⁴ is lowered to "and,"¹ while "thus"³ and "dull,"⁴ from their strategic positions, maintain a balanced tension with each other. Some further sense of pattern may derive from the proportion of the intervals, four syllables coming between "do" and "drooping" and between "languish" and "and," three syllables between "thus" and "dull." Or one might possibly hear these internal rhymes as abcabc, a form that Herbert uses in a few of his many six-line stanzas. It may be worth mentioning, though I have not entered into the intricacies of pitch, that I hear the juncture after "thus" as rising and then sharply cut off, the juncture after "dull" as falling and fading. This pattern would further emphasize the balanced tension already attributed to the two vowels in their bond of stress and position.

Anyone patient enough to sift through all these details will probably acknowledge that the line is remarkably ordered. But my purpose has not been to offer an exhaustive interpretation; I should be disappointed if some readers do not find that, apart from my other faults, I have made some important omissions. Potentially, all the combinations of sound may by their recurrence and variation bind the line together and contribute to its individual form. In introducing and sorting out the problems of this chapter I find certain advantages in concentrating on the one isolated line. When we come to other examples, I shall not need to identify so much; indeed, I shall try to reduce the technical details to a minimum in order to make separate patterns of movement as clear as possible.

Let me assume for the moment that my methods of relating stress and juncture need no further explanation. But I have referred to "phrases" and "phrasing" in more than one way, and the term "overlapping" is one that I mean to use more than casually. I shall try to

The Movement of Words

distinguish three kinds of phrasing. The metrical phrase is any complete unit of meter which the experienced ear may recognize in the flow and pause of the verse. In our example, the first metrical phrase was described as consisting of three feet: "Why do I languish thus." Though I think it must be acknowledged that some readers will hear three separate units under the natural grouping, and have trained themselves to imagine pauses that are never articulated, it seems reasonable to assume that most readers can sort out the underlying pattern at the end of a longer phrase. The metrical phrase consisting of a single foot is too familiar to be very interesting, and it requires great skill to use a number of such phrases together without monotony. We may pass them by quickly with the following examples:

Thy hands made both, and I am there.
("The Temper," I)

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright.
("Vertue")

I live to shew his power, who once did bring
My *joyes* to *weep*, and now my *griefs* to *sing*.
("Josephs Coat")

With words that are not all monosyllabic:

How fresh, O lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! ev'n as the flowers in spring;
To which, besides their own demean.
("The Flower")

[that he was lately gone
About some land, which he had dearly bought]
Long since on earth, to take possession.
[I straight return'd, and knowing his great birth,]
Sought him accordingly in great resorts.
("Redemption")

A second kind of phrase may be called colloquial, with caveats. In its pure state the colloquial phrase would be heard in any "natural"

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

grouping of words that reflected the "habits" of "informal" English speech. But a line of poetry is never informal speech, though poets may often create such an illusion. They may prefer to maintain the illusion, balance on the edge of it, or move in and out for special effects—as in the lines from "Redemption" given above. But in general they seem to find it more advantageous to pretend that poetry is colloquial speech than to pretend that colloquial speech is poetry. And so the colloquial phrase may have to give up some of its purity, making concessions to the formal habits of verse and to the particularities imposed by syntax or the shifting demands of emphasis. Nevertheless, we can usually recognize the colloquial phrase and determine whether it coincides with or overlaps the metrical phrase.

The metrical and colloquial phrases are both included in the rhythmical phrase, which does not pretend to an "ideal" or a "natural" state. In this line from "The Search," "Lord, dost thou some new
⁴ Lord, ² dost ¹ thou ² some ³ new
⁴ fabrick ¹ mould," the metrical phrasing falls into two units: 4212 3414. But the colloquial phrasing may be felt as four units: 4 212 341 4. The rhythmical phrasing then both combines and further divides what we have so far heard: 4 | 212 | 3 | 41 | 4 ||. (The fourth and eighth syllables have been italicized to indicate the metrical phrasing, which the colloquial phrasing would not acknowledge.) In this line the rhythmical phrasing cooperates with the junctures to allow the metrical phrasing its form; at the same time a further adjustment adds a pause not anticipated by either the metrical or colloquial phrasing, "new | fabrick." This addition has the effect of syncopating the second metrical phrase while still preserving the formal contour.

Nevertheless, one ought not to consider the rhythmical phrasing as the "real" one which either assimilates or supplants, or merely reconciles, the others. Rhythmical phrasing draws its positive authority from the needs of oral performance, which tries to be as precise and subtle and complete as possible. One may of course memorize the movement of a line, but to read well one must renew every time what cannot be memorized—a fresh sense of the internal movements as both separate and related. Even more may be at stake, for it is chiefly by retaining a sense of the individuality of the overlapping forms that

The Movement of Words

one may hope to revise interpretations, or refine them by perceiving the emergence of unanticipated forms.

I do not mean to suggest that each kind of phrase will be equally distinct in every line. For instance, in lines like "Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright," where the metrical phrases consist of a single foot each, there is no separate colloquial phrasing. When such lines are well managed they purposely give up one range of expressiveness in order to concentrate. They may present an absolute simplicity of feeling, as in a great line from "The Flower": "As if there were no such cold thing." Metrical phrasing is used in many of Herbert's efforts to express materials in their simplest form, as a clarifying definition for an important moment of the poem, or often as the arresting statement of a first line.

On the other hand, we may observe many lines that do not include a sense of distinct metrical phrasing; for instance: "To one word onely I say, No." The whole poem ("Obedience") cultivates colloquial phrasing and other effects of casual raciness but does so as part of the complex manner being developed, often by abrupt contrasts. For example, the line preceding the one quoted has no colloquial phrasing distinct from the metrical: "Wherefore, I all forgo." In the preceding stanza the first line and the last four syllables of the second line have only metrical phrasing, while the first four syllables of the second line have colloquial phrasing as well:

Besides, thy death and bloud
Show'd a strange love to all our good.

It may be worth mentioning that the prominence of colloquial phrasing in "To one word onely I say, No" conceals an unusual repetition in the pattern of stresses: 1324 1324.

Herbert's metrical style is characterized by the frequency of its colloquial phrasing and by the inventive ease with which he adjusts colloquial and metrical phrasing to each other. No one would think of charging Herbert with "not keeping of accent," but his rhythms are infinitely varied, within the line and within the stanza—varied by the

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

sensitive responses of stress and juncture, of course, but also by the simultaneous, overlapping forms of the phrasing. Almost every poem offers instructive examples; indeed, the range of his effects is very large and provides firm evidence that he is a true master of the lyric.

Stresses, junctures, and phrasing work together, then, and create an order of separate and overlapping forms which may express the fullest possible variety or may give concentrated prominence to a limited range of effects. But the line is to some extent like the metrical foot, a necessary unit of measure and yet, like any phrase, never complete in itself. All its internal adjustments are influenced by what precedes and by what follows. For example, "The British Church" arranges a little gallery in which unflattering portraits of the competitive churches are unbecomingly hung. The third stanza presents the Church of Rome:

She on the hills, which wantonly
Allureth all in hope to be
 By her preferr'd,
Hath kiss'd so long her painted shrines,
That ev'n her face by kissing shines,
 For her reward.

The second line creates mischievous ambiguities of stress, for it invites the reader to come down, as if conclusively, on the "all." Prevented from doing so, he lightens the stress, keeps the pitch from falling, and then must repeat the awkward performance again at "hope." At this point he will have been lured into saying his words warily one at a time, which will give him the perfect sing-song for the third line. But he cannot allow his voice to drop even at "preferr'd," for the syntax interferes with his natural inclination. Only after "shines" can he pause and drop the pitch—just in time to make the last line sound tacked on.

But let us take a serious example, and it may be useful to look again at a line with which we have had some acquaintance. I quote the first stanza of "Dulnesse":

The Movement of Words

Why do I languish thus, drooping and dull,
 As if I were all earth?
O give me quicknesse, that I may with mirth
 Praise thee brim-full!

The second line completes the statements of the first but must take its important cues from what has already been said. An “as if” declaration is not an easy one to gauge; it may emphasize a flat contradiction, denying that the speaker is all earth, or it may ruefully admit that what should not be so appears to be so. The fact that these are all monosyllables, and we are given no clear hint from colloquial phrasing, complicates the problem. In a way, so does the strange decisiveness of the next two lines, which carry through their initial imperative by acting out the animation that will follow *if* the quickness demanded is granted. Then too, the most sensitive words in the second line are “were” and “all”; how we stress them depends on how we take the “as if” declaration, and that may finally depend on what we make of the whole poem.

Still, to think that any one line has to be held in abeyance until we have read the whole poem is about as awkward an assumption as to think that the reading of a line cannot be improved in the light of the whole poem. It is true that the development of controlling attitudes need not be presented in set sequences; and we cannot confidently anticipate the ways in which larger syntactical units of expression, in their order and in their significant connections, will guide the thought in its advances, turns, and ultimate fulfillment. But unless a poem is a deliberately contrived enigma, we may expect to find most of what we need at any moment in what immediately precedes and follows. The “as if” declaration is related to the “languishing” and “drooping,” but we may still need to ask whether it is related to both as one, to each equally, or to each differently. Such questions may force us to spell out what was already implicit in our reading of the line.

We may extend our previous observations by noting that the speaker is expressing a physical condition and at the same time is asking, intellectually, why what he painfully perceives to be happen-

ing *is* happening. The pauses of the rhythmical phrasing increase the sense that intellectual detachment and immediate physical sensation are being experienced simultaneously: "Why do I|languish|thus|." But the second part of the line mostly demonstrates; the sense of question and the detached awareness of what is happening are subordinated to the acting out of the felt experience. If the "as if" does not move briskly, and perhaps glibly, to contradict the "drooping and dull," it must take its chief cue from the movement of those words and tune itself to the falling and slowly fading pitch of "dull."

If we read the line so, "As if I were all earth," the condition contrary to fact will be modified and the "were" subordinated. Intellectual denial is then postponed until the last phrase, where it is not absolute but qualified. The speaker is not "all earth," in spite of some convincing evidence offered.

A new question has been raised indirectly, that of proportions, but it is at once brushed aside by the hopeful imperative of the next lines, which act out a condition contrary to fact as if there were no earth at all in the human composition. Such an answer to such a question would seem to predict further questions, which the poem will then proceed to develop. I shall stop here with my limited point, which is that we are prevented from emphasizing the second line with a premature decisiveness; the causes are the controls which produce two different kinds of statement in the first line and, further, the syntactical ambiguity of the connection between the second line and the first. (In the next chapter I shall discuss the poem for its larger issues.)

When we think of the phrase as a unit of measure never complete in itself but responsive to what may precede or follow, we begin to see, as in the last two examples, that the phrasing both takes and gives meaning in the developing context. For instance, beyond the general purposes of achieving variety and expressiveness, the phrasing can support particular purposes relevant to some of Herbert's thematic concerns. It can work metaphorically, to signal certain relations between common, everyday experiences and religious mystery. In the following lines, the last stanza of "Death," I have suggested the colloquial phrasing by the spacing of the words, the metrical phrasing

The Movement of Words

by italicizing syllables, and the rhythmical phrasing by marking junctures:

Therefore| we *can*|go *die*|| as|*sleep*,# and|*trust*|
Half|| that we *have*#
Unto|an honest| faithfull|*grave*;#
Making our pillows|| either *down*,# or *dust*.||

These lines invite several interpretations, and many readers will differ, preferring, for instance, to reverse the last two junctures—though Herbert’s message indicates that in the equilibrium between sleeping and dying the balance of hope lies in rising from the latter. What I wish to make persuasive is, however, limited to a single point: the colloquial phrasing contributes to the casualness with which a complex and difficult human attitude is made to seem natural and easy.

As with other devices for shaping the flow of language (devices yet to be considered here), phrasing does not carry fixed symbolic values but resembles the flexibility of metaphor. In another poem, “Gratefulnesse,” colloquial phrasing does not at all express casual acceptance but helps convey the restless variety of insistence produced by the human voice. I quote the last two stanzas:

Wherefore| I *crie*,|| and|*crie*|*again*;||
And|in|no quiet| *canst*|thou *be*,||
Till I| a thankfull|*heart*|| obtain|
Of *thee*:#

Not|thankfull,| *when*|it pleaseth|*me*;||
As *if*|thy blessings| *had*|spare *dayes*:#
But *such*|a *heart*,|| whose *pulse*|may *be*|
Thy *praise*.#

In the first of these two stanzas the metrical phrasing serves the expression of a singleminded, vehemently personal insistence; at the end of the second stanza the effect is quite different. In the first stanza the colloquial phrasing seems to assist in postponing until the last

word any pause with a falling pitch. One result is to promote the sense of a "natural" voice moving the words in accordance with some privately heard inner pulsing, and such an effect diminishes the sense of a strictly ordered metrical formality inside the stanza. But the illusion demonstrates the complexities and apparent contradictions that rhythmical art has learned to assimilate. For one thing, a formal element—the punctuation of rhythmical phrasing in the last three words of the first line—discourages, after "again," the pause with falling pitch that colloquial phrasing, on its own and unsupported, might naturally seek. Furthermore, other formal controls, including the syntax and a potentiality of the stanza itself, collaborate to postpone the sense of closure until the chosen moment.

It may be the business of artistic illusion to make such a moment appear as a spontaneous arrival, or as a predetermined period, or as an unprecedented combination of the two. If stresses, junctures, and phrasing work together to create an order of separate and overlapping forms, the balance between apparently independent, informal elements and apparently controlled, formal elements is capable of endless variation. Some of that variation, we may conclude, will depend upon degrees of concealment and upon unexpected transfers between the apparently formal and the apparently informal.

2

The expressive forms that we shall now consider require us to concentrate on the patterns of stress. Let us begin with a characteristic line, from the first stanza of "The Search": "My searches|are|my
daily|bread." The phrasing is exactly repeated, but the auditory illusion created is that the line advances and is intensified. If we look at the stresses alone, neglecting the words and their message, we see 1 3 1 3 2
4 1 4. In every instance the repeated phrase receives a higher level of stress. In addition to serving the immediate message of the line, such a movement creates the feeling of continuity by recurrence and the feeling of development by variation. The movement therefore reveals a form within the rhythm, a form that emerges from variety as from a principle of order, distinguishing itself from those

The Movement of Words

aspects of variety which appear to be never the same but not *significantly* different. It is convenient to begin with an example in which the phrases are repeated, but the structural movement we are trying to isolate is not limited to such occurrences. We may speak of the movement in terms of *intensification*, for it creates the auditory illusion that the words move in patterns of increasing intensity.

Instead of drawing together individual examples to illustrate a frequent tendency, I shall analyze two complete poems. We shall find what we are looking for, but in the active context of other patterns of stress which we may observe at the same time. The first, and simpler, poem is the lyric, "Employment" (I), which begins:

2 1 1 3 2 4 1 4
If as a flowre doth spread and die,
2 3 2 4 1 2 3 4
Thou wouldst extend me to some good,
1 3 1 3 1 4 2 4 1 3
Before I were by frosts extremitie
3 1 1 4
Nipt in the bud;
1 4 1 2 1 4 2 4
The sweetnesse and the praise were thine;
2 1 2 4 1 2 1 4
But the extension and the room,
2 1 2 4 1 3 2 4 2 4
Which in thy garland I should fill, were mine
1 2 3 4
At thy great doom.

Now that we have a concrete example before us, let me try to explain some of the limitations of what I shall be doing. Intensity is identified with the level of stress, for we naturally attribute to heavily stressed syllables greater force and emphasis than to lightly stressed syllables. But that emphasis is not some pure quantity inhering absolutely in stress, from which it can be extracted at will and measured. We fix the intensities of stress by applying mathematical symbols which are relatively stable in reference to their near neighbors, but which cannot be thought to possess identical values in another stanza or another poem. They will be relatively stable only in reference to their new neighbors. Furthermore, the intensity we attribute to stress

is affected by other linguistic devices of emphasis sometimes common to ordinary language but often peculiar to imaginative language. The willing reader of the fictional message has agreed to participate in the fiction; he will respond in complex ways that he has learned from his experience with both ordinary and imaginative language.

As for the influence exerted by other linguistic devices on the intensity we attribute to stress, we may illustrate the general rule by pointing to the stanzas quoted above. There we may note how the intensities of syllable and line are also affected by the total play of the words as the meaning unfolds itself in various forward and delaying motions. For instance, the first-person pronouns which are stressed in the second stanza are the more intense for not having been stressed in the first stanza, and the intensity of "were mine" is the unique inheritor of what it gains from the parallel with "were thine." Finally, one small further qualification is that we cannot usefully distinguish the intensity produced by the relative *rise* between two stresses (from 1 to 3 or 1 to 4) from the intensity produced by their cumulative *weight* (as 2 plus 4 or 3 plus 4).

This limited paradigm represents, then, what are not quite factual intensities. They are selected, relative, and in part fictional; they represent one kind of ordered response to patterns of intensity which are not simply heard and recorded as hard linguistic fact, but are instead heard and felt and contemplated in the particular language of the poetic illusion that is taking shape. Nevertheless, our paradigm, if we treat it carefully and do not ask too much of it, can be trusted to reveal some useful things. We do naturally attribute relative intensity to stress and may therefore symbolize our ordered responses; and though our symbols cannot stand for all the forces that contribute to intensity, and cannot be freely interchanged from one context to another, they may still permit us to observe certain specific patterns of movement and relationship.

Now we may turn back to our example. With the exception of the third line of Stanza I, ending in the weakened syllables of "extremities," the lines conclude in emphatic stresses. The general movement is from a peak of intensity at the beginning or middle of the line to a slackening and then a final peak, as in the second line of Stanza I: 23 241 234. (I have italicized the peaks and roughly suggested the

The Movement of Words

phrasing.) In this line the last syllables carry the greatest intensity, but in other lines the last syllables may seem only to reinforce, or maintain without noticeable decline, the preceding peak, as in the first line of Stanza I: 2113 24 14. The main point is that in either case there is a general sense that the intensity is increasing as we move toward the end of the line. Furthermore, patterns of increasing intensity are not limited to the single line. For instance, in the first stanza the second line completes the intensity of the first:

2113 24 14
23 241 234

Similarly, in the second stanza—after the first line, which stands apart as God’s portion—the third line advances and completes the pattern of intensity made by the second line:

21241 214
21241 324 24

The last line, though the syntax has been waiting for it, is even further postponed by the climax of intensity in the preceding line. Then it comes, in the most elementary form of serial intensification, a form that Herbert obviously likes: 1234.

The third stanza requires little comment. The first line is a model of advancing intensity, and the third line repeats a serial intensification:

1 2 1 3 1 4 2 4
For as thou dost impart thy grace,
1 4 1 3 2 4 1 4
The greater shall our glorie be.
1 3 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
The measure of our joyes is in this place,
1 4 1 4
The stuffe with thee.

In the fourth stanza the advance within each line reaches a climax at the end of the third line, and then the last line backs off, repeating the first phrase of the preceding line:

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

³ ¹ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴
 Let me not languish then, and spend
¹ ³ ² ⁴ ¹ ² ³ ⁴
 A life as barren to thy praise,
² ¹ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ³ ² ⁴ ³ ⁴
 As is the dust, to which that life doth tend,
² ¹ ¹ ⁴
 But with delaiēs.

In its movement the fourth stanza suggests that rhythmical decisions are being made. Not since the first stanza has there been so marked an impulse to reverse the current of advancing intensity. In the first stanza there were two such phrases: "If as a flowre" and "Nipt in the bud." These may be regarded as brief retreats from the dominant movement; they are small reversals and not strong, but they are clearly distinguishable from the kind of slackening between peaks of intensity which *erves* (however subtly in function) the general movement of the intensity. Such slackening becomes a customary part of the pattern; it attracts little attention to itself and does not suggest opposition. The phrases in the first stanza are also distinguishable, by degree, from the still smaller reversals of the second stanza: "But the extension" and "Which in thy garland." But now, in the fourth stanza, there are three phrases that repeat the reversals of the first stanza: "Let me not languish," "As is the dust," and "But with delaiēs."

Their importance to the movement of the whole poem may be seen in the fifth stanza:

³ ² ¹ ⁴ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴
 All things are busie; onely I
³ ¹ ² ³ ¹ ² ¹ ⁴
 Neither bring hony with the bees,
¹ ³ ¹ ⁴ ² ³ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ³
 Nor flowres to make that, nor the husbandrie
¹ ⁴ ¹ ⁴
 To water these.

The remarkable thing about the movement of the stanza is its air of indecisive wavering. The effect of initial retreat in the first two lines

The Movement of Words

does not by itself seem particularly distinct and forceful. But whether that effect, building on similar phrases in the preceding stanza, actually suggests a positive change in direction, or whether these reversals are merely the external signs of some deeper hesitation, the lines themselves do not return to the pattern of advancing intensity which has until now dominated the movement of the poem. We may see the difference rather clearly if we read the first line of the poem, then the first line of the fourth stanza, and then the first two lines of the fifth:

² ¹ ¹ ³ ² ⁴ ¹ ⁴
If as a flowre doth spread and die
³ ¹ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴
Let me not languish then, and spend
³ ² ¹ ⁴ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴
All things are busie; onely I
³ ¹ ² ³ ¹ ² ¹ ⁴
Neither bring hony with the bees.

The first line above reaches its peak in the third metrical foot and does not drop. The second line reaches its peak in the second foot, slackens briefly, and resumes continuity with no sense of sharp interruption. In the staccato third line, however, the words are all separated from each other, and the peak in the second foot seems isolated as the stressed syllable of “onely” (and the jingle) abruptly punctuates the line. (If one chose to raise the level of stress given “onely,” the effect would be somewhat different, but there still would be no sense of advancing intensity.) In the next line the peak of the second foot is not high enough to establish direction, and the slackening in the following foot is then felt as an unusual, dragging inertia. As a result the final stress appears to be isolated rather than being the point toward which the direction of intensity has been moving. The third line of the fifth stanza returns to the dominant pattern of movement, but it resembles the first line in being staccato and in producing a third foot that impedes the sense of rising intensity: “Nor flowres to make
² ³ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ³.” As in the third line of Stanza I, there is an unusual drop in the intensity of the last syllable.

The final stanza begins with a moderate assertion of the dominant movement:

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

² ¹ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ² ³ ⁴
I am no link of thy great chain.

The second line returns to indecisiveness, resembling the movement of the second line in the preceding stanza:

¹ ³ ¹ ³ ¹ ² ¹ ⁴
But all my companie is a weed.

The poem then ends with two lines of powerful intensification:

³ ⁴ ¹ ² ³ ⁴ ¹ ⁴ ³ ⁴
Lord place me in thy consort; give one strain
¹ ² ³ ⁴
To my poore reed.

It is notable that the first of these last two lines begins with a weight of intensity (3 to 4) which Herbert has distributed sparingly throughout the poem—there is only one such foot in each of the first four stanzas and none in the fifth. A long line that begins at the highest peak of intensity will require an unusual composition if it is to have the effect of advancing intensity. Herbert's technique is to follow the first foot with a slackening that turns into serial intensification and another extreme peak (1-2-3-4). Then a transitional foot (1-4) leads to a final peak (3-4). That Herbert is converting initial and intermediate handicaps into a technique for releasing greater energy may be further demonstrated by comparing the effect of "consort; give" with the effects in the preceding stanza of "busie; onely," "hony with," and "that, nor."

So much for the pattern of intensification and its countermovements in "Employment" (I). Now let us look at our second complete poem, "The Crosse," which has a more broken and complex pattern of rhythmical movement.

³ ¹ ² ⁴ ¹ ² ³ ⁴
What is this strange and uncouth thing?
¹ ³ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴
To make me sigh, and seek, and faint, and die,
¹ ² ¹ ² ² ⁴ ¹ ³ ² ⁴
Until I had some place, where I might sing,
¹ ⁴ ¹ ² ² ³ ¹ ⁴
And serve thee; and not onely I,

The Movement of Words

1 3 2 4 1 4 1 3 1 4
But all my wealth and familie might combine
1 3 2 4 1 3 1 2 1 4
To set thy honour up, as our designe.

The development of this poem also involves advances and retreats, but the oppositions are less restricted. The controlling metaphor is now a mysterious religious symbol, and the center of consciousness turns in all possible directions, reviewing all its resources in order to contemplate the tangle of personal relationship as a means of seeking the right path of individual resolution. The movement of the poem ebbs, flows, and eddies; one may interpret that movement as an articulate symbol of the passions and imagination expressing themselves in their search. When we come down to cases, we find no consistent pattern of advancing intensity that resembles the practice of "Employment" (I). Individual lines, like the first, move thus, but not as though they were obeying a principle of rhythmical organization. More prominent is the force of the syntax, which regulates the pace by suspending members and by carrying them across lines.

The movement of the whole stanza is more immediately visible if, in a paradigm, we group the patterns of stress (though a little roughly) into rhythmical phrases:

- 312 4 123 4 (1)
- 1313 14 13 14 (2)
- 1212 24 132 4 (3)
- 141 2 231 4 (4)
- 1324141 3 14 (5)
- 132413 1214 (6)

The first impression is one of extreme variety in the phrasing. Only the first and fourth lines are similar, but not in movement, for the fourth line concludes one syntactical impulse and begins another. The variety in phrasing, however, is not without some significant recurrence which helps to dispose the movements of the stanza in a single direction. The segmented phrasing at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth lines is gathered together in the strong, echoing phrase that begins the fifth line. On the ear the effect would register

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

thus: 132 4 141 and 1324141. At the beginning of the sixth line the phrase comes in again, this time diminished and in accord with metrical phrasing, which may increase the impression that one stage of resolution has been reached.

The second stanza begins quietly and then plunges into movements that are more agitated than those of the first stanza:

¹ ² ¹ ² ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴
 And then when after much delay,
³ ⁴ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ² ³ ⁴
 Much wrastling, many a combate, this deare end,
³ ⁴ ¹ ³ ² ⁴ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴
 So much desir'd, is giv'n, to take away
² ³ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ² ³ ⁴
 My power to serve thee; to unbend
³ ² ¹ ⁴ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ⁴
 All my abilities, my designes confound,
¹ ³ ² ⁴ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ² ¹ ⁴
 And lay my threatnings bleeding on the ground.

Again it will be useful to look at a skeletal arrangement of the stresses and the phrasing:

- 12 121 3 14 (1)
 341 31 41 2 34 (2)
 3413 24 1314 (3)
 23141 2 34 (4)
 32141 3 1414 (5)
 13241 41214 (6)

After the great turbulence of the second line the rhythm resolves itself into the clear metrical phrasing of the third line. The relative stresses in these two lines resemble each other, which is one way in which a tension of similarity is brought to bear against the extreme opposition of the phrasing. The sense of clarity that comes in the third line does not, however, so much resolve the personal turbulence as look more deeply into its causes. The next two lines are then characterized by similar five-syllable phrases, each the predicate of a verb at the end of the preceding line. The last and climactic line begins with a five-syllable phrase reminiscent of its predecessors but

The Movement of Words

ends with a five-syllable phrase entirely different in effect. The general movement of the stanza would seem to turn on the emergence of these longer phrases.

The movement of the third stanza is recognizably different. The effect of the syntax is less positive; it is not felt as a unified, driving, continuous force but as a looser construction that grows by addition. The parenthesis comes in as an afterthought and seems less proportionate to the energy of its motivating impulse than, say, the terser statement of the concluding couplet:

 3 4 1 4 1 2 2 4
 One ague dwelleth in my bones,
1 3 1 2 2 4 1 3 1 2
Another in my soul (the memorie
1 3 2 4 1 2 1 3 1 4
What I would do for thee, if once my grones
 2 3 1 4 1 3 1 2
 Could be allow'd for harmonie):
1 2 1 3 1 4 2 4 1 3
I am in all a weak disabled thing,
3 1 1 4 2 3 1 3 2 4
Save in the sight thereof, where strength doth sting.

- 341 41 2 24 (1)
- 131 2 24 1312 (2)
- 132412 1314 (3)
- 2314 1312 (4)
- 121314 241 3 (5)
- 311423 13 24 (6)

The main pattern of movement in the stanza is that of advancing intensity, but the second line suggests that the pattern will not be a consistent one. Both that line and the fourth advance and then retreat. The third and sixth lines advance, are somewhat indecisive during four syllables, and then end with rising intensity. The fifth line advances steadily—until the last syllable. One could say of the stanza that for the moment the driving search has lost some of its impetus and has dwindled into a kind of inventory.

The fourth stanza builds on the third:

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

^{1 2 3 4 1 2 1 4}
 Besides, things sort not to my will,
^{3 1 1 3 2 4 1 2 1 4}
 Ev'n when my will doth studie thy renown:
^{1 3 1 4 1 3 2 3 2 4}
 Thou turnest th' edge of all things on me still,
^{2 1 1 3 1 4 1 4}
 Taking me up to throw me down:
^{2 1 2 1 1 4 3 1 1 4}
 So that, ev'n when my hopes seem to be sped,
^{1 2 1 3 1 4 1 3 1 4}
 I am to grief alive, to them as dead.

12 341 2 14 (1)

31 13241 2 14 (2)

131 4 132324 (3)

21 13 1414 (4)

21 2114 3114 (5)

121314 1314 (6)

The general movement is now that of a consistently advancing intensity within each line. As a whole the stanza is remarkable in its lack of resistance to metrical phrasing, and the last three lines are composed entirely of metrical phrases. The expression of regret seems more like an imposed overtone, acknowledging sad facts but not punctuating them with any intervening impulses of active reluctance. A characteristic effect may be seen in two long phrases that move with a mildly advancing intensity and fall into exact metrical phrasing with no sense of positive return or resistance overcome: "of all things on me still" and "I am to grief alive." The movement of the stanza is more consistently ordered than is the third, which displayed signs of sagging weariness and uncertainty. In response to the agonized search of the first two stanzas, the fourth stanza represents a development of the third—though not by the significant expression of greater energy, but by the effective organizing of human response at a clearly fixed, lower level. The contradictions are reported as part of a sad but familiar human history. Even the personal details are presented with a kind of neutral detachment, and they do not, like similar details in the third stanza, vibrate with a sense of involved feeling. But the

The Movement of Words

detachment conveys no evidence of an advance in personal discipline and general control; instead, the effect is one of consolidation by retreat, a clarity and distance gained by regarding the present with resigned helplessness, as if it were past.

Two coherent movements of the poem have now been completed. A third begins with the fifth stanza:

1 3 2 4 1 2 1 3
To have my aim, and yet to be
3 1 2 1 1 2 1 4 2 4
Further from it then when I bent my bow;
1 3 2 4 2 4 1 2 1 4
To make my hopes my torture, and the fee
1 3 2 4 1 3 1 4
Of all my woes another wo,
2 1 1 3 1 4 1 2 1 4
Is in the midst of delicates to need,
1 3 1 4 1 2 1 2 1 4
And ev'n in Paradise to be a weed.

1324 1213 (1)

3121 121424 (2)

1324 241 2 14 (3)

1324 131 4 (4)

2 113 1412 14 (5)

13 1412 1214 (6)

The syntax carries through a sustained period, and for the first time since the second stanza it is felt as a positive force. The dominant effect is one of steady, deliberate unfolding, with no pronounced pause like that after the first two lines of Stanza I. The movement of the sense across lines, though strong, does not proceed in violent spasms producing jagged, emphatic phrases, as in Stanza II. One key to the general tone is the frequency of metrical phrasing, in the practice of which the stanza is much closer to its two immediate predecessors than to the first two stanzas. But the general movement is both stronger and more decisive than that of the fourth stanza.

We may attribute this effect in part to the continuity which the syntax provides, but we may observe in addition the kind of reinforcement which the patterns of stress create by their interrelationships.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

The opening phrase of the first line (1324) is repeated at the beginning of the third and fourth lines. A phrase in the fifth line (1412) is clearly echoed in the sixth. The movement and phrasing of the third line are slightly varied and diminished in the fourth, as 1324 241 2 14 becomes 1324 131 4. A personal response to the sense of contradiction, absent from the fourth stanza, makes a subdued but definite appearance in the renewed energy of this stanza. The first line ends with a retreat from rising intensity of stress, but the effect is that of deliberate variation and not indecisiveness, the reversal carrying over into the next line, where it is joined by the falling stress of the first four syllables. The second line then resumes the pattern of advancing intensity of stress which is a steady characteristic of the whole stanza. That pattern is firm and consistent but, in accord with the general tone of the stanza, not strongly emphatic. The one marked anomaly is the first line, but the last line seems to express the general tone by producing an interval of four unemphatic syllables between its two peaks of intensity.

The first and last phrases of the final stanza are particularly difficult to fix by analysis. The first is an interjection that could be stressed in several ways, and the last is a famous quotation, used out of context but influenced by expectations derived from repeated use. Nevertheless, though I have here a sense of being more arbitrary than I should like, the patterns we have been following are not involved to any great extent in these difficulties.

3 1 2 4 1 3 2 4
Ah my deare Father, ease my smart!

2 3 1 4 1 4 1 2 3 4 1
These contrarieties crush me: these crosse actions

2 3 1 4 1 2 1 4 2 4
Do winde a rope about, and cut my heart:

1 2 1 3 2 3 1 4 1
And yet since these thy contradictions

2 3 1 2 1 3 4 1 1 4
Are properly a crosse felt by thy Sonne,

1 2 3 4 4 3 4 3 2 4
With but foure words, my words, *Thy will be done.*

31241 324 (1)

23141 41 2 341 (2)

The Movement of Words

231412 1424	(3)
12 13 23141	(4)
2312 13 4 114	(5)
1234 43 4324	(6)

The stanza continues the movement begun by its predecessor but with less help from the syntax. There is a quiet increase in the level of emphasis, and the sense of personal urgency of response to contradiction, does not, as in the preceding stanza, even momentarily withdraw from the consistent pattern of advancing intensity. If the last line of the fifth stanza may be thought to recapitulate the style of emphasis, the transformation between the second and third lines of the final stanza seems to anticipate the general manner of the resolution which is now developing. The second line, with its individual phrasing and the strong thrust of the sense into the following line, recalls the greater vehemence in Stanza II and the lesser vehemence in Stanza V. But in the third line the energy is channeled into a smoothly ordered metrical phrase, one that by the augmentation of a final syllable resolves the individual emphasis, 23141 becoming 231412. In the fourth line the phrase (23141) is repeated, but coming where it does—in the development of the meaning and after a quiet metrical phrase—the projection of personal emphasis seems markedly lowered. Then, in two following, segmented phrases, the pattern is varied, lengthened again, and lowered in stress: 2312 13.

Though each stanza is individual in its movement, there are three distinct movements in the poem, the second reacting to the first and the third building upon the second. In each group of two stanzas the second advances further in a direction begun by the first. The patterns of stress and phrasing, in addition to their immediate expressive functions, are part of the significant form of the poem, and like thematic symbols can signal across lines and stanzas. The general pattern of advancing intensity, central in the structure of "Employment" (I), is a less important but significant means of organizing movement in "The Crosse." In the more complex poem advancing intensity works in closer conjunction with the phrasing, particularly metrical phrasing. Indeed, patterns of stress and phrasing appear to

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

be a significant means of ordering movements of the poem that resist more conventional kinds of regulation.

Finally, a word about what I have been doing. Admittedly, it is difficult to isolate these materials and to analyze the movements of a poem with a minimal attention to the ways in which movement is located in patterns of emphasis and meaning. Nor can we circumvent distortion if we disregard the meaning entirely. The linguistic phenomena require a human reader, and if he narrows his objectivity too much he will, among other distortions, fail to record a valuable range of what is in fact there. The more customary practice is to isolate the meaning and take the movement for granted. But there is reason to believe that poets do not think as poets except through feeling the expressive movements of their words. These movements, if we can devise ways of perceiving them, are as much a part of the cognitive structure of poems as the subtleties of metaphor.³

3

Advancing intensity of stress, though it requires moments of slackening, seems to be a single principle. It is varied or abandoned. But our next concern, the loosening and contracting of rhythmical movement, may at any time divide and rule between them the expressive movements of a poem or even of a line.

Let us begin by considering some lines from "The Glance." Here is the first stanza:

1 3 2 3 1 4 1 4
When first thy sweet and gracious eye
3 2 3 1 1 3 1 4 1 4
Vouchsaf'd ev'n in the midst of youth and night
1 3 1 2 1 3 1 4 2 4
To look upon me, who before did lie
4 1 1 4
Weltring in sinne;

³ Louis L. Martz writes of "The Crosse": "But suddenly, in three lines at the close, the whole edifice of self-will collapses, as we have known it would" (*The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* [New Haven, 1954], p. 135). I find myself here closer to Rosemond Tuve, who "would admit more of painful struggle still showing in the poem itself" ("George Herbert and *Caritas*," p. 313n.). What I hope my paradigms show is a way of seeing the significant stages by which the struggle orders itself.

The Movement of Words

1 3 1 4 1 4 1 4
I felt a sugred strange delight,
3 1 3 4 1 3 1 2 1 4
Passing all cordials made by any art,
2 3 2 3 1 3 1 4 2 4
Bedew, embalme, and overrunne my heart,
1 3 1 4
And take it in.

The movements are graceful, balanced, and fluent. The patterns of stress and phrasing are varied, and the peaks of emphasis are not gathered into close proximity. In the last lines the climax is a moderate one, and the peaks are distributed rather than concentrated. Here is a transcription of the last four lines:

13 141 4 14
31 341 31 21 4
23 23 1314 24
1314

Of these lines the second is perhaps most unusual, in the way that the strong emphasis of “Passing all cordials” is allowed to dissipate through the next syllables, “made by any.”

In the following examples the first comes from the second stanza and is introduced by a transitional line. In the second example, from the third stanza, the last line begins to move away from the contraction of heavily weighted syllables:

But still thy sweet originall joy,
4 2 3 4 2 4 2 3 2 4
Sprung from thine eye, did work within my soul.
3 4 1 3 2 4 2 3 2 4
What wonders shall we feel, when we shall see
3 4 3 4
Thy full-ey'd love!
1 2 3 4 1 3 1 4
When thou shalt look us out of pain.

Syllables that can flow easily into each other relax the tension of a line, as “look us” and “out of.” There are, to be sure, many ways of adjusting tension between syllables, and there is a greater sense of resistance between the components of “shall we feel” and “when we

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

shall see^{2 4}" than between those of "what wonders."^{3 4 1} But for the most part there is a greater potential resistance between adjacent syllables that are strongly stressed—more, for instance, in "shalt look"^{3 4} than in "of pain."^{1 4} Even where in ordinary speech the voice would only dip and resume its flow, metrical language in promoting a stress may also promote the juncture, so that the movement is deliberately contracted and labored in "full-ey'd."^{4 3}

The loosening and contracting of rhythmical movement is a constant double action the expressive possibilities of which are unlimited. To speak in general, Herbert characteristically brings together heavily weighted stresses and separated syllables at moments of climax; he also likes the expressiveness of a style with brisk but flowing emphasis, in which syllables are kept distinct and stresses are distributed—as in the first stanza of "The Elixir":

^{3 1 2 4 1 4}
 Teach me, my God and King,
^{1 3 2 4 1 4}
 In all things thee to see,
^{1 2 1 3 2 4 1 4}
 And what I do in any thing,
^{1 3 1 2 1 4}
 To do it as for thee.

When the style is heightened, in the fourth stanza, there is a noticeable increase in the concentration of stressed syllables:

^{3 2 1 4 2 4}
 All may of thee partake:
^{3 1 2 3 2 4}
 Nothing can be so mean,
^{3 2 3 4 1 2 3 4}
 Which with his tincture (for thy sake)
^{1 2 3 4 1 4}
 Will not grow bright and clean.

Apart from its general purpose of variety and particular purpose of arranging climaxes of emphasis, the management of release and contraction resembles metaphor in its ability to surprise by combining

The Movement of Words

unexpected movements of the meaning. The rhythmical flow of emphasis discovers new meanings in the juxtapositions it produces by its control of order and timing: for instance, consider this brilliant line from “Sinne” (I), a sonnet describing the “nets and stratagems,” the “millions of surprises,” with which God has carefully surrounded man: “Afflictions|sorted,#anguish of all||sizes.#” In the second metrical foot there is an extreme tension between the two syllables, followed by a quick release as the pitch drops. Before the unusual word, “sorted,” a strenuous pause gathers attention and emphasis; the “t” and “d,” which are aspirated stops that are partly transitional to the next syllables, participate in a flowing movement which creates a different kind of tension as we are prevented from dwelling on “sorted” long enough to take in its unexpected implications. In the next two metrical feet the level of stress is lowered and the syllables blend easily. The final conjunction of rhythmical and metaphorical surprise is preceded by a pause between syllables (“all||sizes”) and is followed by a release which permits a sense of closure and a moment of retrospective assimilation.

A somewhat simpler version of these effects may be seen in some lines from “Repentance”:

Whose life still pressing
Is one undressing,
A¹ steadie|³aiming¹|⁴at a tombe.^{1 2 1 4}

The principal contribution of the rhythm here is to mark off “steadie” and “aiming” from each other so that the relevant implications of “still pressing” and “one undressing” may partly overtake the unfolding sense. This brief contraction is then followed by a swift release which completes the metaphorical surprise. To appreciate the delicacy of the rhythmical manipulation we ought to look at the entire stanza (these lines precede the ones already quoted):

Lord, I confesse my sinne is great;
Great is my sinne. Oh! gently treat
With thy quick flow’r, thy momentarie bloom.
^{1 2 3 4 2 3 1 2 1 4}

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

Only the syllables in "momentarie" flow into each other; everywhere else the boundaries between syllables impose obstacles and delays. The stiffened movement of "Oh! gently treat / With thy quick flow'r" hinders the normal tendency to receive the flower as a standard symbol of the brevity of life. The movement one might have expected appears retroactively, as it were, in "momentarie." As the stanza develops we are forced to look at time from a double perspective; it is brief, a summary motion toward the tomb, but time is also extended by the division of the one conclusion into several images which delay and complicate the final, official view from the tomb. For the "quick" flower is also a living flower, and the poem will try to convert thoughts of brevity and death into a saving perspective.

The last stanza of "Faith" begins: "What though my bodie runne
³ ¹ ² ⁴ ¹ ³
¹ ⁴
to dust?" There is a remarkable tension between the staccato tightness of the verse and the idea of dissolution that the verse expresses. The contrast resembles the one noted in "With thy quick flow'r." The next line begins with an extreme rhythmical contraction, followed by an extreme relaxation: "Faith cleaves unto it." It is as though the effect of dissolution, which was counteracted by the texture of the preceding line in spite of the meaning of "runne," has been postponed until now for greater expressiveness. The rest of the line returns to a highly punctuated tightness: "counting ev'ry grain." The third line begins with another loosening of the rhythm: "With an exact|and|
⁴ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴
² ¹ ¹ ³ ¹
³ ² ⁴ ¹ ⁴
most|particular|trust." There is a second moment of relaxation in "particular." (The syllables between the two have stiffened boundaries: "exact and most.") These two lax moments express particularity by a loosening of rhythm which opposes ordinary expectations, as the tightness of the first line seems to contradict the idea of dissolution. The last line of the stanza, and the poem, "Reserving all for flesh
¹ ³ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ⁴
¹ ⁴
again," is the most relaxed line of the stanza. There is a brief, moderate stiffening at "for flesh," a movement not inappropriate to the thought of the body's reconstitution; the stiffening is also a diminished

The Movement of Words

echo of the frequent contractions in the stanza. But the last line asserts the domination of the less frequent relaxed rhythms, which may perhaps be associated with some of the unexpected movements of faith.

4

I shall turn now to some expressive movements that work by augmenting or diminishing an established pattern. A full study would involve the whole range of Herbert's devices for repetition and variation; but I propose to be brief and to offer, as in the mention of loosening and contracting rhythms, only a few suggestive illustrations. Since the device is basic in the art of repetition, it is omnipresent but often occurs in subtle forms that are difficult to establish clearly by analysis. For instance, that there really is a diminished echo of contracted rhythm in the last line of "Faith" would be hard to demonstrate fully. I shall therefore try to limit the following discussion to examples that lend themselves to clear and brief analysis. Perhaps it will be useful, however, to remind the reader of some previous observations. In "The Crosse," for instance, we noted examples of segmented phrasing gathered together and of phrasing augmented or diminished as part of the structural development of stanzas. The structural principle of advancing intensity of stress, illustrated by "Employment" (I) and "The Crosse," may be considered as a form of augmentation; and when the established direction of the intensity is reversed, the auditory illusion is that the intensity has been diminished. The line most extensively studied in this chapter, "Why do I languish thus, drooping and dull," was observed to have in the phrasing of the first six syllables a diminishing proportion of 3:2:1, and in the last four syllables an abbreviated echo of the first proportion, 3:1.

Let us now look at some fresh examples. Consider first these lines from the third stanza of "H. Baptisme" (II):

1 3 1 4
 Although by stealth|
 1 3 2 3 2 4 3 4 1
 My flesh get on,||yet let|her sister|
1 4 3 4 1 2 1 4 2 4
My soul|bid nothing,#but|preserve her wealth.#

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

A basic pattern of the lines is that of advancing intensity moving toward a climax in which the rhythm is contracted and then resolved at a somewhat lowered level of intensity. Another pattern is that of stress and phrasing, initiated by a delicate balance between the first two phrases. Both are of four syllables, nearly alike in stress. The next phrases are again balanced (24 341:14 341), but these are distinctly felt as more intense and as longer. Much of our impression of development comes from the extension of a pattern that has been clearly established.

A more concentrated example is offered by two lines from "The Temper" (I):

¹ ⁴ ¹ ² ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴ ² ⁴
 O let me, when thy roof my soul hath hid,
¹ ⁴ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ⁴
 O let me roost and nestle there.

The lyrical phrase in the first line is followed by a suspension in the syntax accompanied by a carefully measured advancing intensity. The phrase is repeated in the second line and is augmented by the completion of the syntax: "O let me, when . . . O let me roost and nestle there." The sense of development is further increased by an advance in the intensity of stress, "¹ ⁴ ¹ ² when" becoming "¹ ⁴ ¹ ⁴ ¹ roost|." Our terms of analysis cannot go beyond the intensity of a primary stress, but we cannot fail to notice that "roost" develops by building upon two different kinds of repetition, the parallel with "when" and the parallel with "roof." In the second line there is no conventional advance in the intensity of stress, but there is an effective sense of climax in the extreme tightening of the rhythm and in the resistance between the syllables of "roost|and|nestle." Finally, if we examine what is being said in the stanza, all the forms of augmentation increase the intensity of feeling in order to propose an ultimate moral retreat. The intensity evaporates as the proposition is spelled out:

³ ¹ ¹ ³ ¹ ³ ² ⁴
 Then of a sinner thou art rid,
¹ ² ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴
 And I of hope and fear.

The Movement of Words

In the preceding lines the verbal augmentation moves in one direction while the decisive significance moves in the opposite direction.

Our third example is a simple one like the first, except that the effect of augmentation is perhaps more immediately apparent. I quote from the last stanza of "The Bag," which presents the words of Jesus after the spear thrust has opened his side:

Or if hereafter any of my friends
Will use me in this kinde, the doore
Shall still be open; what he sends
I will present, and somewhat more,
Not to his hurt. Sighs will convey
Any thing to me. . . .

Our interest centers on the phrasing that begins with the last two syllables of the second line. They are beautifully expressive units, and their balanced, incremental order may be seen if we transcribe thus:

the doore shall still be open;
what he sends I will present.

Two syllables and five are balanced by three syllables and four. The next two phrases are of four syllables each:

and somewhat more, not to his hurt.

Then the pattern is further lengthened as four syllables are followed by five:

Sighs will convey Any thing to me.

5

Early in the chapter I expressed the opinion that during the moment of juncture between syllables the trained ear listens in both directions. Advancing intensity, contracting rhythm at the peaks of

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

emphasis, augmentation, returns to metrical phrasing—all these are ways of organizing the movement toward significant stages and conclusions. And yet a movement forward that did not remember as it paused could neither repeat nor vary. The rule holds for every means of ordering movement, including those devices by which the course of intensity can be reversed, the rhythm loosened, and patterns of stress and phrasing diminished. All of the devices we have studied, by making us remember, compare, and contrast, participate in the cognitive structures of poems. Some of these expressive movements take forms that we may want to call rhythmical metaphors, and a few forms would seem to bear symbolic significance. Seldom, however, can we take that significance for granted. In a poet writing about spiritual conflicts that are responsive to religious values, we may expect some positive turning away from forms of emphasis that are suspected of bearing the signature of the personal will. For instance, the last stanza of "Death" demonstrates a diminution of emphasis that is the unmistakable triumph toward which the poem is directed.

We cannot therefore assign fixed symbolic values to the movements we have been analyzing. In one poem, or at one stage, a climax of intensity may express a perfectly achieved resolution. Elsewhere the climax may be excessive, or premature, signaling its faults and their causes and establishing a point from which further development must proceed. On the other hand, forms of diminished intensity may resolve, but they may also represent indecisive wavering, weakness, evasion, retreat, or any of the fertile inventions of hypocritical acceptance. And yet the individual movements of the words are a sensitive means of shaping both subtleties and monumental clarifications.

I review these matters to remind the reader of the ways in which the rhythmical flow of emphasis resembles the power of metaphor to concentrate meaning or to discover and explore new and unexpected meanings. These remarks are also intended as a preface to my last two illustrations. They are brief and present clear examples of diminution, but they also demonstrate the metaphorical creativity latent in the movement of words.

I begin with the first stanza of "Bitter-sweet," a poem that we shall consider again, for other reasons, in the following chapter:

The Movement of Words

³ ¹ ² ⁴ ¹ ⁴
Ah my deare angrie Lord,
¹ ³ ² ⁴ ² ⁴
Since thou dost love, yet strike;
² ³ ² ⁴ ¹ ⁴
Cast down, yet help afford;
² ³ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ⁴
Sure I will do the like.

The second and third lines present a pattern of diminution and augmentation. A flowing expression, “¹Since thou dost|³love,” is diminished to an abrupt one: “²yet|⁴strike.” The last two syllables of each clause have the same stresses, and between the syllables there is a marked resistance, which is notably greater in the concentrated brevity of “yet|strike.” The next two clauses reverse the previous order, with the shorter one coming first, resembling “²yet|⁴strike” but with a small decline in the level of stress. “²Cast|³down” anticipates a rhythmical and a syntactical conclusion; the unexpressed “since” implies that the pattern will be completed by a “yet” still to come. The augmented clause will now seem even longer. It resembles “¹Since thou ²dost|⁴love,” but it increases the level of stress and pauses between the first two syllables, which brings the longest flow of movement to the end: “²yet|⁴help ¹afford.” In Herbert’s rhetorical construction the short clauses represent God’s wrath and punishment, but they are deliberately contained by the more hopeful expressions of God’s benevolence. When we look at the first and last lines, however, we may see that the hopefulness that wants to manage God knows enough to admit the act. The last line is consciously glib, as a pledge of honest, self-conscious deception that will be reclaimed in the second stanza.

And finally, I turn to the last stanza of “The Temper” (I), the first line of which has two eloquent diminutions: “²Whether|¹I ²fie|⁴ with ¹angels,⁴|⁴fall|¹with ⁴dust.” “I fie” becomes “fall,” and the phrase of blending syllables “with angels” becomes the stiffer, shorter “with dust.” The second line of the stanza begins with contracted stresses

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

and separated syllables, followed by a phrase of loosened rhythm and lowered intensity: "Thy hands made both, and I am there." It is a line that produces two extremes of movement, two extreme resolutions that nevertheless do not oppose each other. The contracted rhythm expresses a rapt order of dedication; the loosened rhythm of diminished intensity represents the calm of trust and acceptance. The third line does many things, but it will be enough to observe the expressive balance: "Thy power and love, my love and trust." God's love and man's love, though adjacent in the order of words, are not linked in the order of stress. But God's power and man's love are prominently balanced, which cannot but mean that man's love for God is the most active force of his nature, the human equivalent of God's power.

The last line of such a stanza, and such a poem, carries an extraordinary burden of expression and expressiveness: "Make one place ev'ry where." Herbert's model (for variation) is the longer second line, beginning with contracted strong stresses and ending with a loosened rhythm of lower intensity: "Thy hands made both, and I am there." By dividing his three-beat line into two phrases of three syllables each, with only a slight pause between phrases, he makes the contracted rhythm feel very much like its predecessor; for the heavily stressed fourth syllable ("ev'ry where") both completes the contraction and begins the second phrase ("Thy hands made both . . . Make one place ev . . ."). In the second line the two rhythmical movements were evenly balanced, and the pause between them was brief but distinct, induced by the completion of the syntactical unit and the metrical phrase. But in the last line there is no syntactical or rhythmical closure to separate the phrases, only a slight pause for emphasis, a pause with a narrow margin of silence between the fricative of "place" and the vowel of "ev'ry where." Bringing the strong stress into the second phrase contributes to a remarkable effect. In the second line the lowered intensity of the last phrase, though ex-

The Movement of Words

treme, was balanced and concluded with a slight advance: “And I¹ am² there.” In this fourth line the lowered intensity is much more extreme, and is diminished to two syllables with no separation between it and the force of a primary stress. And yet that lowered intensity is made to feel protracted. Between the two syllables there are three glides: “r,” “y,” “w,” and then a concluding glide, “r.” The second line was extraordinary in producing two extremes of movement which did not oppose each other; this line both increases the extremes and shortens the distance between them, pressing one syllable into double service and creating the illusion that the final phrase lengthens and opens out. That illusion, incidentally, may gain further support if we remember how briskly the last lines of the immediately preceding stanzas moved and closed, with a definite moment of resistance between the last two syllables: “To make the musick better,” “And I of hope and fear,” “Shall he thy stature spell?”

6

We can usually describe by analysis (whether accurately or not is another question) how the formal elements that come under our scrutiny help fulfill the larger purposes of a poem. The true poet, we know, will always need to create individual movements of words to express the particularities of thought and feeling in his poem. At its best such individuality justifies itself—and serves the poem, by creating original and eloquent shapes that extend their immediate sense of life to everything they touch in the developing form. It is reasonable to assume that variety in the movement of language will reveal expressive forms which may be *most* beautiful because they serve a valuable purpose; we are not likely to admire them any the less because they help us to identify that purpose. But we may also assume that a master of the lyric will create patterns of movement of such commanding distinctiveness that only the ignorant and the handicapped will fail to admire them immediately for their own sake.

I am aware that some of my explanations have had to depend upon evidence that Herbert's expressive forms make practical contributions to the meaning of his poems. But I have attempted to do two things

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

at once, and the chapter will have failed in part of its purpose if it has not increased the reader's awareness that Herbert's techniques for ordering the movements of language are significant in themselves. The movements we have studied are characterized by their multiple contributions. They resemble metaphor in both establishing and discovering meanings, but they deserve our critical attention for their own sake as well. Besides, what is inaudible by itself can hardly be related to anything else. In stressing the separateness of these movements I have been motivated by the belief that sharpening the distinctness of form is a valuable activity for anyone responsive to the art of poetry and by the belief, expressed earlier, that it is by retaining a sense of the individuality of overlapping forms that one may revise interpretations, or refine them by perceiving the emergence of unanticipated forms.

At the end of Chapter One I spoke of the desirability of a full apparatus for understanding Herbert's art. The critical demonstrations offered in that chapter employed an apparatus adjusted to my chosen problems and to the stage of the general argument being developed. In this chapter my attempt has been to enlarge the apparatus, but the argument will have been advanced if it has also improved our knowledge of Herbert's feeling for poetic form. The same considerations apply to the next chapter, which will be focused on the movement of certain thematic ideas.

CHAPTER THREE •

COMPLAINT, PRAISE, AND LOVE



IN THIS CHAPTER we shall explore the poetry of complaint, praise, and love. These names, to be sure, suggest both religious and literary traditions in which Herbert was well versed. My chief interest, however, is not in the contributions of genre and tradition. Most of the problems to be discussed here center in the poetry of love, which is in Herbert most distinctive when it is most personal. The approach I have taken leads from his poetry of complaint and praise to his poetry of love—but not according to a set program. The study will treat complaint, praise, and love in part as the subjects of poetry, in part as thematic ideas which move and develop in their own characteristic ways but which are significantly related to each other.

Indeed, in most of their important expressions each theme touches on the others. One brief lyric, “Bitter-sweet,” can provide a concentrated introduction to some of the problems with which we will be concerned here:

Ah my deare angrie Lord,
Since thou dost love, yet strike;
Cast down, yet help afford;
Sure I will do the like.

I will complain, yet praise;
I will bewail, approve:
And all my sowre-sweet dayes
I will lament, and love.

In our earlier discussion of the first stanza we observed that the short phrases reflecting God's power in its angry aspect are "contained" by the more hopeful expressions of God's love, and that in the last line the poet is consciously glib. When he comes to demonstrate his claim to "do the like," he produces a different rhetorical organization, resembling a series of entries in a spiritual ledger: on the one side complain, bewail, lament, on the other praise, approve, love. To express his own action he does not imitate the complex, and gracefully suggestive, balance of "love" and "strike," "cast down" and "help." Nor is the contrariety of his own "sowre-sweet dayes" more than superficially "like" that of a God who is "deare angrie." In responding to the truth in his fiction Herbert proposes an imitation of God that seems to progress from praise to approval to love, but it is not a simple progress. His rhetorical organization is blunt and straightforward rather than graceful, declarative rather than suggestive; its balance is a rigorous internal one, which owes more to the interrelationship of compressed meanings than to the external form of the phrasing. The apparently simple alternation of "complain, yet praise" is brilliantly shortened to "bewail, approve." To approve his act of bewailing is to test, demonstrate, and commend it. Still more important, to approve signifies a deliberate act of the will, engaging the integrity of the whole man. Indeed, such approval under the circumstances validates the providential order and constitutes praise, perhaps even love.

Then the final statement is the simplest one syntactically—no contrasting "yet" or significantly omitted connection, but the two verbs simply put together with the basic conjunction: "I will lament, and love." Now Herbert has engaged himself to carry on two separate actions, not one alternating with the other, or one that dominates or assimilates the other, but two separate actions which are joined in a summary equation representing a central area of Judeo-Christian religious experience. The binding force of the "and" signifies what "approve" means, and suggests the power to transform "angrie" to "deare" and "sowre" to "sweet." But the equation also implies reciprocity and interchangeability of terms, and therefore is not suitable for a standard psychological plot in which one laments as a calculated

Complaint, Praise, and Love

means for graduating to love. The problem of how the human being will lament loving and love lamenting admits a wide solution and furnishes Herbert with the dynamic materials for many original plots.

Let us now consider the theme of complaint. The major tradition in which Herbert is working is, of course, the religious one. Its materials encompass all the evils of life in general and, in particular, all the griefs that a religious man may feel in the course of his individual efforts and failures to meet God. His supplementary materials might include the griefs inherent in a providential order governed by a God who chooses to be silent and incomprehensible at times while requiring full human participation in that order. Herbert's minor tradition is a literary one, which explores all the griefs peculiar to human love, without neglecting the expressive possibilities of cross-references to the established meanings and symbolic states developed by the major tradition. These cross-references have always worked in the other direction too, for the experiences of human love—available in the common endowment, and shaped and refined by literary practice—furnish a wealth of metaphor and some useful techniques of perception for those writing on the subject of divine love.

Within *The Temple* Herbert expresses many of the traditional themes of religious complaint. There is a rather full inventory of the evils of life, "Afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes." The demands made by the providential order are considered and bewailed. One long poem, "The Sacrifice," presents with great distinction the formal complaints of Christ on the Cross. But Herbert's major theme, often implied in the other complaints, is the grief to be felt in contemplating the mysteries of human failure.

Given Herbert's own interests, his feeling for what is real, and his feeling for the forms that may best express that reality, it is not surprising that he is no great master of the "pure" lament. The strongly individual complexities observed in "Bitter-sweet" are deeply characteristic of Herbert, as laments pure and simple are not. The distinction is immediately plain if we mention poems like "Sighs and Groans," "Home," and "Longing." Perhaps it will be enough to say that, when Herbert writes a lament that is nothing but lament,

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

something in the narrowness of the subject, or in his relation to it, imposes restrictions that he is not able to overcome successfully in the poem.

Instead of searching among mediocre poems for the causes of our dissatisfaction, which are not important in themselves, we can learn what we need to know from poems that complain with distinction, for instance, "Confession," which presents an analysis of grief. The account is expository and declarative but concentrates on the development and variation of one leading image. Grief is a "cunning guest" which outwits man's ability to compartmentalize his feelings. Though the poet has made closets within his heart and lined the closets with chests,

And, like a master in my trade,
In those chests, boxes; in each box, a till:
Yet grief knows all, and enters when he will.

No scruce, no piercer can
Into a piece of timber work and winde,
As Gods afflictions into man,
When he a torture hath design'd.
They are too subtill for the subt'llest hearts;
And fall, like rheumes, upon the tendrest parts.

Again, "We are the earth," and afflictions "Like moles within us, heave, and cast about":

No smith can make such locks but they have keys:
Closets are halls to them; and hearts, high-ways.

In "Longing" Herbert puts his own grief directly into almost every image. He speaks with painful sincerity, but we may borrow and vary the discriminations of "A true Hymne": what his heart "fain would say" does not rise out of its "mutt'ring" fixations. "Confession" proceeds by another method; the analytical detachment is itself intense and is increased by the fierceness of the details. The speaker is not prominent in what he says, yet the materials bear the marks of

Complaint, Praise, and Love

intimate experience turned into impersonal expression and made not less but more intense by the energy of the conversion. The poem is not a lament in which the poet registers, in his own person, a single grief or a sequence of griefs. Instead, he is free to develop the tensions and contrarities of experience, which may or may not move him most deeply as a person, but which do—one can have no doubt—move him most effectively as a poet. His reward comes in a form appropriate to the difficult balance he has achieved, that of a paradoxical insight:

Onely an open breast
Doth shut them out, so that they cannot enter;
Or, if they enter, cannot rest,
But quickly seek some new adventure.
Smooth open hearts no fastning have; but fiction
Doth give a hold and handle to affliction.

When Herbert finally brings himself into the center of the poem, the usefulness of his detached pose becomes apparent in the exaggerations he can permit himself. He simply pretends that his hopeful prayer is already answered and that his imaginative comparisons only record the facts:

For since confession pardon winnes,
I challenge here the brightest day,
The clearest diamond: let them do their best,
They shall be thick and cloudie to my breast.

Herbert is a master of analytical detachment, and like his good country parson he has “thoroughly canvassed al the particulars of humane actions.”¹ But as a poet he is a profound observer only when he is a passionate observer. Social ills, faults of the flesh, the lesser passions—these do not move him to distinguished expression. He is a passionate observer chiefly of those recesses of the mind and heart from which his own decisive actions emerge.

¹ *A Priest to the Temple*, p. 230; cf. p. 264.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

The human heart is an unquiet one, endowed with "repining restlessness,"² in accordance with the divine plan. At one moment it is an imperious beggar:

He makes thy gifts occasion more,
And sayes, If he in this be crost,
All thou hast giv'n him heretofore
Is lost.

But God has taken into account the consequences of His endowment:

But thou didst reckon, when at first
Thy word our hearts and hands did crave,
What it would come to at the worst
To save.

And when the poet of "Gratefulnesse" demands a "thankfull heart" and will permit God "no quiet" until he obtains that remarkable gift, his wit is dazzling and unique, but his piety and tact are exemplary. This poem turns adversities into an unusual triumph; more often, however, poems will express the pain of human need while exhibiting that difficult and incomplete blessing of the unquiet heart.

The mysteries of the human heart, then, must be explored while complaining; they are an authentic source of grief but they hold the divine promise. As for the mysteries of the mind, they may be lamented but they too must be explored. In a poem like "Giddinesse" they are only lamented and described. In "Justice" (I) the topics of complaint are not developed; nevertheless, they acquire a kind of spare eloquence, as the basic effects of God's incomprehensibility are paired with the equally incomprehensible ways of man. Similarly, in "Dotage" the topics of complaint are limited to a single opposing pair, pleasure and sorrow, but the descriptions are not discursive and illustrative, as in "Giddinesse": instead, they aim at the finality of definition:

² "The Pulley."

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

For well he knows, if but one grief and smart
Among my many had his full career,

the whole man would die. But God has crossed anguish with joy, and therefore the poet can celebrate His power (and his own condition of lamenting and loving):

I live to shew his power, who once did bring
My *joyes* to *weep*, and now my *griefs* to *sing*.

Here the effort to understand is neither pretext nor background for grief, and though the answer does more to make the human condition endurable than to make it understandable, it is clear that Herbert himself has won something from his oppositions.

Even in a sonnet like "The Answer," a somber inventory of grief and puzzlement which Hamlet might have soliloquized, though the message is man's incomprehensibility to himself, the poem nevertheless pursues the evidence in such a way that the desire to understand is not assimilated to the desire to lament:

My comforts drop and melt away like snow:
I shake my head, and all the thoughts and ends,
Which my fierce youth did bandie, fall and flow
Like leaves about me: or like summer friends,
Flyes of estates and sunne-shine. But to all,
Who think me eager, hot, and undertaking,
But in my prosecutions slack and small;
As a young exhalation, newly waking,
Scorns his first bed of dirt, and means the sky;
But cooling by the way, grows pursie and slow,
And settling to a cloud, doth live and die
In that dark state of tears: to all, that so
Show me, and set me, I have one reply,
Which they that know the rest, know more then I.

Both desires are sustained in spite of the poet's confessed failure to understand. For he also keeps outside his grief, and he is felt as both

Complaint, Praise, and Love

inside and outside the experience through Herbert's sensitive regulating of pace and evolvment, and even more through the inspired and disciplined images that precisely fix the shifting states of bewildered despair, clear scorn, and objective dismay.

Detached involvement and passionate observation are most fully expressed in the poems of spiritual conflict, which come under that aspect of God's art with man summarized in the line, "Storms are the triumph of his art."⁴ But there is another form of self-exploration concerned with the grounds of complaint and turning both inward and outward. This kind of poem, though it searches for insight and develops its intensities toward moments of crisis, does not work through projected oppositions or otherwise resemble those poems we think of as dramatic. For instance, "The Search" begins as a complaint about the absence of God:

My searches are my daily bread;
Yet never prove.

Repeated failures lead to thoughts of God's will and to imaginative efforts to describe the "intrenching" and "strange distance." After a brief prayer Herbert returns to imaginative description as an indirect form of concluding prayer:

For as thy absence doth excell
All distance known:
So doth thy nearnesse bear the bell,
Making two one.

The point to emphasize is that in such a complaint the expression of personal feeling is subordinated to the effort to express God's nature and the relations of God and man. A similar distinction applies to "Deniall"; for though his own voice and feelings are the instrument, what he principally registers are the disordering and scattering effects of God's silence:

⁴ "The Bag."

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue
To crie to thee,
And then not heare it crying! all day long
My heart was in my knee,
But no hearing.

The distinction is clearest in "Church-lock and key," where the study of his own grief leads directly to the insights of detachment. I quote the first two stanzas:

I know it is my sinne, which locks thine eares,
And bindes thy hands,
Out-crying my requests, drowning my tears;
Or else the chilnesse of my faint demands.

But as cold hands are angrie with the fire,
And mend it still;
So I do lay the want of my desire,
Not on my sinnes, or coldnesse, but thy will.

If "The Search" and "Deniall" take half steps, here Herbert has taken a full step, and the self-exploration ends at an impasse for which the only solution is an appeal to God's love. For the present it will be enough to observe that, though the study of grief leads to the apparent dead end of man's incomprehensibility to himself, it also leads to an increased knowledge of God. In "The Answer" grief is turned back upon itself to express a closed mystery of human nature. But if the circle is broken, so that grief may turn outside itself to understand itself, then the way to an answer may be found, as in "Affliction" (III):

My heart did heave, and there came forth, *O God!*
By that I knew that thou wast in the grief,
To guide and govern it to my relief,
Making a scepter of the rod:
Hadst thou not had thy part,
Sure the unruly sigh had broke my heart.

Complaint, Praise, and Love

From that tentative beginning Herbert moves to a full identification of human grief with God's, and so discovers measure and meaning in the experience of individual pain. But the final reward of the insight is that it points toward a knowledge of man securely based on his relations with God:

Thy life on earth was grief, and thou art still
Constant unto it, making it to be
A point of honour, now to grieve in me,
And in thy members suffer ill.
They who lament one crosse,
Thou dying dayly, praise thee to thy losse.

God's grief is the entire subject of "The Sacrifice," where it is developed by a full review of the varieties of human ignorance. At the other extreme sin is brilliantly abbreviated to the instrument physically binding man and God in pain:

Sinne is that presse and vice, which forceth pain
To hunt his cruell food through ev'ry vein.
(*"The Agonie"*)

God's grief, exemplified in Christ's passion, is the major mystery which, when brought forward, can silence the flow of human complaint and questioning. At that moment all the argumentative cunning of the human debater in "Dialogue" is abandoned as irrelevant quibbling: "Ah! no more: thou break'st my heart." The same point is reached via the elaborate postponements and superficial protestations of "The Thanksgiving," in which at the last possible moment a sincere default negates all the chatty glibness that has preceded:

Then for thy passion—I will do for that—
Alas, my God, I know not what.

But Herbert is not often satisfied to rest with the incomprehensibility of either man or God. In the pivotal stanza of "Miserie," a

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

poem composed of the responses between God's love and man's folly and sin, Herbert reaches his most direct expression of one mysterious aspect of the bond between man and God:

As dirtie hands foul all they touch,
And those things most, which are most pure and fine:
So our clay hearts, ev'n when we crouch
To sing thy praises, make them lesse divine.
Yet either this,
Or none, thy portion is.

Though the insight is more relevant to the nature and conditions of God's love, it may at least be mentioned here, as an example of Herbert's refusal to languish passively among the abysses that his complaints discover. He may be overwhelmed but he makes remarkable recoveries—if not in one poem, then in another. "There is no dealing with thy mighty passion," he declares in "The Reprisall," and then deals with it:

Ah! was it not enough that thou
By thy eternal glorie didst outgo me?
Couldst thou not griefs sad conquests me allow,
But in all vict'ries overthrow me?

The answer to this ironic complaint is one that expresses directly an implied purpose of all complaint:

Yet by confession will I come
Into thy conquest: though I can do nought
Against thee, in thee I will overcome
The man, who once against thee fought.

We have now completed a survey of the complaints, and this last example can serve as a point from which to summarize and to anticipate the drift of the argument. I have taken the position that Herbert's lyric gifts are not fully engaged by lament pure and simple.

Complaint, Praise, and Love

At his best the expression of pain and longing is always qualified by something else—by his disciplined detachment, by his awareness of contrariety in human experience, by his imaginative ability to perceive and relate what he finds real within and without himself. His chief theme is the grief to be felt in contemplating the mysteries of human failure to love God. Therefore every complaint is also, more or less, a declaration of praise and love. At least some of the difficulty in the exposition thus far has been caused by the strain of trying to examine the complaints while minimizing their relationship to the themes of praise and love. The advantage is perhaps mostly negative but nevertheless useful: it allows us to see more clearly why Herbert is not the kind of poet he is not.

He is a poet in whom the desire to understand and to relate is a commanding passion. He seldom gives himself to grief for its own sake. Instead, he sorts out afflictions and anguish in order to overcome them indirectly, and in order to reach through them to their cause and purpose. His deepest sense of the God he would praise and love requires the images of reluctance and conflict he finds in himself; he is faithful to those images and struggles with great success to transform them. Very seldom do his gestures of evasion elude his mastery of all the materials of conflict. Time and again those materials are both fully articulated and fully contained by the poetic form that represents the truth of his religious expression.

Herbert's best complaints, then, do not concentrate on grief directly. For many modern readers his most distinctive achievement is in the poems that dramatize, with a powerful balance of immediacy and detachment, his own conflicting thoughts and feelings. In these poems the voice of complaint may have important lines to speak but is never a monologist. We shall now look closely at the development of such a poem, where we may see at work together many of the distinctions we have been briefly considering. The poem is "Dulnesse," the first two lines of which have been commented upon in detail. One advantage of studying this poem is that it draws on the traditions of complaint in secular love poetry.⁵ Furthermore, it is a

⁵ In *The Poetry of Meditation* Martz writes: "It is surprising that Herbert's use of the devices and situations of popular love poetry has not been

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

dramatic poem in which Herbert employs himself as an actor, and its themes involve a conflict between complaint and praise, but the real issue is love.

As in many of Herbert's poems, the first stanza is a compressed version of problems that the plot will then take its own time to unfold:

Why do I languish thus, drooping and dull,
As if I were all earth?
O give me quicknesse, that I may with mirth
Praise thee brim-full!

Two opposite states of feeling are presented. The first is a fact which is then supplemented by a qualified condition contrary to fact; the speaker is languishing as if he were lamentably all earth, but the general question also turns on itself, on whether or not he is "all earth." The second state acts out a condition contrary to fact, the mirth and praise that will appear *if* the quickness demanded is realized; that state is imagined as one which allows for no earth at all in the human composition.

The second stanza is entirely different in manner and partly changes the subject. It moves with a surprising epigrammatic leisure; though crisp, it is without tension or inwardness, and its only apparent link concerns the subject of praise:

The wanton lover in a curious strain
Can praise his fairest fair;
And with quaint metaphors her curled hair
Curl o're again.

more strongly stressed in recent criticism of Herbert" (p. 186). Rosemary Freeman makes a number of perceptive comments on the technique of "parody" in "Dulnesse" ("Parody as a Literary Form: George Herbert and Wilfred Owen," *Essays in Criticism*, 13 [1963]:313-14). In *A Reading of George Herbert* Tuve minimizes the relevance of the secular tradition and objects more fully and directly in "George Herbert and *Caritas*." She returns to the subject in a long note chiefly concerned with musical tradition: "Sacred 'Parody' of Love Poetry, and Herbert," *Studies in the Renaissance*, 8 (1961):249-90.

Complaint, Praise, and Love

The next two stanzas celebrate the beauty of Christ, with one wry, glancing reference to the unworthy object of love in the second stanza. They constitute praise, but as if it were off the record, as if the poet were merely acknowledging an objective truth for which he could claim no inner credit:

Thou art my lovelinesse, my life, my light,
 Beautie alone to me:
Thy bloody death and undeserv'd, makes thee
 Pure red and white.

When all perfections as but one appeare,
 That those thy form doth show,
The very dust, where thou dost tread and go,
 Makes beauties here.

The fifth stanza then complains because the lover of God has no curious poems to show, while the wanton lovers pretend and in their disappointment write all the better. The sixth stanza admits confusion, not the obvious and superficial kind we have been observing, but a radical confusion that turns back, finally, to the problems of the first stanza:

But I am lost in flesh, whose sugred lyes
 Still mock me, and grow bold:
Sure thou didst put a minde there, if I could
 Finde where it lies.

To be “lost in flesh” is an active equivalent of the passive state of being as if “all earth.” Are we to take as one symptom the inappropriate scorn, with perhaps a little envy, directed toward the wanton lovers? Or are we to blame the poet’s lack of recognition that the “very dust” which God treads into “beauties here” makes the first question of the poem a blindly self-obsessed one? His incapacity to hear his own answer resembles his deafness to his own true praise. It lacks “quickness” and “mirth,” it is not “brim-full” enough. He compares himself, unfavorably, with the wanton lovers, but he does

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

not apply his own standards to them, or their standards to himself: "wrongs / Sharpen their Muse." The lover of God cannot claim "wrongs," only frustrations, which he pretends have nothing to do with the quality of his writing. He is determined to be satisfied only by praising appropriately the unified form of all perfections, and he cannot do so without feeling in advance the commensurate "quickness" and "mirth" which might, incidentally, be just the feelings to prove the success of what he is writing and to reward him appropriately. He may be "lost in flesh," but he is cunningly presenting himself as no less lost in the pride of spirit; he is mocking himself with "sugred lyes" in order to free himself of their pretensions, while as true poet and man of God he pretends to be writing a complaint in order that he may truly praise.

The last stanza clarifies the problems of the first:

Lord, cleare thy gift, that with a constant wit
I may but look towards thee:
Look onely; for to *love* thee, who can be,
What angel fit?

He does not ask for the gifts of "quickness" and "mirth," nor does the verse presume to act out the cheerful way in which the gift will be received. What the poet prays for, having acted out an impressive exhibition of his need, is recovery of the lost mind. The modest reward of that recovery is the turning of the mind in the right direction. Its vision will be a looking "towards," and the praise it will offer is a readiness to love. The prayer is devout and humble but not passive. The poet has demonstrated both his need and his preparation for prayer by clearing his own gift.

The speaker is neither "all earth" nor all spirit, and the poem has had the task of reconciling him to a difficult human state, to which neither intellectual detachment nor the immersion in sensation (whether "drooping" or elated) can provide a workable adjustment. The intellect is of course required to record sensations, but it is supposed to order them and itself as well. One order the mind seeks in this poem derives from the specialized intellectual gift of mockery, but

Complaint, Praise, and Love

no exemptions are granted the mocker. The mind does not seem to understand that its expression of praise—at least to an impartial judgment—is more satisfactory than its expression of complaint, which is not a genre for religious amateurs though they are tempted by its apparent ease. Nor does the mind acknowledge that its complaint is tinged with self-pity. The title of the poem is “Dulnesse,” and the first two lines bring together a dullness of sensation and a keen intellectual pain of perception. The rest of the stanza reverses the formula: keen sensation and dull perception. The plot of the poem then works out its variations on the basic formula, but the voice of intellectual dullness may be heard most prominently—not languishing and drooping, but active and irritated, impatiently seeking satisfaction in the service of God.

A poem like “Dulnesse” makes it clear why Herbert does not believe in the validity of pure lament. However genuine his immediate feelings, they cannot express, for long, his sense of reality, which exerts, as it were, a force of leverage from the outside, requiring him to turn those feelings against themselves and to convert them into a form of expression that can satisfy the exacting belief of his religious intelligence. Only in such a form can he hope to express what he knows and feels to be true of his relations to himself and of his relations to God. In “Dulnesse” complaint is countered by praise; both are changed into confession and prayer, and become a purified readiness to love. The poet renounces his claims, but in doing so proves his desire and his humility. The balance achieved is that of one perfect religious poise, which ends in wait.

2

It follows that the writing of praise will present its own difficulties, and I shall try to take them into account later in the discussion. But in one respect Herbert’s poems that set out only to praise differ from their counterparts, the direct laments of poems like “Sighs and Groans,” “Home,” and “Longing.” The difference is that the expository and declarative poems of praise—for instance, “Providence” and “Man”—apparently do not suffer from the prescriptions of the subject. The anthologist can hardly spare “Man”; though it is

not, by current standards, one of his best poems, it does present a range of attitude we recognize to be distinctive in Herbert. He is unmistakably in the poem, and if we miss him here we may miss him elsewhere. Besides, though we now turn away from the didactic, we may hope to avoid being parochial; we can hardly fail to observe how successful "Man" is in its own terms. And "Providence" is not inferior, but only longer.

The argument of design provides Herbert with a traditional lesson that he can "copy" with evident pleasure. To celebrate the beauty of the natural order is to present formal praise to God, uncomplicated by the tensions and uncertainties of the world of grace. In "Providence" Herbert can profess himself "Secretarie of thy praise," surveying the "divided" and "united" gifts of a God who is "in all things one, in each thing many." God's "skill and art" being everywhere, the poet's easiest task will be to record. If knowledge and expression falter, if the discovery of God's symbolic presence, His latent multiplicity in "each thing," is inadequate, the failure will not be felt as a personal one. The very genre, and the accepted conditions governing it, incorporates such failure into the offering of praise: "But who hath praise enough? nay, who hath any?" Like Milton's Adam and Eve in Paradise, man alone has a voice to express what other creatures feel; he is "the worlds high Priest" and they "mutter an assent." Therefore, the poet feels nothing but satisfaction:

All things that are, though they have sev'ral ways,
Yet in their being joyn with one advise
To honour thee: and so I give thee praise
In all my other hymnes, but in this twice.

We may be reminded of the situation in "A true Hymne." There the poet himself begins by "muttering" a symbolic assent, but the "somewhat scant" expression of the heart which desires to love and to articulate its love is completed by God. In both poems the poet may justly feel a double satisfaction, one that he surely seeks in other poems as well, but also seeks to deserve; he does not, by duplicating the situation, crudely "invite" God to repeat the performance. Nor

Complaint, Praise, and Love

does he, in spite of his evident pleasure, settle down to write nothing but hymns of praise. It is easy for Herbert to write such poems well, and his view of the providential order does not permit him to be fascinated only by the difficult. But the hymn of praise, though it may celebrate God's art with nature and though it may comment on man in passing, cannot enter into the circumstances and consequences of God's art with man. The argument of design supports Herbert's own love of nature, and his love of art as well, and furnishes him with a valuable treasury of reference: it is a kind of "singing school" for the soul, but it does not provide the right opportunities for the soul to study all that it needs to say.

For one thing, the hymn of praise cannot develop the reciprocal relations between God and man which occupy a central place in Herbert's religious thought. The poet proceeding through the formal topics of praise can spare only brief, hortatory comments for man. No doubt such writing affords refreshing relief from the intensities of introspection. For the moment he may even feel that he has achieved the "open breast" of "Confession"; that he is no longer the poet-maker but is instead the secretary-recorder, avoiding the penalties of art and "fiction," which "Doth give a hold and handle to affliction." Though "the worlds high Priest," the poet praising God enters into the order of nature from which at other times he feels alienated, envying the mute employment of trees, flowers, bees, etc. But he may gain a sense of participation and a sense of an "open breast" at the price of neglecting part of his accepted vocation as man. That vocation requires him to praise God in many ways, and to make his own thoughts and feelings do more than merely "mutter an assent"; it requires him to study the ways of God with man, in order to be educated in hope, and in order to praise God with the voice of his own feelings.

What "Providence" and "Man," for all their distinction, cannot say is part of the familiar discourse of "Mattens":

I cannot open mine eyes,
But thou art ready there to catch
My morning-soul and sacrifice:
Then we must needs for that day make a match.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

God is not here known by His works but by His presence, which is both demanding and attentive.⁶ God's love for creation is not a general argument of praise but is gathered into a single mystery, which evokes the eloquence not of celebration, but of wonder:

My God, what is a heart,
That thou shouldst it so eye, and woove,
Povring upon it all thy art,
As if that thou hadst nothing els to do?

In the "match" between God and man praise can take many shapes and do many different things. Nor is God's "art" unwilling to exploit human susceptibility, as in "Affliction" (I):

Yet, for I threatned oft the siege to raise,
Not simpring all mine age,
Thou often didst with Academick praise
Melt and dissolve my rage.
I took thy sweetned pill, till I came where
I could not go away, nor persevere.

Nor is man's art unwilling to produce the kind of inartistic display that will set off, and be sacrificed to, a pure moment of praise. Whether he deliberately intended to or not, Herbert turns "Even-song" into such a poem. He begins by blessing God in a series of quibbles notable for their frigidity. The next two stanzas go through some standard motions of praise-and-lament. The beginning of the last stanza, in its leisurely triviality, summarizes the general lack of concentration in the poem:

⁶I differ from Tuve here, at least in what I find the poem to be exemplifying. In "George Herbert and *Caritas*" (p. 328) she emphasizes the "difference between man loving God and a creature loving another creature. . . . the poem attempts the subject of how a man's heart is 'wooded' by God through His other creatures." She takes as her model Augustine's influential distinction between the love that "uses" and the higher love which, by deriving from and referring to God, "enjoys."

Complaint, Praise, and Love

I muse, which shows more love,
The day or night: that is the gale, this th' harbour;
That is the walk, and this the arbour;
Or that the garden, this the grove.

Then, after all this elaborate indirectness, he suddenly turns to say:

My God, thou art all love.
Not one poore minute scapes thy breast,
But brings a favour from above;
And in this love, more then in bed, I rest.

This last example may serve to introduce an account of the problems and difficulties which the expression of praise must overcome. If one is obligated to praise God, one is further obligated to mean and feel the praise. "Lord, I will mean and speak thy praise," Herbert writes in "Praise" (III). But like all other human enterprises this one may be favored by God, so that "All things concur to give it a perfection." If it is not so favored:

But when thou dost on busnesse blow,
It hangs, it clogs:
Not all the teams of Albion in a row
Can hale or draw it out of doore.
Legs are but stumps, and Pharaohs wheels but logs,
And struggling hinders more.

It is one thing to "mean and speak," even eloquently, when the poet is complaining about what he cannot "mean and speak." But the real subject may offer a tangible resistance that justifies thoughts of "all the teams of Albion." Herbert has many moments when what he wants to say seems impossible. If stirred to eloquence he is on the wrong subject; if numbly dull he is, however truthfully, acknowledging failure. But though the desired feelings may not come, words usually do, and then the poet may merely bore himself and us. Praise

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

that is mechanical or "cold" will seem a less adequate offering than sincere complaint.

Furthermore, the poet will not be unaware of the constant temptation to flatter God with artful expressions. Another such concern is the knowledge that both the desire and the power to praise touch on the boundary of pride and presumption—a concern fully worked out but not therefore dissolved by "The Temper" (I):

How should I praise thee, Lord! how should my rymes
Gladly engrave thy love in steel.

At other moments, varying in the depth of their seriousness, the poet will wonder how a transcendent God can be praised at all. Spiritual exhilaration that inspires fecundity leads to problems no less discouraging than those brought on by spiritual dryness. For instance, the bustling lines that "burnish, sprout, and swell" in "Jordan" (II):

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.

Such problems are solved, for the moment, by the poetic license to disavow that which nevertheless provides the occasion for beautiful saying—as in the song from "Easter":

The Sunne arising in the East,
Though he give light, & th' East perfume;
If they should offer to contest
With thy arising, they presume.

But in "Miserie" there is a grim confrontation between "My God, Man cannot praise thy name" and the bond which God will not release:

Not suff'ring those
Who would, to be thy foes.

Complaint, Praise, and Love

Man cannot praise but makes “all the bloud of God to run in vain,” and if he does go through the motions of praise, they are motions that betray his animal nature and defile; nevertheless, God holds to the bond:

Yet either this,
Or none, thy portion is.

Since man is obligated even his failures are significant and justified. They supplement the lessons of direct grief and teach him to know his own heart. They also teach him to distinguish between false and true praise, and to value what is essential in the obligation: absolute sincerity. Though complaint comes naturally and praise may require effort, in both man explores his relations to God and to himself. In both, his discoveries often lead to prayer.

Like praise prayer can take many shapes that are transitional rather than final. For instance, in “Justice” (I) “My prayers mean thee, yet my prayers stray.” In “Church-lock and key” the poet imagines that his sins drown out his prayers, but he can think of an alternative explanation, for which he does not need to invent a fantastic scene: “Or else the chilnesse of my faint demands,” “the want of my desire.” As one of its methods, the art of praise may employ prayer in a rhetoric of bargaining which God is expected to condone, or allow, or perhaps encourage. For example, the opening of “Praise” (I):

To write a verse or two is all the praise,
That I can raise:
Mend my estate in any wayes,
Thou shalt have more.

Many of the conditions that govern praise apply to prayer, and the most comprehensive single statement is the sonnet, “Prayer” (I). In the first quatrain all the images mark the relations between man and God, and do so in terms of connection, source, and return:

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.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

In the second quatrain all the relations between man and God are centered on earth, and the images express violence, conflict, guilt, fear:

Engine against th' Almighty, sinners towre,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-daies world transposing in an houre,
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear.

The God who crowns all man's blessings with "repining restlesnesse," who eyes and woos and pours out all his art to draw man to Him, also endows man with the gift of prayer, which man is free to use against God in ways that express both his own nature and God's purpose. Prayer is the sinner's instrument of attack, always ambiguous, always reminding him of his guilt and the benefits of his guilt. From the sestet we need to mention only the final two words, on which the whole poem turns: "something understood." Prayer, we learn from what Herbert says and from what he acts out in the sonnet, is neither definable nor wholly expressible; part of its message is always implicit, not quite expressed and perhaps not quite understood by him who prays, but understood by God.⁷

And so at one level, at least, prayer, like praise, is a kind of weapon which man is invited—nay, obligated—to use against God, the better to disarm himself. And praise too may be something that has no fixed form of perfection but is "understood." One emblem of the place where man and God meet for understanding is the "broken Altar . . . Made of a heart . . . No workmans tool hath touch'd." The heart is a stone which only God's power can cut:

Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name.

⁷ See the full and perceptive study by E. B. Greenwood, "George Herbert's Sonnet 'Prayer': A Stylistic Study" (*Essays in Criticism*, 15 [1965]:27-45). There are some good observations in Robert Ellrodt, *L'Inspiration Personnelle et l'Esprit du Temps chez les Poètes Métaphysiques Anglais* (Paris, 1960), 1:368-70.

Complaint, Praise, and Love

Such an altar will provide mute praise, "if I chance to hold my peace." But "The Altar" introduces more than one hundred and fifty poems in which the poet does not hold his peace. And while summoning himself to be possessed by God's will he must use whatever workman's tools he has; he must act as the poet-maker of the broken parts of his life, both listening and speaking, acting and waiting, and hoping to be "understood."

"Hard things are glorious,"⁸ and to *feel* understood is one of the hard things rewarded by authoritative, and thus untainted, glory. By the quality of his personal experience, and by a mastery of art which supports the rare human skill of being brilliantly subtle and wholly honest, Herbert purifies and elevates his praise. In doing so, if I can trust my sense of the governing decorum, he gives due praise to God and expresses the dignity of man. The mark of his feeling that he is understood comes as a release, often sudden, from the tensions of the effort he has been making (or so one may recognize the moment in its negative aspect). What is positive in the release is conveyed by what the expression says and by the intimate signs of joy that the poet reveals in the saying. To draw on a previous example, the sudden illumination that concludes the fumbling awkwardnesses of "Even-song": "And in this love, more then in bed, I rest."

In his best poems of praise Herbert works against the open and the hidden difficulties which make the writing of praise hard, difficulties which are fully exposed only by the kinds of opposition he discovers in himself. The honest and subtle man wishing to fulfill a constant obligation that can never be terminated—an obligation that requires him, again and again, to mean and feel whatever he puts down in words, yet requires him as a poet to give individual shape to individual experience—such a man will surely not lack the materials of discourse, whether or not he engages the assigned theme directly. When we put the problems thus, it seems only reasonable that Herbert should have chosen, most of the time, to work indirectly—to mean and feel those honest failures which would not compromise the next opportunity, to complain while hoping to praise, and, most of all,

⁸ "Providence."

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

to search out the reluctances in himself so that he might understand them and, with God's help, transform them.

The end of "The Thanksgiving" grinds to a sudden halt, as if to say: Peace, prattler, do not praise. Confronting the thought of "My Saviours blood" in a context of comfortable protestations, Herbert is overwhelmed. But his confusion is an act of mute praise that is a severe reprimand to easy articulateness and opens the way for a more strenuous confrontation. In "The Reprisall," whose earlier title was "The Second Thanks-giving," he imagines the conflict with God, not as a convenient figure of speech or privileged psychological gesture, but as an image expressing a real relationship, one that engages God and man fully. The act of taking his image seriously, even while he plays before God with gravity and grace, is a movement toward true praise. That his argument leads to the complete offering of himself is only part of the praise—the confirmation and reward, one might say, of what he has been doing and of how he has done it.

I turn now to one of Herbert's master metaphors of praise, music, an art that for him not only expresses but represents both meaning and feeling.⁹ To Herbert music is first of all a philosophical art, one that is constantly transforming its materials into a measured order of sound and silence. The Platonists endowed with considerable attraction the thought that music in its highest form is inaudible, and Herbert understandably responds to that attraction. Since God is the first composer:

all must appeare,
And be dispos'd, and dress'd, and tun'd by thee,
Who sweetly temper'st all. If we could heare
Thy skill and art, what musick would it be!

("Providence")

⁹The fullest account is by Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (London, 1954), pp. 156–70. No one writes at length on Herbert without touching the subject, as Martz does, very well, in *The Poetry of Meditation*, pp. 272–73. There are some useful notes in the general study by John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry, 1500–1700* (Princeton, 1961).

Complaint, Praise, and Love

We shall glance at this attitude again in the last chapter, but for now we may rest on the central emphasis, and here, as in other matters, we find Herbert chiefly concerned with the reciprocal relations between God's art and man's.

God's music is the model which concerns man immediately because he hears, feels, and responds to it—as in “The Temper” (I):

This is but tuning of my breast,
To make the musick better.

The dead can respond only to the promised sound of the last trumpet: “Dust, alas, no musick feels, / But thy trumpet.” Yet in their response they will themselves complete the purpose of music:

Man is out of order hurl'd,
Parcel'd out to all the world.
Lord, thy broken consort raise,
And the musick shall be praise.

(“Dooms-day”)

In that music, composer, composition, performers, and audience are all united. In the meantime lesser compositions, which need rehearsal, have their task—for instance, to justify the gift of understanding which strives to return to God, or should:

The bird that sees a daintie bowre
Made in the tree, where she was wont to sit,
Wonders and sings, but not his power
Who made the arbour: this exceeds her wit.

But Man doth know
The spring, whence all things flow.

(“Miserie”)

That gift of understanding, however, may occasionally get ahead of itself and produce detailed plans for hope in a style of optimistic assertiveness. Herbert is no singing bird confined to dainty bowers,

Complaint, Praise, and Love

When youth is frank and free,
And calls for musick, while his veins do swell,
All day exchanging mirth and breath
In companie.

The music of common pleasure is that of gay ignorance, which is not condemned, but which is nevertheless the occasion for anticipating a different kind of "social" music, the passing-bell that announces impending death. Sir Thomas Browne, characteristically, makes the music of mirth his formal occasion for contemplating the far reaches that Herbert would reserve for the music of intellectual praise.¹⁰

Let me pause for a moment to note that several of these musical references come from poems that may be described as "mortifications"; they have as their main theme the disciplining of the soul to think of death and of eternal ends. The poems that discipline the soul to deny distractions are in one sense poems praising the order of God's design. They are not philosophical poems of search or dramatic poems of discovery; they do not propose to "find" and praise God. They are directed toward an understanding which, if mastered, can overcome the crippling dread of death. The known things these poems teach, if incorporated into life, would make for actions Herbert would not hesitate to describe as "the musick shall be praise."

¹⁰ "For even that vulgar and Tavern-Musick, which makes one man merry, another mad, strikes in me a deep fit of devotion, and a profound contemplation of the First Composer. There is something in it of Divinity more than the ear discovers: it is an Hieroglyphical and shadowed lesson of the whole World, and creatures of God; such a melody to the ear, as the whole World, well understood, would afford the understanding. In brief, it is a sensible fit of that harmony which intellectually sounds in the ears of God" (*Religio Medici and Other Writings*, ed. Ernest Rhys [London, 1906], p. 80).

In Herbert's "Dulnesse" the "mirth" that would praise God "brim-full" is the self-flattering music of ignorance. In "Redemption" the search for God leads to Calvary, discovered by "a ragged noise and mirth." And in "Aaron" we find an extreme version, without the minor ignorance of mirth: the only musical image that does not save is "the noise of passions ringing me for dead." To these examples I may add the third stanza of "The Pearl"; see Chapter One, n. 26, above.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

In the next chapter some of these poems will be studied for what they can tell us of Herbert's achievement. My limited point now is that the finest of the "mortifications" are themselves emblems of his concept of music and musical form. He does not throw himself into the traditional forms of absolute denial, or give himself up to the fierce joys of asceticism, but prefers to oppose in order to temper. A master of the composite feelings familiar in the "sweet strains" of music, he knows how to draw these through the whole poem; or he can suddenly gather the feelings together in a single moment that preserves all of their audible distinctness, as in "Life," when the emblematic flowers "cunningly" wither, offering

Times gentle admonition:
Who did so sweetly deaths sad taste convey,
Making my minde to smell my fatall day;
Yet sugring the suspicion.

When the silence of God is felt the soul may indeed think itself "Untun'd, unstrung."¹¹ But to accept a practical task of educating the feelings on a set subject is also to imply an initial "tuning" of the soul sufficient for the work in hand. The poems of "mortification," therefore, seldom dwell on the deeper, more resisting passions. They may nevertheless be considered as poems of praise, illustrating a minor music of praise.

I now turn to a second major connection between the theme of praise and Herbert's metaphorical use of music. It is plain that he does not give much formal attention to the affective side of music, which concerns pleasure. Music expresses the intellect; because of both a traditional and a personal belief he finds it natural to think of the highest praise of God in terms of music. But he is a poet and musician who knows that music is heard and *felt*: "Dust, alas, no musick feels." Since the obligation to praise comprehends the obligation to mean and feel the praise, man cannot fulfill one part without the other. Herbert's fastidious intellect is very demanding; skilled

¹¹ "Deniall."

Complaint, Praise, and Love

in its own evasions, it is not easily taken in by the inventive plausibilities which the feelings offer so attractively.¹²

It is different when he is writing poems celebrating order. Then there is not much occasion for quarreling with Renaissance habits of ceremony in personal and public manners; he is at ease with the happy correspondences between things private and public, natural and divine, and content with the Anglican compromises. Still, not all of the immediate and comprehensive demands to which he responds can be quieted with ideas of harmonious correspondences, or with the religious practices of a *via media* in which he nevertheless believes. He may charge his troubled feelings to defective belief, and may further believe that what he feels is the will of God, but he will not therefore feel the less.

Under obligation the feelings can prove both stubborn and unpredictable, one moment drooping and the next ready to "Praise thee brim-full." In either case they may need to be disciplined or opposed. Music, Herbert writes in "Easter," "is but three parts vied / And multiplied." The art of vying is an art of tension and conversion. In "Christmas" it is "the grief / Of pleasures" that brings man to God, and the light to be discovered "shall cheer my breast, and both so twine, / Till ev'n his beams sing, and my musick shine." In "Employment" (I) the opening image of the flower in God's garland does not lead to a happy solution until, at the lowest point of hope, the flower is exchanged for a weed. Then, in Herbert's inspired revision, the humble metamorphosis finds an opening for hope:

Lord place me in thy consort; give one strain
To my poore reed.

Let us consider one of Herbert's most unusual images for the music of feeling. In his poetic language¹³ sighs are almost always more

¹² The poems contain all the finer evidence, but *A Priest to the Temple* is full of shrewd demonstrations, and the psychology Herbert inherited (which is that of Shakespeare too) put him in full command of an essential principle: "for the humane soule being bounded, and kept in, in her sensitive faculty, will runne out more or lesse in her intellectuall" (p. 238).

¹³ We need systematic studies of his language, and particularly of that personal idiom which develops from the intimate conversation of one poem

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

general and less expressive than groans, and groans are a kind of music. In "The Search" the poet sends out a sigh, "Deep drawn in pain, / Wing'd like an arrow," but nothing happens. His next move is to alter the sigh:

I tun'd another (having store)
 Into a grone;
Because the search was dumbe before:
 But all was one.

In "The Crosse" groans offer themselves, though without much confidence, as a harmony, and in "Grieve not the Holy Spirit" the mention of God's groans in one stanza brings in the lute and a song of complaint in the next. But the most striking association comes at the beginning of "Death," where "The sad effect of sadder grones" is followed by "Thy mouth was open, but thou couldst not sing." The groans that have worn the life out present an image of arrested music, and what may seem to be the arbitrary product of fantasy is instead rationally grotesque. Finally, "Sion" provides the most comprehensive example. There the groans are converted to a music of praise, offered to God and accepted, but still "vying," as God pleases:

There thou art struggling with a peevish heart,
Which sometimes crosseth thee, thou sometimes it:
 The fight is hard on either part.
 Great God doth fight, he doth submit.
All Solomons sea of brasse and world of stone
Is not so deare to thee as one good grone.¹⁴

And truly brasse and stones are heavie things,
Tombes for the dead, not temples fit for thee:
 But grones are quick, and full of wings,
 And all their motions upward be;
And ever as they mount, like larks they sing;
The note is sad, yet musick for a King.

with another. The demonstrations that seem to me most promising are those by Bowers, Colie, and Greenwood.

¹⁴ In "Gratefulnesse" groans are "countrey-aires" that "take" God's love.

Complaint, Praise, and Love

But all of the problems of praise do not lend themselves to the metaphor of music, and some of the obligatory feelings are not to be “vied / And multiplied.” One of Herbert’s most persistent, yet troubling, beliefs is that God’s “state dislikes not easinesse” but maintains “an easie quick accesse.” In “Prayer” (II)

If I but lift mine eyes, my suit is made:
Thou canst no more not heare, then thou canst die.

But part of the trouble is that God hears too well; and lifting the eyes may be no easier than shutting out afflictions by keeping “an open breast,” no easier than the active waiting of true obedience. If the approaches to God are all easy and open, the chief sources of failure must be sought in the perplexities of human nature. But before these difficult materials can be transformed they must be discovered and understood. After, not before, they are understood, the “groveling wit” of the process may be disowned, as it is in “The Pearl,” where the praise of demonstrated knowledge is offered to God as having come from God. Yet it may be impossible—in regrettable accordance with man’s nature and in simple accordance with God’s will—to fuse harmoniously the acts of discovering, understanding, transforming. Depending upon the circumstances, discovery alone may do practically all of the work, or may do only its portion, falling back exhausted and justified. But the basic duty remains: transformation of whatever is understood requires the full consent of the feelings. Believing in the ease of God’s accessibility, but faced with the intimate experience of inaccessibility, Herbert must either lament or turn with renewed determination to the mysteries of human nature. These he can at least hope to understand and transform—as a direct offering which constitutes praise and which may, indirectly, recover the sense of God’s presence.

Transforming the recalcitrant human materials into praise is one of the hardest poetic achievements, and effective praise transforms the man himself. If God puts a limit on grief and crosses anguish with joy, the themes and occasions will not be difficult to celebrate. But Herbert can offer himself lamenting and loving, for he can, all at

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

once, both accept and express the transformations wrought by God's will in him, and rejoice:

I live to shew his power, who once did bring
My *joyes* to *weep*, and now my *griefs* to *sing*.
(“Josephs coat”)

The poet-priest mastering the disciplined changes of “Aaron” becomes indistinguishable from the beautiful austerities of the poem itself, and he emerges dressed as a true Aaron, a symbol of God's power and love. Time and again the poem that has mastered its materials presents the poet at one with what he has finally been able to say.

But even the happy endings reflect the strains endured, the duplicities exposed, the fidelity required. As a constant obligation praise cannot be written off, and the man transformed in one poem still has to fumble his way into another. This condition is a steady part of Herbert's religious consciousness. “Great joyes are all at once,” he wrote in “The Size”: they represent hope fulfilled and “are at home.” But the joys and hopes he trains himself to trust are wayfaring ones that live on credit: “these journey still, / And meet the rest on Sions hill.” To accept rejoicing may be thought the highest kind of praise—not to be confused with accepting because one is rejoicing or rejoicing because one is accepting. At such moments, which are always conclusions that imply further beginnings, no note of personal triumph must be heard, and the action signified by the words can be trusted to express the joy that is often muted in the words themselves.

The music of personal praise in Herbert seldom converts grief into unqualified joy, though there are free moments of remarkable verve and gaiety. These lines from “Dooms-day” illustrate a capacity that plays underneath or breaks the surface of many of his poems:

Summon all the dust to rise,
Till it stirre, and rubbe the eyes;
While this member jogs the other,
Each one whispring, *Live you brother?*

Complaint, Praise, and Love

He often opposes to the deliberate solemnity of his thought some irrepressible spontaneity of high spirits, or delicately mocks stubborn discouragement by intellectual playfulness. He prefers to be cheerful but does not try to command that state; and he regards the feelings of elation as more immediately dangerous than their opposite, for a Christian is "Like a pretender, not a bride."¹⁵ When the sense of joy is most moving it seems to emerge from a grief melting away, so barely past as to feel still present:

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
On whom thy tempests fell all night.
(*"The Flower"*)

And so the music of personal praise, as it shapes itself into the final offering of a completed lyric poem, is one of accepting with chastened joy. The kind and degree of joy expressed may vary, but not the acceptance. The attitude of the poet at the end of "Dulnesse" is the characteristic one.

3

The governing perspective of this discussion has been that each of the three themes touches on the others, and therefore most of the conditions of love by now have been brought forward. Certainly, if complaint is transformed into praise and praise transforms the man himself, then the general conditions of love would seem to be satisfied. But in complaint and praise we have also had to recognize particular conditions: the drive to know, or the obligation to mean and feel, or the end of feeling understood. To conclude my discussion I shall try to give weight to the force of particular conditions by singling out three approaches that are distinctive in Herbert's treat-

¹⁵ "The Size."

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

ment of love as a poetic theme. Two of these are relatively simple but furnish the basic plots of many poems. One may be described as a movement away from love, an effort to escape; the other is a movement toward, aiming to force love. The third approach is the one with which I shall begin; though involving movement, it is primarily contemplative.

It may now be taken for granted, thanks to the studies of Tuve, Martz, and Summers, that Herbert assimilated both the older and the newer methods of religious meditation. Traditional subjects and symbols are contemplated by him for the solutions they contain, and these are applied as personal reminders, reproaches, and exhortations. The answers are, as they should be, the old and tested ones. We do not expect individuality in the answers themselves, but rather in the poetic occasions which they complete. Indeed, readers who give these poems their just due will not be tempted to emphasize the answers apart from the force and quality of Herbert's individual questioning. In poetry, but not in poetry alone, answers cannot prove their validity and life unless they are renewed by the issues they are called upon to settle.

The quality of Herbert's questioning has not lacked illustration, but it may now be helpful to approach the subject from a different point of view. I mention first his remarkable grasp, everywhere apparent, of what he called "the particulars of humane actions." There is an up-to-date, seventeenth-century concentration on the details of human performance and motive. He is a master of the new edge demonstrated in learning by the practice of detached observation and "anatomy." In this matter alone he proves himself a worthy friend of Bacon and Donne. Herbert's country parson "greatly esteemes also of cases of conscience, wherein he is much versed. And indeed, herein is the greatest ability of a Parson to lead his people exactly in the wayes of Truth." The poems, after "The Church-porch," do not, of course, deal with such practical issues, but they too are firmly tied to exact observations drawn from actual experience. The poet cultivates the familiar and homely; indeed, some of his most effective rhetorical credentials are acquired through the intimacy with which he speaks to himself and to God. Without losing any of

Complaint, Praise, and Love

the edge of his detachment he involves himself and the reader in the immediacy of the experience. Though the quality of his questioning cannot be described apart from his achievement as a poet, we may follow Herbert in isolating one effect. In praising the art of questioning founded by Socrates, Herbert attributes "the secret" of its efficacy to this: "that at Sermons, and Prayers, men may sleep or wander; but when one is asked a question, he must discover what he is."¹⁶

The poet, if he succeeds, will always make his own questions the listener's, and this alone would give them convincing force. But in contemplating a subject like God's otherness, for instance, Herbert has also mastered the power to imagine and express God's distance and silence. If these are not to remain absolute, frozen in monumental expression, it is because what seems to be only stated evokes a counterforce of questioning. For the remoteness of God can be *answered* only by the effort which the sense of His loss calls forth. What must be mentioned at this point is that some of the standard sources of answer, though they provide many of the materials for eloquence, do not speak most effectively in the moments of crisis. The Book of Nature, for instance, however important it is to Herbert as a religious poet, is often closed when the subject is not the demonstrable presence of God's love but its felt absence.

Even the Book of Scriptures, the chief source of his methods, direction, and wisdom, which encompasses his education in hope and discipline, cannot be made to speak of the otherness of God as powerfully as the immediate apprehension drawn from the book of his own soul. In "The H. Scriptures" (II) he writes:

This verse marks that, and both do make a motion
Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie:

Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good,
And comments on thee: for in ev'ry thing
Thy words do finde me out, & parallels bring,
And in another make me understood.

¹⁶ *A Priest to the Temple*, p. 257; the two quotations earlier in the paragraph are from p. 230.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

The lines have a great deal to say about his own poems and about his belief in the reciprocating integrity shared by art and life. They call for action and practice; they affirm the steady motion of God toward man, but if that motion is interrupted, or the clues lost, then the poet cannot say, except superficially:

Nay, I will reade thy book, and never move
Till I have found therein thy love,
Thy art of love, which I'le turn back on thee.
(“The Thanksgiving”)

What he reports in “Affliction” (I) seems the more reliable account:

Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me
None of my books will show:
I reade, and sigh, and wish. . . .

“Thy words do finde me out,” but sometimes the pupil is radically disabled: “Thy word is all, if we could spell.”

Though the firm stability of relations between “Thy power and love, my love and trust” cannot be revoked except by man, still, human life must be lived every moment, and must make its individual response both to the immediacy of grief and to the felt power of glimpses of joy. The Book of Nature can most conveniently be read in fair weather, and a stanza I have mentioned before makes a distinction that is never far from Herbert’s consciousness:

The grosser world stands to thy word and art;
But thy diviner world of grace
Thou suddenly dost raise and race,
And ev’ry day a new Creatour art.
(“The Temper,” II)

Confronting the power of God’s love to “raise and race,” to draw and withdraw, the poet finds his most effective responses in two main sources. The storms of the soul, which are the “triumph” of God’s

Complaint, Praise, and Love

art, furnish him with the issues and opportunities which are taken up in many of his best poems. The same storms also evoke the felt answers contained in the symbols of God's transforming love—in the Holy Communion, in the life of Christ, and in the life of the poet himself. My own view is that Herbert's major achievement as a poet rests on the direct evidence of God's transforming love, to which his own imaginative life responds. If we had only the poems which contemplate the symbols directly, we should be left with far fewer poems and, I believe, a much smaller poet. Herbert's great theme, the mystery of God's art with man, cannot be realized without poetic attention to man's participating role. "The Sacrifice" would not be the masterpiece it is if it did not maintain, throughout its formal stations, a constant sense of personal urgency. "Redemption" is not a symbolic contemplation translated into a drama; its peremptory brilliance requires the very protagonist chosen—the slow-witted petitioner of God. As for the meditation of "The Crosse," though it begins and ends in attitudes established by tradition, the poem still searches personal experience for its material. The symbol of the Cross "felt by thy Sonne" and the lesson of Scriptures, "Thy will be done," are completed by an acceptance that has imagined a large range of individual resistance and development. The four concluding words have become, emphatically, "my words."

Here I must leave my brief argument against making too much of symbolic contemplation in Herbert. In the next chapter I shall examine several "mortifications" in detail. These are poems in which fixed attitudes and the established materials of meditative tradition combine to test and demonstrate Herbert's individual quality of effort, his own poetic response to the established answers of symbolic contemplation.

I turn now to poems that reply to God's love by seeking to escape from it. The most famous example is "The Collar," which begins with a declaration of independence employing the most elementary expressions of freedom, the loosed outward courings of nature. Nature's abundance justifies the innocent pleasures of the senses, but an undercurrent of response to the seasonal forms of nature emerges as a peculiarly human interpretation of the lessons of time: "Recover all

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

thy sigh-blown age / On double pleasures." The reasoning which sees man only in nature regards man's discovery of moral laws as his own invention. Therefore, he is free to reject the painful task of striving after the right, since it is only self-imposed, the accepted blindness of his own illusion. At this point he is ready to reject the fear which is the beginning of religious wisdom and to assert his own self-orientation and a new law of reason:

He that forbears
To suit and serve his need,
Deserves his load.

God intervenes, having let His beloved child teach himself the steps and destination of his argument. In spite of its vehemence and apparent freedom, the rebellion has plunged along well-rutted paths leading to a monumental dead end. And so the effort to escape love has demonstrated the logic of its own folly; the climax calls forth God's motion, which coincides with man's readiness, purged, to return to Him. The spontaneity of that return has been validated by the action, and the relations between man and God are more than reconfirmed; they are renewed.

In "Dialogue" the rebel seeks to escape by another method. He pleads his lack of merit; if there were any hope of spiritual progress, if his soul were at all worth having, then he would promptly check all thought of withdrawing. Perhaps the display of excessive humility is a bid for assurance. But the answer chooses to acknowledge no appeal:

What, Child, is the ballance thine,
Thine the poise and measure?
If I say, Thou shalt be mine;
Finger not my treasure.

Only Christ, "Who for man was sold," can judge these matters; besides, his act "transferr'd th' accounts" to him. But the human speaker, unimpressed, yields none of his previous position; further-

Complaint, Praise, and Love

more, if he is excluded by God's will from reasoning about the process, then he will reason himself right out of it:

As the reason then is thine;
So the way is none of mine:
I disclaim the whole designe:
Sinne disclaims and I resigne.

The latent rebelliousness of the first speech has now become active and open, and the rebel takes on some of the attitude expressed in "The Collar"—except that he remains a debater, preserving a certain cloak of appearances and still scoring points. He can use the word "resigne" conscious of his irony, and he can instantly revise his speech to attribute the disclaiming to sin, which he admits and which his opponent has failed to explain. Nevertheless, the rebuttal refuses to act like one, and no debate is finally acknowledged. Christ refers to his own "resigning" and to his passion again, but this time not briefly; the historical act is made present and personal and painful. As in "The Collar," the argument does not require direct answering in its own terms; the reality of God's love breaks through the pretenses, and the debater gives up his clever line of retreat, which has concealed, not very well, his aggressive motives: "Ah! no more: thou break'st my heart."

These poems are formal efforts to withdraw from the bond of love. More often the movement is momentary, an option that exists and therefore must be tested in any full-scale struggle to come to terms with the self and God. When the senses "grumble" in "The Pearl" the possibility of withdrawal is at least intimated, and so the piety of the speaker must be credited with having consciously measured that alternative. In "The Temper" (I) the fervent wish to back out of the human condition suggests an extreme humility: to "roost and nestle." That the essential motive is willful and assertive is indicated by the prominent intellectuality of the proposal: a humbler station on the scale of being will free God of a sinner and will exempt the petitioner from the laws of "hope and fear." At other times the thought of being busy like an orange tree, or any tree, or flower, stimulates the

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

wish to serve God under laws that provide no latitude for impatience and the pain of waiting, that render attractively inconceivable the "cold dispute / Of what is fit, and not."

In Herbert's most comprehensive account of the rebellious lover, "Affliction" (I), the effort to escape is not central, as in "The Collar" and "Dialogue." But it comes at last and initiates a movement that resembles the climax of "The Temper" (I). "Affliction" (I) dallies with the false surmise of arboreal existence as the proposal is mildly intellectualized:

For sure then I should grow
To fruit or shade: at least some bird would trust
Her household to me, and I should be just.

Here the human terms are gently advanced under the color of a green thought and do not emerge as willful or assertive. The next step is similar to "Yet take thy way" of "The Temper" (I), a form of intellectual acceptance:

Yet though thou troublest me, I must be meek;
In weakness must be stout.

But in the next, the poet backs away and tries rebellion again:

Well, I will change the service, and go seek
Some other master out.

It is a modified rebellion which does not aspire to the full independence of "my wish and way" but acknowledges the need to seek and serve. When the final acceptance comes it is not like the positive eloquence that concludes "The Temper" (I), in which we feel the poet's identification with what he says. The central issue of the poem has been restless impatience, which is not to be clarified by a reconciliation of opposites. The answer is patience; it is terse and burdened with negatives:

Complaint, Praise, and Love

Ah my deare God! though I am clean forgot,
Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.

The statement summarizes and rejects both the efforts to escape love and the efforts to force love.

The efforts to escape love are always, according to the letter of the law, wrong; so are complaints, but both are granted extraordinary opportunities for transformation. The efforts to force love seem to be less completely covered by the code—as if man, his moves less patterned and anticipated, were being encouraged to improvise. But at least some of the same tacit rules governing the license and proprieties of complaint and praise apply to the direct seeking of love. For instance, if prayer and praise offer a kind of weapon that man may use against God in order to disarm himself, in the courtships and campaigns of love the use of such weapons becomes a major strategy. There are, of course, the formal demonstrations that the poet “would love” but needs God’s help to write “loved.” And there are the firm dedications that express the poet’s full knowledge of the terms of love, as these stanzas from “Obedience”:

O let thy sacred will
All thy delight in me fulfill!
Let me not think an action mine own way,
But as thy love shall sway,
Resigning up the rudder to thy skill.
* * * * *
Besides, thy death and bloud
Show’d a strange love to all our good:
Thy sorrows were in earnest; no faint proffer
Or superficial offer
Of what we might not take, or be withstood.

But in between these two dignified statements Herbert presents an argument, coated with praise, that frankly wheedles and coaxes:

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

Yet since thou canst not choose but see my actions,
So great are thy perfections,
Thou mayst as well my actions guide, as see.

Here we may perhaps detect a lapse in Herbert's usual subtlety, for the argument does not seem to point beyond itself as it does, for instance, in "Submission." There he advises God and practices charming sophistries in order to conclude:

How know I, if thou shouldst me raise,
That I should then raise thee?
Perhaps great places and thy praise
Do not so well agree.

Wherefore unto my gift I stand;
I will no more advise:
Onely do thou lend me a hand,
Since thou hast both mine eyes.

Such disarming arguments propose to "find" God, not as a philosophical music of praise but as a music of feeling. They are a kind of ambiguous "artillery" which attack in order to provoke counterforces.

In dealing with his fellow men Herbert counsels against "empty boldnesse," though when "substantial worth" lies underneath it "guilds finely." The right temper of personal dignity in addressing the great is "respective boldnesse."¹⁷ Toward God, of course, the authentic attitude is meekness, but if man is to praise God with the materials he has in hand, then he must also make use of the kinds of reluctance he finds in himself. "The distance of the meek / Doth flatter power," he writes in "The Priesthood," boldly applying to the religious life an observation drawn from secular life. And he concludes:

¹⁷ "The Church-porch," ll. 207-10, 253. Chaplains in great houses "are not to be over-submissive, and base, but to keep up with the Lord and Lady of the house, and to preserve a boldness with them and all, even so farre as reproofe to their very face, when occasion cals, but seasonably and discreetly" (*A Priest to the Temple*, p. 226).

Complaint, Praise, and Love

Lest good come short of ill
In praising might, the poore do by submission
What pride by opposition.

Both serve, but the difference is that God's power and love freely countenance opposition. Man is granted the privilege of "respective boldnesse." Though his confidence falters often and he prefers to seek the path of meekness, the divine arrangements require him to work, most of the time, through pride and opposition, and he is not without his own endowment of power.

The formula laid down in "The Temper" (I) defines an aspect of man's power: "Thy power and love, my love and trust." The equivalents are God's love and man's trust, but also God's power and man's love. Therefore, man's love, whether in the form of praise or complaint, is privileged to address God boldly. The music of feeling, even as untransformed complaint, enjoys an access that God will not deny, though it interferes with celestial harmonies:

A throbbing conscience spurred by remorse
Hath a strange force:
It quits the earth, and mounting more and more
Dares to assault thee, and besiege thy door.
There it stands knocking, to thy musicks wrong,
And drowns the song.
Glory and honour are set by, till it
An answer get.

("The Storm")

In "Gratefulnesse" Herbert triumphantly realizes man's love as power, as argument that undoes itself and turns the effort to compel love into an expression of perfect meekness, turns the complaint of groans into a music of praise meant and felt as love. The beggar applies his art to God, petulantly asking for one more gift to top the rest. But God knows the cost of desiring men's "hearts and hands":

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

This notwithstanding, thou wentst on,
And didst allow us all our noise:
Nay, thou hast made a sigh and grone
Thy joyes.

Not that thou hast not still above
Much better tunes, then grones can make;
But that these countrey-aires thy love
Did take.

Wherefore I crie, and crie again;
And in no quiet canst thou be,
Till I a thankfull heart obtain
Of thee:

Not thankfull, when it pleaseth me;
As if thy blessings had spare dayes:
But such a heart, whose pulse may be
Thy praise.

In "Confession" Herbert acclaimed the "open breast" and disparaged as a foe to that desired simplicity the kinds of "fiction" that "a master in my trade" might build. But to judge by performance, the "open breast" does not come of itself; confession is also an art, and therefore not commanded by an autonomous will, and yet, like the pulse of praise, can be achieved only through individual effort. When the end is gained it is finally given, but given as God writes "loved" in "A true Hymne"—not as the whole poem but only as the last word. Man must exert himself, and even the efforts to escape love are answerable to the calculations of art. As for the effort to force love, "Gratefulnesse" succeeds by driving its diversities toward the one transforming image. To borrow the language of "An Offering," if one recovers the "divisions," the "set partitions" that "parcell out" the heart, then "thou mayst offer many gifts in one." Such an offering is the pulse of praise. It is unique, but so is every valid poetic offering. "The Flower" makes its human gift—a more valuable one, I believe—less brilliantly. What the poem presents to God is more mod-

Complaint, Praise, and Love

est than a thankful heart: it is the full acceptance of one's transient state, felt as a flower but known as a human being whose desires are complex and real. "Mortification," "Life," and "Vertue" present their individual imaginative mastery of time and death. I can only mention these poems now; when they, and "Love" (III) are brought forward in the next chapter, they will enlarge the modest compass of the present discussion. To conclude these brief references to other unique offerings, in "Love" (III) the conflict lies not in man's capacity to give but to receive love, and the perfect offering is man's acceptance of God's love.

"Gratefulnesse" presents one measure of what may be achieved by the effort to force love. But there are no standard successes. When we observe this we have recognized an essential truth of Herbert's character as man of God and poet. For example, "Praise" (II) provides us with a useful comparison, as Herbert proclaims his resolve to love God:

And that love may never cease,
I will move thee.

He will sing God's praise "with my utmost art," and raise Him, though not in heaven, at least in his own heart. So far I have been quoting the odd stanzas, in which the determinations are expressed, all in the future tense. The even stanzas carry their antiphonal message in the past tense: God has already "granted my request," having yielded, apparently, to something other than "my utmost art." The last stanza adopts a present tense:

Small it is, in this poore sort
To enroll thee:
Ev'n eternitie is too short
To extoll thee.

God has willingly been enrolled, and man can mark the gains and successes and still feel that his whole enterprise is disproportionate; in

the light of eternity his own future resolves will seem even smaller. And love willed is as inadequate as declared intentions that have already had their purpose fulfilled.

The art of the poet has helped to illustrate the disparity between man's love and God's, and the failure is at least as prominent and significant as the success. In not fully imagining his own love, which is obsessed with the effort it is making, Herbert has failed to touch a living sense of the reciprocity between God and man, a sense that often, even in the midst of acknowledged failures, is felt as a precious achievement. The praise he ends with is not, therefore, praise that transforms the man himself, or offers him lamenting and loving or accepting and rejoicing; nor is it an expression of hope that, however tenuous or trained small, he can identify himself with: it is a gesture offered while backing away. The poem is deliberately divided between the future and the past, beneath the exposure of eternity; the present is introduced only as the time in which to admit inadequacy and an unrelieved sense of effort. For Herbert love in its intellectual character explores its meanings through the imagination of time. But love is always *felt* as present. Its moment is marked by the absence, or the subordination, of the particular struggle experienced, and by the lack of definition, as yet, of any further struggle for which the clear moment has been a saving preparation.

In order to carry this point a step further, we must first look back briefly. Pure lament is a spontaneous cry of immediate feeling which—if I read Herbert right—must be converted into something else, praise, for instance. There is no similar need for praise to direct its feelings against themselves. Only when praise fails, and suffers an honest defeat in the record of continuous engagement, will it be converted into its opposing form, complaint. More often it will change into a related form, such as prayer.

But concepts of opposition and conversion do not adequately describe a central difference between the *movement* of praise and that of complaint. The direction of complaint is away from its basis in the immediate feelings; it seeks analytical detachment as a means of approaching God. On the other hand, the direction of praise is fixed in advance; it is toward God. The formal praise of God nevertheless

Complaint, Praise, and Love

involves a discipline of keeping proper distance. Furthermore, the language of complaint enjoys within its body of laws the advantages of special privilege—whether these are derived from a general license of speaking fictionally, or from the great religious precedents which endow man with certain rights when addressing God: complaint permits the demand that one be heard, and in the first person. The rules governing praise are more limiting and require that it present itself as an offering. (In “Gratefulnesse” Herbert brilliantly sweeps the letter of the law aside but keeps the spirit.) In the providential order the right experience of grief may lead, suddenly, to God, and the discipline of expressing grief is allowed to hope for the unexpected. But the discipline of praise is allowed to admit no such personal hope. As an offering praise begins with detachment, a movement out of the self. Yet the poet comes to one end of praise when he returns to the basis of his own immediate feelings and identifies himself with them. Though he may not seek the state directly, if he comes to feel himself spontaneously at one with his expression he will have an internal confirmation that the praise has been heard and accepted. And so both movements have unexpected suddenness¹⁸ in common, but spontaneity is the point of departure for complaint and is one sign of arrival for praise.

In “Praise” (II) Herbert seems to be obsessed with the effort he is making, and the present comes into the poem chiefly as a measure of his defeat. In “Gratefulnesse” the concept of a thankful heart, and Herbert’s imaginative control, endow the poem with great freedom and confidence, and its resolving image springs with triumphant surprise out of the intellectual inevitability—turning away from itself and its individual artistic accomplishment to become an offering, an act of dedication. The imaginative order of artistic expression and the discipline of religious feeling meet in spontaneity, which, like inspira-

¹⁸ Like the sudden motions from the world of grace which Herbert acknowledges in “The Temper” (II)—motions that cannot be learned by observation and definition, the way the parson studies virtues and vices in their “suddain passing from that which was just now lawfull, to that which is presently unlawfull, even in one continued action” (*A Priest to the Temple*, p. 264).

tion, is a messenger that freely crosses boundaries between the sacred and the secular. At the last moment all the flaunting efforts disappear, consumed in the process of the poem, and all the imaginable partitions of time are assimilated into a felt present.¹⁹ The calm love and trust which remain—although a product of effort, and whether or not the final expression is an arrival or a station of readiness—at the last seem free of effort and are felt as fully present.

For a basic description of Herbert's aim we cannot improve on his announced program: to "kindle" true and "consume" false desires, in order to "make thee way." Whatever the merit of the program itself, in his hands it does not minimize the dignity or force of human desire; it does not arrive at its goal easily, by screening or suppressing the false desires while bestowing promotions upon the true. Nor does Herbert underestimate the human difficulties in making way for God. His best poems do not evade or divert violence, they transform it. The most triumphant resolutions are effortless at the moment they are achieved; but they have been won at the cost of honorable stains and bruises, as if by a long passage from one state to another. As God crosses anguish with joy, the poet crosses his own desire to simplify

¹⁹ There are some excellent comments on Herbert as a poet of the present in Ellrodt, *Les Poètes Métaphysiques Anglais*, 1:270ff. By a different method, and with other problems in mind, I arrived at partly similar conclusions in treating the poem "Death." The next chapter will make some further observations on Herbert's poetic uses of time. Herbert says a great deal on the subject, but I have not tried to sort out his many statements. My general impression is that they are not much more interesting than what other people say; what he *does* with time, however, is of great poetic interest. If I were to choose explicit statements that seem to have particular significance and authority, they would be the lines from "Employment" (I): "The measure of our joyes is in this place, / The stuffe with thee." And I should add, from "The Discharge":

Onely the present is thy part and fee.

.

Man and the present fit . . .

.

Either grief will not come: or if it must,
Do not forecast.

And while it cometh, it is almost past.

Complaint, Praise, and Love

with a powerful sense of the otherness of God and the strangeness and complexities of man. He practices an art of detached involvement, and his deepest imagination of God must work through the images of reluctance and conflict he discovers and masters in himself. Though he succeeds, at moments, in disciplining the sense of urgency out of his desire, the desire itself is felt even in acceptance. It may be sober, chastened, purified, released from the entanglement of false images, giving due place to lament in love, effortless. But the desire is felt—a human contribution, an irreducible spontaneity, and present.²⁰

²⁰ Rosemond Tuve's study, "George Herbert and *Caritas*," makes valuable distinctions that the serious student of Herbert will need to consider. I do not find myself in basic disagreement over the relevance of the Augustinian "model," or the Dantean "solution" as described by Charles Singleton. Yet differences clearly develop from the kinds of questions we ask of the same poems. Miss Tuve, with notable success, applies the theological positions and distinctions directly; I prefer to ask the poetic "solutions" what they have to tell us. Part of her commitment requires her to minimize the traditions of human love; she therefore, with a peremptory definition, proves that Herbert wrote no poems of complaint: "The transformed will is outside the logic of complaint" (p. 311). But "Dulnesse" and other poems would suggest the relevance of "illogic," and in "Decay" Herbert shows himself in firm control of the belief that human complaint is not bound by the literal law: even God's power "could not / Encounter Moses strong complaints and mone." In the dialogue between man and God, the privileges of complaint and man's allowed "respective boldnesse" and man's love as the human equivalent of God's power—all these endow poetic actions with valuable attributes which may be acknowledged by theological reasoning but are best approached by other forms of reasoning. The final chapter will try to make these brief assertions more persuasive.

CHAPTER FOUR•

QUESTIONS OF STYLE AND FORM



HOUGH THERE ARE many reasons for responding to artistic expression, we remain convinced only by the response we can renew, and since our desire for knowledge turns naturally toward what moves us, the questions we ask serve to test the validity of our response. If after we come to see how the main effects are achieved we are still moved, then the study of details may further test our pleasure and interest. But repeated experiences with a work of art cannot be identical. In the dialogue between poem and reader, then, the renewable experience will prove the validity of response by discovering no aesthetic reasons for distrust, while finding that the experience itself is not merely repeated but is capable of being extended and intensified. At the very least, we shall attribute uniqueness and a special kind of artistic inevitability to what attracts, satisfies, and still attracts, to what seems perfectly itself, enduring and rewarding the closest inspection.

Fear of monotony is a constant principle of artistic wisdom, but it is a negative principle which, if it comes to dominate, ends in aesthetic triviality—all variations and no theme. Lesser poets often imitate their own successes, but they may also avoid them so studiously that their creative talent gives itself up to discontinuous feats of originality. Major poets do not imitate their successes, and they have more of them. But they too are careful to guard themselves against the easy temptations; they avoid the plots and external circumstances which lead toward past triumphs, yet they seem to do so unobtrusively, by a moral tact that does not crowd them into defensive positions. They

invent and vary as a matter of course, and the things that move them to expression emerge with a kind of constitutional similarity. They are never the same, but we have confidence in their intrinsic lines of relationship; diversity never seems imposed from without. When we wish to speak in a general way of what they express, we invent honorific terms like "vision," which no one expects to have simply lifted out of its formal expression and summarized in a bare statement. But in dealing with lesser poets we carelessly abstract their message, declaring that they do not have much to "say," or that most of what they "really have to say" is in such-and-such poems.

We do not find Herbert repeating the situations and plots of his many striking poems. The mystery of God's art with man is to be explored; there is no model to be copied. Though a poem of spiritual conflict that hopes to end in praise, meant and felt, can look outward to examples and rules, its proper tone is one of individual immediacy; it will no more wish to seem "imitated," however well, than recollected in tranquillity. To lament-and-love is to express a single religious attitude that cannot be mastered once and for all; the variable balance between the terms is limited only by the poet's capacity to perceive, experience, imagine, and express. What may be observed in the treatment of plots and themes has an obvious parallel in Herbert's extraordinary invention of effective stanzaic forms. These are justly admired, but they deserve serious and extended critical study, not simply relevant remarks in passing. Without undertaking the study I recommend, my guess is that these formal elements are related to larger artistic purposes in ways that resemble the movements of words: Herbert creates individual rhythms to express the particularities of thought and feeling for every moment, and these expressive forms extend their immediate sense of life to everything they touch in the developing form; they serve a valuable purpose and they are beautiful in themselves.

Herbert's capacity to invent and vary, and the strength of his commitment to do so, cannot be in doubt. Scores of poems we have not mentioned would only confirm what we already know. Their details are fresh and inviting, but I shall try to direct most of my attention toward extending and consolidating what we have already

Questions of Style and Form

learned about Herbert's sense of poetic form. In the exploration of his variety, time and time again we have met solid evidence of his ability to turn the materials of invention into a significant imaginative order. We attribute the variety, of course, to his power of invention, but this power is adjusted, with scrupulous sensitivity, to the particular circumstances of each poem. The imaginative order of many poems will strike us as free, flexible, even spontaneous, discovering order in motion—in the specific materials and propositions entertained, from within as it were—and with an individual rightness that in retrospect will seem inevitable. Yet the desire for variety, expressive grace, and freedom of movement must come to terms with the prior beliefs, needs, and purposes which move the poet, as a private human being, to expression. The common danger is that the significant form will be narrowly ordered, with the free discovery of individual rightness cramped by prior obligations, which may assert their inevitability. So on the one hand we may observe the elements of individuality and freedom, on the other hand, the commitment to significant form and specific beliefs. What the analysis can separate and gloom over, the poet must somehow combine in perfect balance.

These are problems that are real enough; many of them, and their varied solutions, have been presented in the preceding pages. But the discussion up to now has centered about other concerns. Let us now approach these problems directly and from some new perspectives. One critical opportunity is offered by the two poems Herbert revised most extensively, "The Elixir" and "Easter." From other revisions we glean valuable details, but from these poems we may gain some insight into what did or did not satisfy Herbert in terms of a whole poem.

In the manuscript of Dr. Williams' Library the first and last stanzas of "The Elixir" are preserved in an earlier version:

Lord teach me to referr
All things I doe to thee
That I not onely may not erre
But allso pleasing bee.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

But these are high perfections:
Happy are they that dare
Lett in the Light to all their actions
And show them as they are.

The inferiority of the expression is plain enough, but Herbert does more than improve expression; he has altered the emphasis—indeed, the whole concept of the poem. In the earlier version the end makes a formal gesture toward the beginning; the connection is the state of being seen by God. This link disappears in the final version; at the same time the first stanza establishes much fuller, and more active, relations between the poet and God:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in any thing,
To do it as for thee.

The revised poem shifts from a state of passive obedience bordering on self-distrust to an emphasis on symbolic action, from analysis and description of duty to an acting-out which demonstrates, and participates in, the meaning of the elixir. After the initial prayer for the right relationship the poem then brings forward, each in a stanza, two defining actions, followed by an encompassing one to show how “All may of thee partake,” and a humble, transforming one which “Makes drudgerie divine.” Finally, there is the new stanza of summarizing praise:

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for lesse be told.

To be touched and owned by God is to have the initial prayer answered—or rather to set up the conditions for its being answered by demonstrating the actions that make God “Prepossest.” The stanza of

Questions of Style and Form

the revised poem turns outward in general statement¹ and does not need to formalize its link with the beginning; yet the statement nevertheless touches on every issue and on almost every image in what has preceded. A new metaphorical relationship² is introduced by the alchemic image—"the famous stone" and all that it symbolizes of human endeavor, the whole history of the search for "perfection," exotic and humble, outward and inward, through heaven and earth. The novelty of the image and its expanding associations balance against the contraction of its application, which in its reflective movement draws together and solves the issues of the poem. The feature I have isolated seems unmistakably distinctive. Herbert preferred in his final version to balance an improved tightness of reflective relevance against a new imaginative movement that also opens outward.

Now let us turn to the song from "Easter," here quoted first from the manuscript³ and then in its revised version:

I had prepared many a flowre
To strow thy way and Victorie,
But thou wast up before myne houre
Bringinge thy sweets along with thee.

The Sunn arising in the East
Though hee bring light & th' other sents:
Can not make up so brave a feast
As thy discoverie presents.

¹ In the earlier version the shift from the first person singular to the third person plural may indicate Herbert's unrealized intentions.

² Though without knowing which came first, we may observe that this new image is related to Herbert's turning from the imagery of tree, fruit, and organic growth in the canceled fourth stanza to the different kind of growth implied by the "tincture." One remarkable retention from the earlier draft is the couplet structure, by which the thought advances two (unrhymed) lines at a time. Indeed, in the substituted last stanza he eliminated his one departure from that established movement. In *The Metaphysical Poets: A Study in Religious Experience* (New York, 1936), pp. 189-94, Helen White demonstrated by her study of this poem what has not yet been given enough attention: how much can be learned from the evidence of Herbert's revisions.

³ I have made some small changes to normalize the text.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

Yet though my flours be lost, they say
A hart can never come too late.
Teach it to sing thy praise, this day,
And then this day, my life shall date.

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, & 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.

The major structural change is to move the "I" of the poem out of the last stanza, transferring emphasis from the "I" (and its relations to the day) to the day itself and to the relations of that day to time. The "I" moves to "we" and is moved to the periphery, along with the sun and other days—all being assigned the background tasks of endeavoring and counting. A more pervasive structural change is the subtilizing of the logic in the final version. There the connections are less explicitly drawn, and the poem does not go back to pick up the small symbols of the flowers, and time ("before myne houre," never "too late . . . this day . . . date"), and the heart's gesture of individual love. The matter of timing in the first stanza and the possibility of presumption in the second come together as part of the contributing background of ineffective endeavor. The question of whether there can be "any day but this" jumps the argument into a generalization on time which depends on the imaginative demonstration of human and solar inadequacy on *this* day. The answer is that this day, being a symbol of eternity, transcends time.

Questions of Style and Form

There is here, unlike "The Elixir," no reflective movement. Instead, once the poem has found its controlling symbol, all of the imaginative details on the way, though charming and rich in their incidental significance, are, as it were, used up in advancing the structure. What both poems share is the introduction of a new comprehensive image that opens outward, and in both revisions Herbert rejected an ending that would close up the poem by turning back to the beginning.

There are, however, poems that have some of the effects of closing down and turning back—poems that, for instance, end with clarifications that stand in opposition to expressive turbulences freely entertained, bringing them to a final, diminishing order. "Let me not love thee, if I love thee not" comprehends all of the issues in "Affliction" (I). But that solution is balanced between the passions of the immediate past and the unformed issues of the indefinite future. We are made to feel both. In the last chapter we identified this balance as a religious poise inseparable from Herbert's handling of major themes; indeed, a poet determined to lament-and-love will need to seek solutions capable of expressing both attitudes. We may assume that Herbert's characteristic solutions are not independently determined by his religious beliefs, and that his attitudes toward poetic form are deeply involved in all the poetic decisions he makes. We shall try to explore the subject further, but let us now consider some poems that deliberately turn back and close in on themselves.

We expect to find such poems among the emblematic pieces, and among those which are devoted to set subjects that move by prescribed steps toward expected conclusions. Herbert wrote many poems of this kind, and some of them do illustrate his interest in closed forms, for instance, "A Wreath," which progresses by interlocking expressions:⁴

A wreathed garland of deserved praise,
Of praise deserved, unto thee I give,

⁴ For references to linked forms in Elizabethan verse see Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, p. 196.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

I give to thee, who knowest all my wayes,
My crooked winding wayes, wherein I live,
Wherein I die, not live: for life is straight,
Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,
To thee, who art more farre above deceit,
Then deceit seems above simplicitie.
Give me simplicitie, that I may live,
So live and like, that I may know, thy wayes,
Know them and practise them: then shall I give
For this poore wreath, give thee a crown of praise.

The technique is not one for which a poet is likely to find many convenient occasions, and the resources of artistic stammering are quickly used up if it becomes a style. It is worth noting, however, that Herbert succeeds in making some of the repetitions rhetorical and some syntactical. Furthermore, he manages to vary the spacing and rhythm of the repetitions; it is no small achievement that the final effect sounds more like speech than the product of a written word game.

When we look at the movement and coherence of the whole structure, we find that it does not lack individual distinction. The second quatrain, while continuing to weave the wreath, turns mostly away from personal concern; life is defined by God, but the "crooked, winding wayes" of appearances make life on earth a spiritual death of preferring illusion to reality. The concept is familiar enough, but the paradoxical statement, in context, is freshly imagined. For the poet is not trying to unwind the naturally "crooked," though he prays for the essential thread of "simplicitie." He is, one might say, taking the crooked appearances on their own terms and winding them to death. What begins in the present indicative mood touches on the eternally present ("ever tends," "who art"), then becomes "may live," "may know," and finally "shall give." The wreath to God "who knowest all my wayes" becomes, when man knows and practices God's ways, not a garland but a crown, an offering of the transformed life. The rhyme words of the last four lines are the same as those of the first four, in reversed order. But "my wayes" have become "thy wayes," the giving includes the giver, and the physical life is changed to spiritual;

Questions of Style and Form

the last word is “praise,” which sums up the qualitative changes of the repetitive form. The conditions of the poem are clearly special, and closed forms may serve different purposes at different times. But in terms of our initial questions concerning style, form, and prior beliefs, one must recognize that this poem is an emblem that does far more than assert or affirm. The form of the poem does not merely turn back on itself; it has been turning the whole time, the verbal device being conceptual, a winding with a purpose, and the purpose is to transform.

“Sinnes round” would seem to be a companion piece. The form is emblematic and circular, though the subject is different, and so are the effects. The interlocking expressions are limited to repeated lines, the last line of each stanza becoming the first of the next stanza; to complete the pattern the first line of the poem, itself a “round,” appears again as the last line: “Sorrie I am, my God, sorrie I am.” This poem does not, however, move by half-steps. In the first stanza a single image is fully developed until the thoughts, “working like a busie flame,” issue in words that “take fire from my inflamed thoughts.” In the second stanza a volcanic image combines with the actions of speech; the words are “spit” forth, and “vent the wares,” “And by their breathing ventilate the ill.” The image then concludes with the observation that words are not enough when the motives are “lewd”: hands are required “to finish the inventions.” In the third stanza we are presented with an image of successful cooperation, by means of which “my sinnes ascend three stories high, / As Babel grew, before there were dissensions.” But then we are ready to begin the round again, for “ill deeds” produce

New thoughts of sinning: wherefore, to my shame,
Sorrie I am, my God, sorrie I am.

The purpose of the poem precludes transformation, but the circular form does more than confirm the beginning; it establishes the compulsive order of sin and draws into its emblematic form, as an ambiguous adornment suitable to both beginning and end, the mere expression of regret.⁵

⁵ When the expression “I am sorry” is used as a hopeless substitute for responsible action, it makes a ready target for Stoic scorn. See Lipsius’ *Of*

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

A poem constructed on the model of "A Wreath" and "Sinnes round," but without the complications that they present, is "The Call." Each of the three stanzas begins by invoking three abstract nouns which are then briefly developed, each in a line:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
Such a Life, as killeth death.

The second stanza begins, "Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength." The same form is then exactly repeated, with only the verbs and rhyming nouns altered. If anything, the form is further tightened, since "feast" is used as a rhyme and therefore appears again in the third line as "Such a Feast." The third stanza introduces a minor variation, for two of the rhymes are verbs, but except for their verbs and nouns the middle lines are identical:

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
Such a Joy, as none can move:
Such a Love, as none can part:
Such a Heart, as joyes in love.

In each stanza the third rhyme is echoed at the beginning of the fourth line, but here the second rhyme also does extra service; and the last line, by converting one of the abstract nouns into a verb, manages to draw together the key terms of the stanza. The poem as a whole demonstrates the surprising resourcefulness of a repetitive form that can move toward a climactic repetition—the last stanza, which has the least room for significant movement and yet turns in on itself admirably. That stanza is a tour de force which makes "A Wreath" seem lax by comparison, but the example of closed form, though a striking one, does less to confirm the development of the poem than to confirm the procedural method.

Constance in the Stradling translation, edited by Rudolf Kirk (New Brunswick, N.J., 1939), p. 102.

Questions of Style and Form

At this point we may glance at "H. Baptisme" (II), which conducts a lyrical argument without repetition or circularity. The poem combines Scriptural and Neoplatonic ideas and images; all of these illustrate and confirm the conclusion that "Childhood is health." Though the imagistic illustrations are varied and flexible, they put no imaginative pressure, not even a token one, on the central attitude. Nothing is qualified or transformed; everything is confirmed, and it is left for other poems to search out what is unsaid here. And so we may regard the poem as an example of closed form, frequent enough in literature but (and this is my chief point) unusual in Herbert.

I shall conclude this phase of my exploratory survey by turning briefly to examples of closed form that, because of their similarity to "H. Baptisme" (II), can best instruct us in their differences. "The Posie" presents an ultimate expression that stands unchanged while the alternatives advance only to retreat. The end confirms the beginning, partly by quoting it:

Invention rest,
Comparisons go play, wit use thy will:
Lesse then the least
Of all Gods mercies, is my posie still.

No real argument has been advanced, for what is rejected is neither felt as loss nor valued as opposition, but is named only as the typical activities of wit, with "words and posies" competing in a kind of game. Opposed to what is rejected is an emblem, a contracted expression, the "posie" which underlies real "delight." The rejections are negligible, while the central statement is profound and comprehensive—a single answer, always available, that humility can make to the challenge of all conceivable circumstances. A strange force is developed by the poem's lack of a serious argument, and the power of the "posie" is that it governs in its calm contraction, which does not need to be expressed by typical activities, everything that wit, will, and invention strive to say.

"The Quip" makes use of a posy that answers the jeers of the "merrie world" by a quotation: "*But thou shalt answer, Lord, for*

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

me." The mocking temptations of the world are thus answered in kind by a single refrain that marks the irrelevance of their posturing. Then the final stanza draws the indirections together in a clear statement:

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 playful leisure of the mocking world receives one answer in the deliberate leisure of the first two lines, which impose their sense of the encompassing movement of God's time; the third line justifies the brevity of the poet's answers by anticipating God's, and the last line concludes by justifying the procedure of the whole poem. Delicate, ironic movements thus play, with easy, pointed relevance, underneath an unchanging attitude.

"The Rose" partly resembles "The Posie" and "The Quip" in advancing the answer of a single, unmoved position. There is no refrain, but a symbolic object, when interpreted, repeats the same answer in various ways. There is other variety as well, for an explanatory introduction, both general and personal, is conducted with an imaginative and witty leisureliness, in sharp contrast to the concentration of the following stanzas. At the same time, the expansive meanings of the symbolic rose, which Don Cameron Allen⁶ has reviewed "like a master in my trade," are all contracted to a single sense.

Finally, let us note one of Herbert's best examples of closed form, a poem that is at once unmistakably unique and typical. (The number of such poems is one mark of Herbert's greatness.) In "Aaron" the repetitions create an imaginative argument by demonstrating their power to move through the oppositions they themselves represent in order to arrive at the desired purpose. "Aaron" is one of Herbert's masterpieces: its repetitive form astonishes us, not for its virtuosity but for the latent power brought out of its deliberately limited mate-

⁶ *Image and Meaning: Metaphoric Traditions in Renaissance Poetry* (Baltimore, 1960), pp. 67-79.

Questions of Style and Form

rials. The poem repeats in unchanged order the same five rhyme words throughout five stanzas, and the third line of every stanza introduces an image of music. But these repetitions work through contrast and conflict; the echoing reverberations, marvelously assisted by simple prepositions, mark changes that become an expressive development. At the end the ideal state merely described in the first stanza has been confirmed, evolving through a process of active choice which requires mastering alternatives convincingly imagined.

The discussion thus far ought to make it clear that Herbert shows a pronounced interest in poetic form which turns back on itself, though we have constantly had to recognize other tendencies. Now let us turn in the opposite direction. In "H. Baptisme" (I) Herbert writes:

As he that sees a dark and shadie grove,
Stayes not, but looks beyond it on the skie.

That expanding movement outward is no less characteristic than the contracting movements we have observed. For instance, the stanzas of the emblem poem "Easter-wings" begin and end, perforce, with the longest lines. The opening line expresses the fullest prosperity of the human state: "Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store." That state diminishes and then advances toward the last line of the first stanza: "Then shall the fall further the flight in me." The first line of the second stanza is a little strained and is merely a long line. But the stanza ends by converting the physical and spiritual movements of contraction into their opposite: "Affliction shall advance the flight in me."

The repetitive form of "Trinitie Sunday," organized in triads, partly resembles that of "The Call," though the differences are instructive. In the first stanza, for instance, the parallels do not stand still or turn back but advance:

Lord, who hast form'd me out of mud,
And hast redeem'd me through thy bloud,
And sanctif'd me to do good.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

The rhymes and the verbs mark progressive stages; the verbs themselves, in their rhythmical emphasis, make a distinctive pattern of augmentation: "form'd," "redeem'd," "sanctif'd." The last line moves from gifts received to actions due. (The second stanza, which is inferior, also has one verb in each of the first two lines and two verbs in the last.) The third stanza turns the syntactical contraction into a final expansion. A single verb serves three concrete nouns in the first line and three abstract ones in the second. But the last line introduces a new triad, of intransitive verbs, which move outward and upward toward a final state of motionlessness:

Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me,
With faith, with hope, with charitie;
That I may runne, rise, rest with thee.

The last moment of a tightly wrought poem is decisive, and any departure from the established method will have the effect of loosening the form. So "The Odour," which develops a central image by careful half-steps and interlocking expressions reminiscent of "A Wreath" and "Sinnes round," concludes with some perhaps unintended awkwardness. The new idea that Herbert introduces at the end is nothing more than the expressed hope that the fictional experience of the poem can be applied to a literal concern of his own life. Such an ending is wholly conventional, the "practical" end of a formal meditation, and the expressed terms, "employ and busie me," are by no means irrelevant to the central action of the poem. The texture of that action has been so close and consistent, however, that the final statement seems neither to evolve from the poem nor to turn back in reflective relevance, but rather to exert leverage from an imaginative position outside the poem. In "Clasping of hands" a similar effect, but clearly intended and built in, dismisses the structure, issues, and method. The poem is an extreme example of interlocking expressions and repetitive form playing out the intricate changes of "thine" and "mine." Out of these two words, plus the rhymes "more" and "restore," Herbert constructs two strong and coherent ten-line stanzas—though the constant reverberations test one's

Questions of Style and Form

ability to grasp what is new in each minute turn of the meaning. In the last two lines the poem sums itself up and then hopes that the whole enterprise can be abandoned:

O be mine still! still make me thine!
Or rather make no Thine and Mine!

Once again we may observe a performance that is clearly not to be repeated. But my main point is that such loosening of form by rejecting the established terms of a poem is not infrequent in Herbert. For instance, the sonnet "Sinne" (I) begins: "Lord, with what care hast thou begirt us round!" The divine provisions are then reviewed for three quatrains; it is no methodical catalogue, and the writing is fresh and vigorous without any sign of slackening. But the whole program is changed in the concluding couplet:

Yet all these fences and their whole aray
One cunning bosome-sinne blows quite away.

In Chapter One a number of instances were noted in which Herbert deliberately broke form as if he were testifying that truth was more important to him than beauty. These last examples cannot be thought to have so radical an intention. What they break away from is by no means left without emphasis. In effect, they may be associated with Herbert's evident pleasure in forms that end by suddenly turning outward and opening up, as was observed of the revised "Easter" and "The Elixir."

It seems clear that Herbert is attracted by both extremes of poetic form, by poems that turn back on themselves and by those that turn away. But the examples that best illustrate one extreme are not themselves always rewarding poems, though we may learn from them how to approach poems in which neither extreme is expressed without significant qualification. It is useful to know that these opposing attitudes exist because when we recognize them they are not often easily separable from the expressive and intellectual elements which all together combine to make and resolve tensions. The fact that

Herbert is attracted by two contrary attitudes is one indication that the concept of form to be discovered in a poem has probably achieved its decisiveness by resolving, and not by merely dissolving, its relations with its conceptual opposite. Indeed, some of the more promising examples of closed form proved to be subtly compromising. We shall proceed, then, with the understanding that both open and closed forms may be expected to reveal tension and awareness of alternatives.

2

In "Grief" Herbert complains at length that his poem cannot express what he feels, and he ends with a broken exclamation, "Alas, my God!" The poem is, from the beginning, mannered and excessive. But whatever else he intends, Herbert is also rejecting its fluency. In "Jordan" (II) he is explicit in his mockery of bustling invention and proposes to "copie out" instead. Whether he speaks explicitly or not, however, one indispensable quality of his poems of spiritual conflict is the willingness to say too much, more easily than he should, and with too great resonance. Though such fluency is, of course, only one means by which he develops and clarifies conflicts, it has the great advantage of not being entirely fictional; that is, he can use one of his native gifts against himself. Facile invention is the chief quality of his Latin verse, at its best perhaps in the superficial brilliance of his epigram to Bacon,⁷ which resembles "Prayer" (I) in method, being made up of another string of images, but without the modulations, bite, and coherence of the English poem. The youthful sonnets to his mother are burdened with an excess of imagery and the rhythms are pushed too hard and too long: such insensitivities he later masters, or turns into distinctive dramatic voices. But occasionally, as in "Love" (I) and (II), he seems dominated by mere talent.

We might perhaps consider Herbert's fluency of invention as an aspect of his interest in poetic form that turns outward in expansive movement. Such a translation of terms would regard the excesses, and

⁷ "In Honorem . . . Verulamii. . . ." See Hutchinson's note (p. 597) on the reputation of the poem. Martz aptly describes this kind of writing as "the technique of packed analogy" (*The Poetry of Meditation*, p. 195).

Questions of Style and Form

their modulations, as both the external signs and the very materials of conflict. But what of the opposite extreme, represented by contraction and closed form? As an end in itself, contraction may go beyond the purposes of definition and beyond the discipline of humility, signaling a failure to feel and to express. The way of inarticulateness, which triumphs in "A true Hymne," and works well enough in a few poems, is nevertheless a restricted, highly specialized vehicle for hope or expression. The resources of overarticulateness, on the other hand, would seem to be unlimited. In Herbert's characteristic practice, even when the end of a poem is an absolute definition, it must form its contraction out of superfluities which invite, challenge attention, apply pressure, and yield but do not defect or abscond. For instance, "The Crosse" moves with full and passionate immediacy, both flowing and ebbing, before it is brought to a final diminution, an accepted point balancing all the extensive personal discoveries. "The Pearl" pivots on its refrain, in order to return with greater energy and consciousness to the same place. In "The Collar" the voice calling "Child!" (an ultimate expression, silent until the end) abruptly collects the apparently runaway freedom of self-expression. In these poems, as in many others, a restricting commitment controls, often with some daring imbalance, a personal fluency which is not limited to the "right" feelings.

What of the poem in which a driving fluency acknowledges no conflict or disparity between its expressive elements and its thematic contraction? "Church-monuments" repeats the elementary lessons of death. A rush of language one expects only in isolated moments of lyric immediacy is forced into a narrow channel of thought and sustained throughout the impersonal austerities of a lecture. But the poem is not without its tensions, for these are created in part by the friction of the language itself and by Herbert's challenging refusal to modulate his intensity.⁸ "Church-monuments" may remind us of a problem

⁸ See the instructive analysis by Summers, *George Herbert*, pp. 129–35. There seems to be an unbridgeable difference between my reading and that of Martz, who describes the movement of the poem as a "steady onward pulsation" suggesting "an equanimity, a calm, a measured poise" (*The Poetry of Meditation*, p. 142).

with which this chapter began: the conflict between prior beliefs, which have a major voice in decisions concerning significant form, and those expressive elements which answer the desire for variety and individual freedom of movement. A poem that sets out to be a mortification has already made some basic decisions. Any open conflict between the beliefs and the expressive elements might require extraordinary measures to avoid seeming prearranged. The main limitations imposed on a poem of mortification are those of theme and attitude. To a modern reader these may seem crushing enough. But I think we can distinguish between such limitations and those which are produced, say, by arbitrary choices that fix the internal order of a poem. For instance, in poems like "A Wreath," "Sinnes round," "The Call," and "Trinitie Sunday," the expressive elements are severely limited, as the obstacles created by strict form take over the oppositions normally furnished by individual thought and feeling. These poems deserve our interest, and admiration too; besides, they make it plain how much Herbert values the discipline of his craft and the necessity of obstacles and opposition in his art. But measured by the standard of his best poems the triumph over technical difficulties will seem relatively cold and thin.

In Herbert's most characteristic practice individual invention is permitted a generous latitude, and the poetic advantages are everywhere apparent. He is the master of an essential artistic illusion by which the flow of invention may seem to discover its own form, as if spontaneously. I shall now look at two examples of that illusion. They will also serve to introduce the next stage of this study by illustrating how the flow of invention, even if it is not in conflict with the commitments of theme and established attitudes, nevertheless can produce expressive elements which, expanding and contracting, create the tensions and conflict necessary to imaginative life.

Here are the first two stanzas of "Employment" (I):

If as a flowre doth spread and die,
Thou wouldst extend me to some good,
Before I were by frosts extremitie
Nipt in the bud;

Questions of Style and Form

The sweetness and the praise were thine;
But the extension and the room,
Which in thy garland I should fill, were mine
At thy great doom.

The imaginative movement of the period is characterized by advance and retreat, proposition and qualification, expansion and contraction. The flower that can bloom and die, but can “spread” to good purpose in between, can also die prematurely. The second stanza then varies the possibilities by giving two versions of spreading and only one version of death. First we see things from God’s perspective: the spreading flower produces fragrance which, according to the established metaphorical signals, constitutes an offering of praise. Then we see things from man’s perspective: the human flower, conscious of its own enlargement as it occupies a place in the divine garland, escapes the contracting movements of both common death and divine judgment. The argument is delicately tendentious, and it flows with such easy grace that the rewards of personal aspiration are made to seem a natural consequence of the imagery. The rest of the poem makes it clear that Herbert is not taken in by his argument but is advancing it as one stage in a conflict.

Now let us look at the second example, the development of a final statement, the last stanza of “Sion”:

And truly brasse and stones are heavie things,
Tombs for the dead, not temples fit for thee:
But grones are quick, and full of wings,
And all their motions upward be;
And ever as they mount, like larks they sing;
The note is sad, yet musick for a King.

Herbert has been contemplating the pomp and glory of the Old Dispensation, which has given way to a new architecture within the soul of man; its typical structure, “one good grone,” is more precious to God than “All Solomons sea of brasse and world of stone.” The old, massive style is better for tombs (and flesh); the new style,

echoing St. Paul, is a temple for the spirit. The "quick" groans express the living; they are swift also, like wings, and like both wings and temples they are symbols of the spirit and therefore aspire upward. When the groans take wings they ascend singing like larks. The dominant imaginative movement is forward and expanding, image producing image, except for that retrospective turn of "quick" before it takes wings. And then in the last line the flow of invention closes down in a beautiful diminution: "The note is sad, yet musick for a King." The style of the New Dispensation thus presented in summary form is declared satisfactory. Groans, when they are freed from their imagistic efforts of rising, remain, as they should be, sad. That final note, however appropriate for a Christian, also echoes major features in the history of the poem: the flourishing glory abandoned, debate, struggle, sin, and death. Yet the fluency of invention seems to find its own form without the opposition of an overt conflict. One could say that the images sprout, work, and wind, and that the poet weaves himself into the sense, and that the movement is energetically expansive until everything is in place. Then the movement contracts, looks backward, and strikes a final, complex balance.

We now come to the major examples of this chapter: "Mortification," "Life," "Vertue," "Love" (III), and "The Flower." Whatever their diversity of form, these poems are all anchored firmly in a set of commitments. The first three poems are mortifications—obliged, therefore, to speak (like "Church-monuments") against the attractive immediacies of life. They can hardly escape repeating tried and true arguments which lead to foregone conclusions. Yet, since these poems are masterpieces of lyric form, they should prove especially instructive to modern readers, who tend to regard such difficulties not as an imaginative challenge but as a plain disadvantage.

In "Mortification" the stanzaic pattern is tight, the progress of the argument fixed by custom, the theme familiar through and through, and the resolution predictable. No major surprises are expected. If there are to be tensions and conflict, then, they must come, as in the last stanza of "Sion," from the expressive elements themselves.⁹ Each

⁹ Insofar as such a poem seems to admit no "conflicting elements," it may appear to challenge the authority of Martz's eloquent description of the

Questions of Style and Form

of the first five stanzas represents a stage of man's life from the perspective of death, and the last stanza makes a comprehensive comment. Each stanza is a model of Renaissance rhetorical description. But the poem is, no less, a model of twentieth-century "significant form," for the stanzas also repeat, vary, and advance thematic materials, and the last stanza does not merely apply the appropriate moral comment: it responds to the aesthetic movements with an aesthetic comment. I shall emphasize the modern perspective and present the poem for its relevance to problems raised in this chapter.

From the first stanza we can learn most of the questions to ask:

How soon doth man decay!
When clothes are taken from a chest of sweets
 To swaddle infants, whose young breath
 Scarce knows the way;
 Those clouts are little winding sheets,
Which do consigne and send them unto death.

Dying begins with birth, and the brevity announced in the first line establishes the tempo; but the variations of that tempo, as we shall notice, carry deliberate thematic significance. The first familiar household objects are all metaphors of death: clouts are shrouds, the permeating sweetness comes from dead, dried flowers, all taken from a wooden box. The beginning and end are connected in the uncertain breath, and the speed of decay becomes a compulsive process: "do consigne and send." The infant must learn how to breathe, which introduces a theme varied in every stanza—the degree and kind of knowledge relevant to the stage of life being represented. "Breath" and "death" occupy the same place in each stanza, and so will register significant changes. Special effects will occur at the end of the third line, where the syntax will prevent anything more than a slight rhythmical pause—ending in "breath" but not permitting the reader to breathe until he completes the sense in the next, the shortest, line.

The last two lines of the stanza also invite regular inspection, but intellectual discipline that produces "the peculiar, tense coexistence of conflicting elements under steady control, moving toward a predetermined end" (*ibid.*, p. 135). But, as I hope to show, the description is accurate.

first let us note some structural details. The rhymes are abcabc; the lines are, in terms of prosodic "feet," 354245. The rhyming pairs are therefore always unequal in length, the pattern being 32, 54, 45. So the "a" and "b" rhymes make a diminishing pattern, the "c" rhyme an augmenting one. Besides, the "c" rhyme is reinforced by the fact that it is always the same ("breath" and "death") and by the overlapping form, which makes the last two lines of the stanza like the "c" rhymes in that a four-beat line is followed by a five. A diminishing pattern, chiefly important in the first and fourth stanzas, is the decreasing of the second, third, and fourth lines from five to four to two beats. The syntax of the stanza tends to group these lines together against the resolution of the last two lines.

We shall see that the last two lines make a similar maneuver in each stanza: they always pause and are partly retrospective, after the manner of closed form. For instance, here in the first stanza the last two lines complete the focus which translates the household objects into images of death. "Those clouts are little winding sheets": they *are*, and they "do consigne and send." The metaphorical exchange between swaddling clothes and shroud is absolute, or so the manner asserts; the identification between the two partly reflects the precariousness of "young breath" and partly the imaginative "consignment" which transfers the destination (and its appropriate garments) to the very first motion of breath toward that destination. The material of the garments and the style of wearing them are surprisingly similar, but the assertion goes much further and declares them to be the same garments. The point of these remarks is that we may expect in the last two lines of each stanza not only a turning back but an individual metaphorical style, one that interprets, as it were, the distance and particular quality of the relations between literal and imaginative meaning.

Most of these observations will furnish us with questions for the second stanza:

When boyes go first to bed,
They step into their voluntarie graves,
Sleep bindes them fast; onely their breath
Makes them not dead:

Questions of Style and Form

Successive nights, like rolling waves,
Convey them quickly, who are bound for death.

In the first stanza an imaginative transfer joins birth and death in a brevity that cannot be surpassed or, for that matter, even developed. But the theme of time can be taken up, and with it the tempo of the progress toward death. The compulsive movement, implied and then asserted at the end of the first stanza, becomes a principal theme of the second. What we have now, though, settles down to being a process rather than an imaginative simultaneity, and Herbert gives us both the sense of speed and the sense of undeviating progress. The boys are bound “fast” and conveyed quickly “bound.” A term of measure lengthens the brevity but strengthens the pattern of the progress, and instead of being wound at once in shrouds the boys are bound in a succession of nights. The knowledge displayed is hardly more conscious than that of the infants, but the motion of a step is harder to learn than how to breathe. At least the step is “voluntarie” and it does know “the way,” if not what that way means.

Since the movements of the third and fourth lines are related to each other throughout the poem, it will be easier to follow these if the stresses and significant junctures are noted. Here are the relevant lines from the first and second stanzas:

¹ ⁴ ¹ ³ ¹ ² ³ ⁴
To swaddle|infants,|whose young|breath||
³ ² ¹ ⁴
Scarce|knows the way.#

⁴ ² ¹ ⁴ ³ ¹ ² ⁴
Sleep||binds them fast;||onely|their breath#
³ ¹ ² ⁴
Makes them not|dead.||

(These details are derived, I hardly need to remind the reader, not from some apparatus of proved consistency but from one man’s analysis of his own performance. They are “interpreted” and do not exclude the possibility of other interpretations; but like all the evidence and arguments offered in this book, they aspire to a sensitive accuracy that may deserve to be persuasive. At least the details may be

examined, may form the basis of an argument that can be accepted or corrected.) What we see, besides the fine variety in rhythm and phrasing, is a significant variation in the arrangement of pitch at the end of the lines. In the first stanza the stresses and pitch rise to "breath," pause, and then pause at level pitch after "Scarce"; then a longer phrase moves, perhaps like an exhalation, toward a concluding fall in pitch, with the voice fading gradually. In the second stanza the movement rises with "Sleep," falls and rises quickly; then after "fast," though the stresses fall and rise, the pitch only falls. The last four syllables of that line are in stress exactly duplicated in the following line, but the phrasing is different and the pitch rises, which gives an unusual kind of positive effect to the "not dead." A commonplace experience of parents, vividly recreated, does more than imitate the rise and fall of breath. The lines represent the ambiguous tensions of such familiar scenes, and the resolving recognition of life strangely follows the exhalation of "breath," coinciding with the two quickly spaced rises in pitch—"Makes . . . dead." That movement of the pitch echoes, less forcefully because of the differences in stress and phrasing, the movement of the first four syllables of the preceding line: "Sleep binds them fast." And so, even if this were not the second occurrence of a thematic movement, we should be reminded that Herbert does not need the materials of a formal conflict to produce the tensions and resolutions characteristic of his art. Here, as in many examples from the third chapter, the expressive movements of words create their own forms, which, like metaphors, create meanings by establishing similarities.

Finally, when the last two lines turn back they translate the representative instance into the sleep of a lifetime. Bound in the rocking motion of their breath, much like a succession of nights or waves, the boys are conveyed, as if quickly, into a dimension of time that has been made uniform. Sleep is the familiar simulacrum of death, and waves are a traditional symbol of time, but the sense of speed is a product of the adopted perspective. As we noted of the first four lines, we have been given a process, however abbreviated, and not an imaginative simultaneity. Besides, there is one small but definite countermovement which resists being drawn into the imaginative

Questions of Style and Form

perspective: their breath, only but nevertheless, “Makes them *not* dead.” The metaphorical exchange is less complete than in the first stanza.

The next stage is youth, parts of which invite critical brevity:

When youth is frank and free,
And calls for musick, while his veins do swell,
All day exchanging mirth and breath
In companie;
That musick summons to the knell,
Which shall befriend him at the houre of death.

In the first four lines the tempo and the kinds of movement strikingly depart from those established in the preceding stanzas. Suddenly there is leisure and daytime, “All day,” in a world where “mirth and breath” break out of the fixed relations of birth and death. The contracting movements of winding and binding are replaced by those of swelling and exchanging. The infants and boys were helpless objects looked at; youth, representative but singular, acts independently in a fellowship of peers. He “knows the way”—at least the way he wants to use his breath; in his general dilation of spirits he exercises choice by calling and exchanging. Now let us glance at what the stanza does in the movement of its third and fourth lines:

³ ⁴ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ⁴
All day|exchanging|mirth and breath||
¹ ³ ¹ ²
In companie.||

We find none of the subtleties and tensions of this place in the previous stanzas. The most remarkable thing perhaps is that the syntactical completion provided by the fourth line is a rather weak phrase, coming as an addition rather than as an internal necessity. Everything else is straightforward and anticipatory—until the last two lines. These turn back to revise the music and the expression of companionship.

But the most interesting thing to observe is that the metaphorical gap has widened. When the two kinds of music and friendship are

brought together, they do not pretend to be the same. Previously the imaginative translation dominated the literal meaning, though less in the second than in the first stanza; now they are juxtaposed, and the declaration of similarity emphasizes the differences. The translation simply asserts that the lively scene imagined is an ignorant anticipation of the actual scene to come—a scene bare of details, left wholly to the reader's imagination and memory. Time, not invited to this party, reappears with that single, arbitrary gesture, "summons." Up to this point time has been expressed as the encompassing present; a day, however, has punctuated the flow and has presented itself as an event more distinguishable than "Successive nights." The future is introduced formally in "shall befriend," and time condescends to be named in a small unit, "the houre of death." These minor but distinctive differences in the treatment of time may perhaps be attributed to an occasion (the "day" of youth) that actively disregards the force of time. It is the one moment of resistance, at the very center of the five scenes, and it evokes from time an individual act different from the comprehensive consigning and conveying. What we are noticing here is not formal conflict but, again, an expressive part of the poem used thematically. As for the metaphorical style of the last two lines, the gap between the literal and imaginative meaning stretches out the process of dying still further; while the confident arbitrariness of the relations brought together, under the authority of time and in the face of resistance, further strengthens the rigor of the progress.

Now we have the scene of maturity:

When man grows staid and wise,
Getting a house and home, where he may move
Within the circle of his breath,
Schooling his eyes;
That dumbe inclosure maketh love
Unto the coffin, that attends his death.

The tempo slows down markedly, and in the first four lines the dominant movement is not winding, binding, or swelling, but calmly

Questions of Style and Form

balanced and circular. Like youth the mature man acts independently, as an individual; the presence of others is implied, but there is no exchange. He is declared wise of purpose, and the voluntary act which characterizes the advanced stage of his knowledge sets up limits; within these he consciously disciplines desires. When we turn to the movement of the third and fourth lines, we notice that we reach the end of the third line with our sense of syntactical expectation transferred from the last clause and phrase to the completion of the whole period begun by the first line. Moving "Within the circle of his breath" is a striking expression, apparently complete, and the participial addition that follows is neither anticipated nor, until it sinks in, felt as necessary. If anything, the casualness of the syntax increases the force of the relevance, and the irony is both retrospective and anticipatory. In the preceding stanza the similar looseness of "In companie" registers its ironic effect chiefly by anticipation. In this stanza the syntactical incompleteness usually poised at the end of the third line has been transferred to the second and fifth lines (the "b" rhymes), as if to withdraw emphasis from the individual act of breathing. One effect is to translate breath from a characterizing act into a generally representative state.

³ ¹ ¹ ³ ¹ ⁴ ¹ ² ¹ ⁴
Getting|a house and home,||where he may|move||
¹ ² ¹ ³ ¹ ² ¹ ⁴
Within|the circle|of his breath|
⁴ ¹ ¹ ⁴
Schooling|his eyes.||

For the first time since the opening stanza, but more fully now, a particular potentiality of these middle lines is developed. They are grouped together rhythmically and syntactically. Their diminishing pattern is carefully balanced, the number of rhythmical phrases descending from 4 to 3 to 2, a symmetry much finer than that made by the number of syllables or beats, which must alter the proportion in moving to the shortest line. To illustrate Herbert's workmanship here, in the first stanza the rhythmical phrases in these three lines move from 4 to 4 to 2, and the shortest line falls into phrases of one and three syllables ("Scarce|knows the way"); but in this stanza he

binds the unit by repeating the participial construction, and the shortest line is balanced in two equal phrases which have the same stresses in reverse. The sense of balance is confirmed by still another means, for unless I am mistaken the pitch holds level after "breath," for the first and only time in the poem.

We may agree, then, that there has been no dearth of expressive means to establish and amplify the portrait of the mature man balanced within his chosen circumference. Again we may notice that the expressive elements of the poem are capable of developing, creating tensions and conflicts not available in the plot itself and the explicit ideas it carries forward. We come now to the metaphorical style of the last two lines. The fifth line repeats the syntactical enjambment of its rhyming partner, the second line, and in doing so introduces the most surprising image since the clouts were declared to be winding sheets. The two images have much in common, but the imaginative differences are fine and instructive. In both the metaphorical exchange may seem to be absolute, as the final focus translates domestic objects and existence into an image of death which proclaims not similarity but identity. The infants provide a startling identification between birth and death, being diapered with shrouds. But the mature man's identification with death is less direct and is not supported by the same kind of literal basis. For the infants even the arbitrary transfer of beginning to end is based on the actual precariousness of "young breath," besides the points of similarity in the material of the garments and the "chest of sweets." For the man identification is mediated by a symbolic structure, the "dumbe inclosure" he has made of his own free choice, which in turn "maketh love" to the coffin always waiting though not usually recognizable in the fashion of architecture and furniture or the shapes made by breath. The literal basis is a common observation of human behavior, elevated to a principle and *interpreted*. What is arbitrary in the imaginative transfer is subdued, but not rendered invisible, by the terms of the poem, by the cumulative context, and, most impressively, by the indirectness of the voluntary act. The man does not himself make love; he courts death by proxy, as it were, when he deliberately establishes and circumscribes his limits. No less important, he does not necessarily understand the

Questions of Style and Form

significance of his act. He has grown “wise,” but we are invited to ask how far his wisdom extends. A positive action veiled at one remove is not unenigmatic, especially when it is an indirect passion issuing from direct repression; we are not encouraged to think that he has grown any wiser on the basic subject, in spite of ambiguous appearances, than were his predecessors, the infants, boys, and youth.

The final scene presents old age:

When age grows low and weak,
Marking his grave, and thawing ev'ry yeare,
Till all do melt, and drown his breath
When he would speak;
A chair or litter shows the biere,
Which shall convey him to the house of death.

Again the tempo changes; “weak” and “thawing” set the pace and suggest the movement, which is both more regular and more uncertain than any preceding lines. The old man has nothing to exchange or school; what he has to say must overcome the rheums and their silent message of dissolution. That message is a kind of involuntary knowledge, the most clear, precise, and conscious the poem has presented. Nevertheless, there are ambiguities and reservations. The message is perfectly understood by others, but we cannot draw a line between the old man’s demonstration and comprehension. For instance, does he recognize what the chair “shows”? The one firm action of the first four lines is “Marking his grave.” What this immediately means is plain enough; the trouble is that it can mean too much. The old man takes note of his grave, perhaps looks at it, certainly thinks about it, perhaps chooses the spot, or composes an epigraph, or considers the lettering. But he is also, in decline, a figure of death, characterizing the grave, and producing in others the thoughts he himself entertains. So his knowledge, though more precise than that of any previous figure, still is a compelled knowledge, not wholly in possession of itself, more significant for what it shows than for what it knows.

Now let us look at the movement of the third and fourth lines:

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

Till all²|do³ melt,¹# and drown⁴|his¹ breath⁴#
 When he would²|speak.¹||

The first of these lines is in some respects more regular than any preceding line. Its rhythmical and metrical phrasing coincide exactly.¹⁰ Here, after the first phrase, which seems to suggest the collecting of energy, the line moves with a painful show of effort, overcontrolled in stress and phrasing, letting the pitch fall at the middle and end but protracting the rhythmical flow longer than it can be held in balance. The handicap is relayed to the following line, which is a masterpiece of expressive awkwardness and weakness, faltering with uncertainty up to the pause, and then rising in stress and pitch—the effort barely but excessively accomplished, and left hanging, as if detached.

The old man and the youth, because of their degree of physical individualization, come closest to being “characters.” These two figures are related in that the youth offers most resistance to the symbolic representation, the old man least. The infants, boys, and mature man, in spite of their differences, all lend themselves to imaginative translations that discover the control which death exerts over life. The typical scene of youth will not yield itself up so. It must be brought into line by the application of an ironic reversal. One mark of the strain is the sudden appearance of the future tense; the comprehensive present is no longer adequate. At the other extreme old age is already a familiar symbol of death, and a typical scene provides little to translate or discover. When the last two lines turn back to interpret the stanza, the “chair or litter” serves to assemble the various movements toward dissolution. But the symbolic objects hardly need to point, they are so close to being what they indicate. The order of imagination is primarily physical as the chair becomes a bier. Even the syntactical relationships exhibit less energy and precision: the first four lines wander in their suspended construction,

¹⁰ So does the opening line of each stanza (except the last), but these lines are declarative and emphatic, with other internal means of achieving individuality.

Questions of Style and Form

making the matter of breath seem for the first time a little digressive. Now that we have reached the actual threshold of death, and all the difficult imaginative transfers have been made, the proximity of the literal fixes and simplifies the direction of the remaining transfers. The wavering movements of the middle lines are converted into the brisk rhythm of the last line—a shocking change that simply happens, without comment. The symbolic house of the mature man no longer *means*, it practically *is* the “house of death.” The boys whom nights “Convey . . . quickly” have arrived. The bier “Which shall convey” the moribund is a matter of fact, and the future tense now seems like an expression of pedantic exactitude. “Convey,” stripped of associations with time, refers only to place, the carrying of a body from one house to another.

All the scenes have been presented, and the task of the final stanza is only too clear. It must point up a moral or, as a rhetorician might say, express “the cause and reason of a former narration.”¹¹

Man, ere he is aware,
Hath put together a solemnitie,
And drest his herse, while he has breath
As yet to spare:
Yet Lord, instruct us so to die,
That all these dyings may be life in death.

Since the narrative progress has been completed, the time sense of the stanza will have a new expressive purpose. It no longer needs to demonstrate in a compelling present scenes that imply the future. We now have the first introduction of the past tense, “Hath put together . . . And drest.” It is remarkably quiet and unemphatic as a summary reference to the five preceding scenes. All of the imaginative excitement of time has been trained out of the last stanza. The question of knowledge finally disposes of the question of time. Brevity, announced in the first line of the poem and then progressively qualified, is looked at from an altered perspective. Man has really been demon-

¹¹ Hoskins, *Directions for Speech and Style*, p. 35.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

strating "solemnitie." He has been ritualizing death in all the stages of life, not only before he was aware but whether or not he was aware. Now, brought up to the present and looking back on the record, he is in a position to employ his wisdom—which he does by praying for divine instruction. It is a dry and summary comment on the scope and purpose of human knowledge when it comes to the question of dying.

The movement of the third and fourth lines does nothing new or strikingly individual:

1 3 2 4 2 1 1 4
And drest|his herse,||while he has breath||
1 3 1 4
As yet|to spare.||

That is, Herbert satisfies the expectation that he has created by making this part of the stanza a place for special treatment. There is no falling off in the expressive relevance of the lines, but they are merely concluding one formal movement of the poem and are not charged with any complex pattern.

The final stanza does not begin with a suspended construction. The signals of change come early, when the opening line breaks precedent by pausing after the first syllable. Now the whole stanza turns back to interpret the poem, enlarging the movement which has concluded each stanza. That movement is also repeated as the last two lines turn back to interpret both stanza and poem. All of the rituals of death have been separate "dyings," each one turned back on itself and closed down firmly. The last moment sums up all of the closed scenes. They have been demonstrations that life is directed toward death, and each tableau is an individual combination of literal and imaginative materials, the "solemnitie" being symbolic and the death literal. From the final perspective all the lines meet at the same point, presenting to the man alive the privilege of interpretation and revision, permitting him to see death as "all these dyings." But the last moment recognizes and releases the alternative to the converging lines. In effect the whole process of the poem is reversed by an imaginative movement opening outward, as the most stubbornly literal word in the poem, "death," is at last converted to symbolic "dyings" and is represented as a stage of life.

Questions of Style and Form

“Mortification” is not a poem of spiritual conflict. Theme and plot are fixed by religious and rhetorical traditions. But I believe myself to be exaggerating hardly at all in saying that every syllable is individual in its movement and in its dynamic relations, making and resolving tensions at every turn. Each stanza is both retrospective and progressive, shaping a general development within which we can identify significant internal communications created by the sense of pace, attitudes of awareness, and the styles of imagination. These expressive forms speak to themselves and to each other, and serve that final act of imagination which translates into its conceptual opposite the closed perspective of life compelled to ritualize death: the contractions of death become an argument for the open alternative, “life in death.” That alternative implies a radically different order of life, no longer dominated by death. The new freedom of choice will then be surrounded by limitations that assist human life and do not obsess it—by the need for spiritual instruction and individual discipline. The poem is itself both argument and pledge. As for the end proposed, the infinite life of eternity, that is not a proper subject for literary comment; one may at least observe, however, that the argument, and its conduct, addresses itself to the inescapable human problem of how to live without being dominated by the fear of death. Herbert’s poetic answer, if one may distinguish it from his religious answer, is to expose the secret forms of death, imagining them into familiarity, so that they can be recognized and mastered.¹² One final comment of another kind: in terms of form “Mortification” reverses the method of “The Collar,” which at the last moment contracts its expanding disorder and rediscovers concord.

¹² In the Williams manuscript the last word of the poem, “death,” is written in larger letters and with a different kind of capital “D.” That emphasis would certainly resist the easy reading, “LIFE in death,” but would as surely, I think, prevent a literal interpretation of “death.” The way to life in death is through the symbolic “dyings,” a discipline requiring continuous self-mastery and the support of spiritual instruction. I am indebted to my colleague Ben Drake for calling my attention to the problem raised by the manuscript evidence.

The methods of "Mortification" are not unusual in Herbert's poetry. We have seen many poems turn the immediacies of expressiveness into forms capable of establishing and developing thematic relations. The point is worth consolidating, however, and I shall now consider two more poems partly in these terms. "Life" and "Vertue" are simpler mortifications, informal treatments of the same theme. They get along without an established plot, a familiar cast of characters, and vivid scenes brought into brilliant focus. Besides, "Vertue" may pass for one of the purest lyrics in the language. But we shall see more than a casual resemblance to the methods of "Mortification." In the poems to be considered problems of conscious awareness and of imagination are developed in distinctive styles. Furthermore, although little *happens* in these poems at the level of explicit action and detail, they support a continuous argument by their poetic conduct of the expressive materials. Their formal ideas cannot be expected to excite much contemporary interest, though they have much to say to the neo-Freudians who are rediscovering the importance of death to life.¹³ The poems offer, as well, a liberating challenge to modern critical tastes, creating significant aesthetic form of surprising vitality out of severely limited materials and "fixed," unfashionable attitudes.

In "Life" Herbert contemplates a posy of flowers.¹⁴ As a symbol the flowers have one obvious and fixed meaning: they refer to the brevity of human life. But the symbol has another, less stable, meaning assigned to it—the quality of life. As a posy the flowers invite, like "A Wreath," an emblematic form that will express its motto while turning back on itself, as if it were some brief wisdom inscribed in a ring. The poem begins:

I made a posie, while the day ran by:
Here will I smell my remnant out, and tie
My life within this band.

¹³ For example, Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown.

¹⁴ But I cannot agree with Martz's account of the poem in terms of "the formal process of meditation" (*The Poetry of Meditation*, p. 58).

Questions of Style and Form

But Time did beckon to the flowers, and they
By noon most cunningly did steal away,
And wither'd in my hand.

“While the day ran by” sounds musical and vague: it echoes, appealingly, the arbitrary illusion of time in the never-never land of countless poems. For the flowers the day is a specific measure of time, ending at noon; for man time is both an external, indifferent measure and a major source of internal questions he must acknowledge and try to answer. The poet imaginatively identifying himself with the flowers knows that he is doing so, as part of his own posy and his double response to time. In declaring that he will “smell my remnant out,” he is perhaps proposing, with linguistic and imaginative extravagance, to join the bouquet and contribute to the general fragrance. But to “tie” is a conscious, separate act, and “remnant” is a deliberately self-conscious word. Similarly, if to “smell my remnant out” suggests passing the rest of his life savoring the flowers, he is marking a most unusual relationship but not a union. In the context the expression is, for all its colloquial casualness, an arresting one, and part of its inescapable meaning is that he will trace the symbolic scent of the flowers to his own conclusion.

There are two kinds of doubleness in the account of the flowers' dying. First, the event is reported twice: they cunningly steal away *and* they wither in his hand. The manner is like that of “while the day ran by,” a product of the naive imagination, recalling the atmosphere of ballad and oral tradition.¹⁵ But to the twentieth century, with its rediscovery of pre-logical thought, the report will not seem merely tautological. The flowers go away suddenly, invisibly, and at the same time they stay, showing the visible signs of death. The naive imagination registers two contradictory actions in two kinds of time, where the logical mind would observe one event occupying one measure of time. The second kind of doubleness is anything but naive. It reverses the symbolic orientation and transfers to the flowers the attributes of human life, thus marking two events which in other

¹⁵ There is a similar effect in Southwell's “The Burning Babe”: “With this he vanished out of sight, and swiftly shrunk away.”

Questions of Style and Form

templation of the flowers to their simplest message, the brevity of life. Time is an abstraction for the intellect to ponder, if it needed "more thinking"; "admonition" speaks to the will, and "gentle," which speaks to the affections, is the binding word. They make a strange and admirable composition—an equilibrium in motion, an abstraction permeated with feeling, a stylized gesture so much at ease with itself that it seems to derive from some superior order of inspired spontaneity.

Then the next line, "Who did so sweetly deaths sad taste convey," suddenly concentrates in a climax of sensuous excitement human attitudes which have been presented as casually simple. "Sad" admits what "admonition" barely suggests, and "convey" expresses a detached recognition that is different in quality from the imaginative record of beckoning, stealing, withering, taking. The "sad" is conveyed sweetly, however, and the intellectual recognition is translated into a single physical sense, taste, which unifies the response much as "gentle" did in the preceding line. From taste to smell is a short half-step. When the whole person declares, "Here will I smell my remnant out," he is being consciously metaphorical, producing multiplex meanings intentionally. But when he says that his mind is made "to smell my fatall day," the separateness in the metaphor has been radically diminished. The sense of smell, unlike sight and hearing, is in the traditional hierarchy a "lower" sense, but it can also reach out to gather knowledge, as touch and taste cannot. Knowledge has been reduced to a single item, and the mind has become a single basic function. The mind, which has taken its cue from hand and heart and taste, can now, "without more thinking," apprehend all that it wants to know by further narrowing its perception to the agency of a single sense.

On the one hand we have moved from the verbal and imaginative self-consciousness of "smell my remnant out" to an opposite extreme; but we seem equally remote from the simple imaginative world of stock phrases, "pre-logical" simultaneities, and causal relations founded on the principle of proximity. The mind smelling represents a different order of simplicity, not a poetic recovery of more naive modes of thought but a disciplined concentration on the essential by

stripping away everything else in a peremptory exclusion. It is a brilliant effect and cannot go unobserved. We have therefore been noting some of the strains and separate imaginative movements in the fusion that the first part of the stanza achieves. But the line we have been considering, for all the pressure it generates, does not admit division. The last line, "Yet sugring the suspicion," does acknowledge a certain separateness, for the "sugring" does not exert the assimilative effect of "so sweetly" on "deaths sad taste," nor does it bind like "gentle." And so the detachment and doubleness of the first stanza reappear, but mildly and unemphatically, almost lost in the dominating brilliance of the preceding lines.

I do not apologize for pursuing these details further than the expository point (which I have not forgotten) may seem to justify. It would be a shame, and a waste, to deal summarily with a poem which exhibits a range and quality of Herbert's imagination that we have not met before. Nor can one, aloof from details, adequately describe the structure of a poem when the main plot is crystal clear, while the actions that compose it are both genuinely and deceptively simple—when, indeed, we encounter a kind of "primitive" poetic imagination joined with a highly developed intellectual power of imagining things in their absolute simplicity.¹⁶ It is a power of the mind closely akin to Marvell's "annihilating" imagination, and it belongs to an advanced stage of thought in which the mind, conscious of itself, discovers forgotten powers.

The third stanza turns from a concentration on the human response and, like the first stanza, contemplates both the flowers and their referential meaning, but now the relations are drawn up, not as narrative but as a formal analogy:

Farewell deare flowers, sweetly your time ye spent,
Fit, while ye liv'd, for smell or ornament,

¹⁶ In "Vanitie" (I) we find, not an actual poetic demonstration, but a jocular account of reducing things to their simplicity. The subtle chemist can "strip the creature naked, till he finde / The callow principles within their nest." He is admitted to the bedroom while "ordinarie suitours" must wait outside until "They appeare trim and drest."

Questions of Style and Form

And after death for cures.
I follow straight without complaints or grief,
Since if my sent be good, I care not if
It be as short as yours.

The first three lines review the symbolic career of the flowers, and the last three lines apply that review to the poet's own life. The initial posy is that personal declaration in the future tense: "Here will I smell my remnant out, and tie / My life within this band." But the flowers die and the poet reflects on the meanings. His final statement is no longer an unqualified assertion of imaginative identification with the flowers; the terms have been refined and they do not meet exactly at every point. So the formal effects we shall want to examine are those produced by the reflective relevance which emphasizes how the process of the poem has qualified and transformed its materials.

In the first stanza the *differences* between the poet and the flowers are indicated by the very expressions that represent the closeness of the relationship—the self-conscious language on the one hand and the double effects of the imaginative naivete on the other. In the last stanza the terms of the relationship are simplified. The flowers are addressed as objects of affection, now dead and separate; the poet is alive, selecting the points of comparison. In life the flowers fulfilled their purpose of "smell or ornament." The option of the latter term is not taken up, though we are free to infer that the good human life will have its ornamental value. The point of comparison is the metaphorical fragrance, which other human minds may appreciate synesthetically. They may enjoy the example of a good brief life directed toward a good death, and so be prompted to repeat the poet's experience: to apprehend the "sad taste" of death in our lives' sweetness and to convert that apprehension into a way of living life. Another selective comparison is that the good life ending in a good death offers "cures" to the living. These are "cures" addressed entirely to the mind, whereas the dead flowers, properly regarded, affect the mind but are also the unnoticed "servants" man walks on everywhere, the herbs that "gladly cure our flesh."¹⁷

¹⁷ "Man."

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

When we look at the terms of comparison so, we cannot miss what they in truth are, gracefully precise metaphors of relationship that press their similarities with tact, for they are under the discipline of an intellectual power that observes and does not blur the differences. To say that the human death will be "without complaints or grief" is to offer a heightened, negative expression, resembling, but somewhat distantly, the easier death of flowers. At the same time the modest denial of grief does indicate that the poet has passed beyond the tensions and excitement controlled in the second stanza.

As our attention is turned back, then, we observe that the development has confirmed the end but not the beginning of the poem, and that the development is one of tracing and refining the human responses to the flowers. The sense of smell carries the major burden of the comparison, but there are two other terms to consider. In the first stanza we have "poetic" time, "while the day ran by," but also the specific time of "noon" and the personified abstraction, "Time did beckon to the flowers." In the second stanza "Times gentle admonition" strangely possesses the poet's mind. But in the last stanza time is wholly naturalized, like the "sweet and wholesome Hours" which conclude Marvell's "The Garden." The poet bids farewell in the first line, "sweetly your time ye spent," and it is this time which in the last line gently unites the sweetness of human life and the brief scent of flowers. The other term to consider is that part of the human response marked by the activity of thought. The flowers offer symbolic meanings, and the poet contemplates, reacts to, and clarifies these. In the first stanza he makes an oversimplified assertion in self-conscious language, but he also records the death of the flowers with unself-conscious naivete. In the second stanza he gains his knowledge in an authoritative way and proceeds "without more thinking." The mind now grasps its ultimate knowledge by a radically regressive integration as an organ of sense. But in the final stanza the intellect seems to be, like time, naturalized. There is no self-consciousness, no complex fusion, no naive or annihilating imagination. "I care not," Herbert says, and that is all the conscious intellectual activity he admits. Though the weight of comparison moves from its physical basis to intellectual meanings established in moral discourse, if we

Questions of Style and Form

grant him the translations which tradition had made easy and for which his own poem has thoroughly prepared the way, we must acknowledge that the final statement expresses a mind extraordinarily at peace with itself. The basis of integration is perforce limited, but in the context of alternatives presented by the poem the limitation is deliberately achieved. The mind gives up its various eccentric powers to concentrate on the one function that the development of the poem can accept as being central.

By a parallel development the imaginative identification with the flowers finally limits itself to one central point, the humble, trusting acceptance of brevity—if only the human conditions of sweetness can be met. The ultimate equilibrium suggests that a precondition of moral sweetness requires coming to terms with time, toward which moment the whole experience of the poem leads. The restless intellectual activity, therefore, has been directed toward the ordering of itself by ordering its imaginative relations with time. Only the last stanza takes a position firmly in the present. There the poet can unite the past and future history of the flowers and, at ease with brevity, speak of his own future as present. The poem turns back on itself but not to close up the action, for brevity can be accepted only in a genuine present, where the final poise rests.

The moment toward which poems of complaint or praise or love aspire is one which seems to be free of effort, one which has assimilated the partitions of time into a felt present. The mind seeking integrity strives to create order out of that rich human chaos, the imagination of time. After its violent expansions and contractions, its movements up and down, “The Temper” (I) comes to rest in a poise of place, an “everywhere” that is always present. A movement of significant retreat in “The Crosse” acts with resigned helplessness toward the present, as if it were past; the final recovery moves toward a full acceptance of the present. In poems that contemplate a theme without formal conflict—such as “Death,” “Mortification,” “Life”—time is a subject with which the mind and heart have an ancient and continuing quarrel. Out of that quarrel, which does not need to be presented directly or even acknowledged, Herbert discov-

Questions of Style and Form

celebrates what Cézanne somewhere calls the permanent shape by which the transitory is seen in a still moment that gives the illusion of permanence. The marriage of earth and sky is a splendid, momentary elevating of the illusion, a marriage consummated in death every day, and lamented by the more common illusion attributed to the dew, which does not suggest permanence. The day, whether we view it as an arrested moment or as a completed cycle, is not, like the rose, fully involved in the precariousness of time. The rose is a poignant image of man's time, with no fixed term of duration. We contemplate the day, but we identify ourselves with the flower and with the "rash gazer" who responds to its coded message. His gesture constitutes all the recognition of beauty and lament accorded the symbolic rose, for what the root means presents itself as a simultaneous fact, with no addition, no lyrical flourish. We are not invited to linger regretfully over the loss; rather, the tempo of inevitability is accelerated, and we see one step in the cyclical process reduced when the refrain alters "For" to "And."

The third stanza brings together the images of life which in their separate presentation have led to death:

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.

The image of spring includes, in a summary season of time, many days and many flowers, proving in the imagistic argument the rightness of its previous conclusions. As in "Mortification," the forward movement of the general design is punctuated by periodic contractions as each stanza turns back to bring its particular statement into focus. Here, for example, spring is an image of life, an expansive image of large import to man's feelings; but it ends by contracting, and is a mere unit of time, compressing all its comprehensive sweetness into one box—another "chest of sweets." What happens to the leading image of spring is reinforced by other effects. We know from "Mortification," "Life," and other poems that flowers, which pre-

serve the essence of their sweetness, are a familiar symbol of death, with special reference to the good death. But the metaphor is left "compacted": the fragrance may signal its message to the mind preparing to read the last stanza, yet the fragrance does not emerge from its abstract presentation to offer an intermediate appeal through the senses.¹⁸ The metaphor of music then follows, but the analogy is limited to its cognitive aspect and does not include the affective. Indeed, after the first line there is not much cantabile, and the refrain assumes a new character; it is a declaration, sustained and challenging, less a resolution of its own stanza than a bridge to the next. There is no "rash gazer" sensuously involved, but man is now more fully involved. The enlarging repetitions have at last framed his place at the center, no longer presented with natural objects, but with an art of human creation, a product of the mind, which does not simply offer itself for interpretation but demonstrates: "My musick shows."

An alternative is now expected, and that is the task of the last stanza:

Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
 Like season'd timber, never gives;
 But though the whole world turn to coal,
 Then chiefly lives.

The seasoned timber is also a natural object, but one that achieves its purpose after death—not as a tree but as wood. If it suggests the box which contains the season, that suggestion is little more than tangential. The seasoned timber speaks, like the fragrance of dead flowers and like music, to the moral intelligence. The overt point of comparison is that the unyielding soul practices philosophical rehearsals for death, and is, in the traditional metaphor, "dead" to the distracting

¹⁸ To this extent the imaginative procedure differs from what we observed in "Life" and also differs from "The Odour," where saying the words "My Master" produces "An orientall fragrancie" with which "I do perfume my minde . . . ev'n thrust into them both . . . This broth of smells, that feeds and fats my minde."

Questions of Style and Form

influences of the world. By virtue of its awareness, the soul is already seasoned before the death of the body.

Let us look at the comparison more narrowly. The first three stanzas invoke symbols and carefully control the specialized meanings they are allowed to present. The seasoned timber is neither a symbol nor invoked; it is introduced as a deliberate comparison, a simile. Like the spring it draws together previous representations of death, and like the music it "shows." The one expressed resemblance to the soul is that it "never gives," which implies its difference from transitory objects. A further implication lies in the reversal of the imagistic pattern that leads from life to death. Only the timber and the soul move from purposive death to life. But the timber and the soul are not identical. What the timber means must be created and controlled entirely by the context; it does not enter with symbolic credentials but is formally tagged as an illustrative comparison, which means that it is both like and unlike the soul—a product of human creation, as music is, and thus consciously addressing the mind.¹⁹ The life of

¹⁹ I cannot accept Ellrodt's interpretation (*Les Poètes Métaphysiques Anglais*, 1:282–84) that the seasoned timber is a symbol of the Cross and therefore of resurrection and immortality. Herbert's symbolic language, though subtle, glancing, and profound, hardly ever behaves like a private language. The syntax, like the argument, may demand of the reader intense imaginative cooperation, but he is seldom forced to depend on connections that seem arbitrary even when he knows what the symbols mean. (A rare exception is the third stanza of "Frailtie," which reads like a rough draft that never had his final revision. There he undoes the careful preparations of the first two stanzas, both overcrowds and loosens the syntax, and puts too much sudden weight on the symbol of Babel, which, however public, he is using in ways that are partly personal.) Nothing, of course, prevents us from remembering the Cross at this point, and we may also recall that Herbert can think of the Cross as a symbol for music. But we had better not press our reasoning too far. Herbert is not likely to think that such music demonstrates a "dying fall," and to make the Cross a symbol of moral unyieldingness would be to show a strange dislocation of religious and philosophical values. Furthermore, if the Cross enters the poem at this particular place, the "like" must signal a misleading comparison. For we should need to understand that the comparison was actually a complete identification—with the third person singular referring not to the soul but to the soul-like-the-Cross. We had better not think of the Resurrection of the Cross on the last day.

timber and the life of the soul are similar to a point and then different. We are not to think of the green tree, or of the virtues required in dealing with our fellow man, but only of the relations between "metaphorical" death and "real" life. The "not giving" is a limited comparison, like the "not burning." Even if we think that seasoned timber burns well and has a kind of second life in its coals, the parallel will not last. The end of the soul is not metaphor but myth, believed implicitly without regard for the laws of matter. But Herbert seldom disregards the laws of tact. Conscious discrimination, which characterizes the discipline of the soul and the discipline of the poem, is firmly recorded at the last moment; at the day of doom the soul is different from everything else but not from itself and its previous history: there is no break but a progression when it then "chiefly lives." (I realize that some of these observations are over-compressed; I shall return to "Vertue," and especially to the last stanza, in the following section.)

4

Herbert's country parson "values Catechizing highly," for the art of questioning both delights and teaches. As for teaching, Holy Scripture, "when it condescends to the naming" of common things by way of illustration, demonstrates how familiar things may "serve for lights even of Heavenly Truths." As for natural truths, "by questions well ordered" Socrates "found Philosophy in silly Trades-men." The "plain and easie framing" of questions, the progress toward understanding which moves by steps from the known to the unknown, the delight in an argument that teaches by proposing the right questions in the right order—these are familiar properties of plain style, and they entered Christian tradition without having to sever all of their connections with earlier history. Herbert observes that "when one is asked a question, he must discover what he is"; therefore, "Sermons come short of questions" in teaching. But questions, as the orator knows, "cannot inflame or ravish, that must be done by a set, and laboured, and continued speech."²⁰

²⁰ *A Priest to the Temple*, pp. 255-57.

Questions of Style and Form

Poetry also delights and teaches, and its language illustrates one thing by another. Herbert's remarks are not, of course, directed toward poetry, but it is worth trying to translate them. Though the questions in poems of spiritual conflict are often implied rather than stated, the characteristic development is dialectic: propositions are advanced, tested, and then rejected or refined. In speaking of discursive thought Herbert stresses the importance of conceptual structure: "First, an aim and mark of the whole discourse, whither to drive the Answerer, which the Questionist must have in his mind before any question be propounded, upon which and to which the questions are to be chained." We have not encountered a poem that lacks a conceptual design; therefore, we cannot doubt the relevance of this description to poetic discourse, and especially to the poems that dramatize conflict. But we cannot fail to observe that these poems differ in one essential way from the prose discourse which Herbert has in mind: they are not directed to the spiritual novice; they aim at personal discovery and assume in advance a high degree of self-knowledge. So these poems will not be limited to that kind of philosophical dialogue which requires a "plain and easie framing" of questions.

It will be clear from these qualifications that the parallel with "catechizing" must be a modified one. Furthermore, we have been looking at poems that do not develop by open conflict or dialogue, and it is not easy to believe that the complex tensions arising from the play of imagery and the expressive movements of the verse belong in any simple way to an order of preconception. Still, Herbert's definition is illuminating when applied to many poems that are meditative and analytical in development. For instance, the last two words of "Prayer" (I), "something understood," are the "aim and mark of the whole discourse." The first two quatrains differ radically from each other, and the sestet is composed in a wholly new metaphorical style. Yet a central conception imposes order on the extreme variety, even on those vehement images that in their immediate context threaten imaginative discontinuity. Some unusual patterns of phrasing seem to strain the metrical structure, but by their cunning repetition they in effect provide an unobtrusive means of ordering the apparent freedom and turbulence. Note, for example, "returning," "th'

Almíghtie," "transpósing," "which áll things," "of spíces," and also, "the Chúrches bânquet," "the Chrístian plúmmet," "reversed thún-der," "Exáalted Mánna," "in órdinárie."²¹ Obviously, metaphors and phrasing are not subject to systematic determination in advance, and even less so are the smaller forms made by their collision or conjunction; yet in this poem the local immediacies, however dazzling, do respond to the "foreconceit." Much of the difficulty of the poem lies in what is held back until the last words are in place.

Another poem, "Miserie," is based upon a concealed dialogue between man's folly and God's love. The "Questionist" would seem to have two "aims" which, significantly, do *not* meet. Man's folly moves from the bravado of knowledge to grudging will to inadequate performance. In the pivotal stanza of the poem, the seventh, the greatest gap is marked when man tries to revere his God, for God also partakes in the folly of relationship and is bound to it as much as man.²² Then the poem goes all the way back to the beginning, to start a new inventory which includes a contemplation of the original paradise. The general aim discovers no hopeful solution and is a full review of human failure. But Herbert has another, more personal, aim, which is marked by the management of personal pronouns. These move from "he" to "they" to "we," back to "he" to "thou" to "he," and then the final admission: "My God, I mean my self."

"Redemption" is "a set, and laboured, and continued speech." Its questions are translated into a quest, and the design surprises the listener into identifying himself with the slow-witted protagonist, to "discover what he is." The allegorical narrative proceeds with fine adherence to the perspective of its fictional character, the "tenant" trying to get out from under the old law. All of the circumstances are

²¹ I borrow these observations from D. W. Cummings, *Towards a Theory of Prosodic Analysis for English Metrical Verse* (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1965), p. 49.

²² This is an aspect of divine love that escapes Miss Tuve's attention and is not quite covered by references to the security Herbert feels in God's love. The thought that God "cannot" let man go is one that can produce its own fertile tensions, as in mystics like Eckhart.

Questions of Style and Form

filtered through his personally awkward, stubborn vision: "In heaven at his manour I him sought." But the ways of the high and mighty are not easy to understand:

They told me there, that he had lately gone
About some land, which he had dearly bought
Long since on earth, to take possession.

The leisure of the fiction (extraordinary in a sonnet) begins to grow crowded as the humble petitioner searches in likely places: "In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts." Then there is an astonishing scene of recognition, and a peremptory brevity:

At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
Of theeves and murderers: there I him espied,
Who straight, *Your suit is granted*, said, & died.

When the discourse reaches its "aim," the discovery, its attractive, leisurely fiction suddenly disappears, used up all at once.²³

In poem after poem Herbert invents a new way to "drive" the answers which are the "aim and mark of the whole discourse." Every poem studied closely here demonstrates his power to invent original designs. We may note correspondences but not repetitions. In poetry the art of the "Questionist" can find "Philosophy in silly Tradesmen," or "tenants," or in the talented servant of God striving to clarify his knowledge. At the same time poetry can "inflare or ravish" by its "continued speech." For poetry is not "chained" to literal questions. Every expressive element and every form can discover imaginative questions that create, as it were, a dialogue between the structure and the texture of a poem—questions that expect to be answered in kind, that is, precisely, in the language of movement and

²³ For useful studies of Herbert as an allegorist, see Summers, *George Herbert*, pp. 171–84; Robert L. Montgomery, Jr., "The Province of Allegory in George Herbert's Verse," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 1 (1960):457–72; R. E. Hughes, "George Herbert's Rhetorical World," *Criticism*, 3 (1961):86–94.

feeling, which can swiftly ask and answer questions that the more rigorous language of critical thought must arrest if it is to study the transactions.

Before proceeding to my final examples, "Love" (III) and "The Flower," let me turn back to illustrate the relevance of the present perspective to some earlier observations. One of the assumptions of the last chapter was that poetic answers prove their validity and life only when they renew the questions they are called upon to settle. I argued there that for Herbert God's love has the effect of a continuous question that evokes a great variety of human replies: complaint, praise, prayer, efforts to escape or force love, and campaigns against God that turn many replies into self-questioning. The spiritual conflicts reveal strange metamorphoses in which extremes like pride and humility, or answers and questions, grow into each other. A powerful statement of the remoteness of God, for example, may have the apparent shape and finality of a statement, but it becomes a question if it registers an anguished sense of personal loss that cannot rest without an answer.

Nor is acknowledged conflict necessary for such metamorphoses. "Mortification" and "Vertue" present the contractions of death as thematic questions leading to a similar answer in each stanza. The "aim" of both poems is to "drive" the answer to a point where it must be *felt* as a question. Man, who is obliged to live, and obliged to order his life, is driven to produce a two-fold reply. His ultimate answer invokes faith and the world of grace; the examples of death-in-life are merely the symbolic dyings that show the way to life-in-death. An intermediate answer invokes God's help and instruction, and what the poet offers in his own voice will make audible the presence of human thought and the uncertainties of human effort, for materials transformed into a resolution may still keep some edge of their previous resistance. "Let me not love thee, if I love thee not" is one such resolution. Not seldom one might say of the human answer, "The note is sad, yet musick for a King." In the conclusion of "Life" one may hear an intermediate answer composed of the tentative, the metaphorical, and the assured:

Questions of Style and Form

Since if my sent be good, I care not if
It be as short as yours.

In “Vertue” a day, a rose, and a spring—whose illusionary aspects are responded to, interpreted, and given a summary answer—are all opposed by the simple example of a virtuous soul:

Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
Like season’d timber, never gives.

Illusionary aspects are not, however, entirely dropped. When the soul is declared to be like seasoned timber, the purposive, controlled, and limited illusion of figurative language replaces those natural images of time which are characterized by their appealing appearances and are destroyed by its passage. The soul, like seasoned timber, is figuratively “dead” to the distractions of living and is thus unyielding. The “never” is a “never” limited to the figurative case and exactly applicable to the moral, not the temporal, order. The virtuous soul and seasoned timber are characterized by never giving so long as they are what, within the controlled illusion of figurative speech, may be truly named a virtuous soul and seasoned timber. Outside the figurative case timber may rot; after the death of the body the unyieldingness of the soul will no longer be a pertinent characteristic. The “never” of the limited case, then, does not directly and fully explain the examples of mutable appearance leading to real death. But I have not been pursuing this kind of analysis in order to demonstrate Herbert’s mastery of illogic, and to see what he is really saying we must look at the whole metamorphic structure of question-and-answer.

In each of the first three stanzas the opening two lines propose a lyrical subject. Each third line provides an individual answer: to the day the dew, to the rose the root, and to the spring what music shows. The fourth line drives home the individual answer by repeating, intensifying, and enlarging a comprehensive answer: “For thou. . . . And thou. . . . And all must die.” The fourth stanza begins with a different kind of proposition, one that seems to open out as a positive

answer which makes the preceding answers feel like questions. An argument that keeps responding "death" to the displays of life comes finally to the place where the man convinced must cry out: "Then what shall we do?" But these first two lines on the virtuous soul, though a retrospective answer, also introduce their own proposition that must in turn be answered. As we have already observed, these lines, though they break from the established pattern and assume the external form of a complete pronouncement, nevertheless present their own "questionable shape"—that of figurative language (a limited, incomplete resemblance) and that of a "never" which translates the question of universal mutability into the answer of a particular moral case. Such a turn of argument reverses the expected logical procedure. The authority for such a reversal derives from both religious and philosophical traditions of reasoning and proceeds from the accepted premise that the moral order is superior to the temporal. Accordingly, the answer to time and change is to assert a prior obligation to a superior order and to remain fast, as it were, in a limited but essential way. But the final justification of this liberty with logic must anticipate the end of the temporal order and the ultimate solitary rule of the eternal order to which the soul is dedicated. Only then will the "never" of the sweet and virtuous soul become an unlimited "ever"; only then will what is questionable in the pronouncement be entirely answered.

In the preceding stanzas the third line has had the task of presenting an individual answer and the fourth line has then driven home the general answer. But now the third line answers the day, the rose, and the spring by carrying their images of death to the end of time: "But though the whole world turn to coal." As an answer it pre-empts the position that has belonged to the fourth line and enlarges a thrice-repeated answer to a universal conclusion. What the third line does *not* do is fulfill the expectation that it will provide an individual answer to the proposition of the preceding two lines. Equally unprecedented is the fact that the third line is an incomplete statement in the form of a conditional proposition that will itself need to be both completed and answered by the fourth line. In prospect, then, the third line is a kind of question; in retrospect it is unmistakably an

Questions of Style and Form

answer, one that, however syntactically incomplete, calls up the full imagery of the familiar cyclical myth. Indeed, the fire of the Last Day has only to be mentioned to complete the “imagistic sentence” begun by the invocation of the “Sweet day.” As an answer the reference to the Last Day is terribly final yet strangely tentative, expressed so as to record the presence of careful, discriminating thought: “*But though the whole world turn.*” (To point up some of Herbert’s discrimination one may think of the coarser line that Walton reported: “But when the whole world turns to coal.”) As an answer, universal death raises one of the greatest and most persistent questions for faith.

With the last line, “Then chiefly lives,” the metamorphic structure produces its most authoritative answer. The moral “never” is translated into an eternal “ever,” and all the smaller questions are left with their smaller answers, which were sufficiently comprehensive. But the last line, though not metamorphic in terms of question-and-answer, does change the established progression from particular to general and directs its universal answer to the individual soul. (May one infer, encouraged by the lack of waste motion in the poem and by the break with logical procedure noted earlier in the stanza, that the altered order signifies that in eternity there is no distinction between the particular and the universal?) The absolute finality of the answer is remarkable for its preservation of a modest human idiom. “Then” signals the time which transcends time but is also the clear indication of a rational process, the pivot of consequence by which the virtuous soul becomes part of the eternal order. The “chiefly” both affirms and denies—denies any break in the continuity of never-giving and ever-being. What was really alive in what only looked like death at last enjoys a distinction, not in kind but in degree; it now primarily, above all, enters into the order of complete life, with no constraining appearances.²⁴

²⁴ In view of the vast literature of speculation on the subject, it would be more prudent, far, to attribute nothing bold to a mere poem. But I should like to offer some brief comments even though I can claim no professional knowledge in these deep matters. Formal statements on the Resurrection draw heavily on the eloquence of rhetorical contrast, imagining the final blessed state in terms of its radical difference from everything we plainly see around us

“Love” (III) and “The Flower” “propound” their questions more overtly. What these poems ask and answer is expressed in the language of movement and feeling but is based on the art which finds

and its less striking difference from those valuable things we darkly glimpse. Augustine, distinguishing between the incompleteness of spiritual vision and the finality of intellectual vision, describes the latter as a state in which “the manifest truth is perceived without any material image as intermediary. No shadows of opinion obscure. There is no labor of the soul. Temperance does not need to bridle desire, and there is no work for fortitude, justice, and prudence to do. Virtue consists in love and felicity in possession. There the blessed drink at the very fountain, with no more of restraining pleasure, enduring adversity, relieving the poor, and resisting the false. God will there be seen in all clarity, not as in the limited visions of Moses, Isaiah, or John” (I have been translating, freely, with some omissions, from *De genesi ad litteram* 12. 26. 54; *PL*, XXXIV, 476).

Now let me offer an example of Donne's pulpit eloquence (*The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. E. M. Simpson and G. R. Potter [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1953-62], 9:127-29). Summarizing received opinion on the state of blessedness, Donne begins with a certain pedantic diffidence which is due to the fact that the wrong church has already canvassed these grounds. In summary, blessedness consists in a vision of God which includes union, love, knowledge, and joy.

I shall have an un-interrupted, an un-intermitted, an un-discontinued sight of God; I shall looke, and never looke off; not looke, and looke againe, as here, but looke, and looke still, for that is *Continuitas intuendi*. There my soule shall have *Inconcussam quietem*; we need owe *Plato* nothing; but we may thank *Plato* for this expression, if he meant so much by this *Inconcussa quies*, That in heaven my soule shall sleep, not onely without trouble, and startling, but without rocking, without any other help, then that peace, which is in it selfe; My soule shall be thoroughly awake, and thoroughly asleep too; still busie, active, diligent, and yet still at rest.

The contrast between imperfect human sleep and heavenly repose, if not an outright indecorum, is at the least a disproportionate comparison which makes human interest linger too much on the wrong subject. Far more successful is that contrast between the broken looking, “as here,” and the *Continuitas intuendi*. But Donne's most powerful expression is that which describes the perfected soul as both active and at rest—reconciling two related, but specialized and conflicting, ideals of human existence, those of action and contemplation. Here Donne is, like Herbert, speaking of the perfection of the soul as a continuity, a difference in degree, not kind, and the simple images of waking and sleeping serve both worlds. Donne, like Augustine himself in the passage

Questions of Style and Form

“Philosophy in silly Trades-men.” The language of criticism is discursive and must always keep trundling its apparatus into position. But since in these poems more imaginative questions are out in the open, and since, I trust, the relevance of the critical questions no longer needs to be argued, I may spare many of the efforts that “Vertue” called forth.

“Love” (III) is a dialogue in which symbolic questions, answers, gestures, and silences are exchanged.²⁵

quoted above, speaks through the illustrative images of “spiritual vision,” which connects the visible and the invisible orders. But Herbert does without an image. His “lives” draws its meaning from “intellectual vision” (and from the philosophical credit of human arguments on being which do not need to be mentioned). There is no image, nothing illustrative or tentative, in the verbal expression. Yet we approach that ultimate vision through transitions that are as characteristic of human idiom as any images: “Then chiefly lives.”

The subject is one that, between the extremes of silence and transport, is hard to modulate with dignity. Most of the expressive opportunities lie in contrasting the two states; the resources of human existence provide more than enough material, and it comes ready charged with disappointment and hope. Most of the easier modulations are to be discovered in treating the unperfected soul, for even though the changes are to be absolute the things to be changed are intimately known in their human context of relationship and degree. Where the modulations are most difficult is in the task of expressing transitions between the two states, their difference in degree, and the unbroken similarity in their difference. The sweetness in Herbert’s modesty of expression is one kind of triumph, and I have quoted another in the passage from Donne. But Donne’s grudging acknowledgment to Plato illustrates how hard it is to express a genuine good that is to be transcended, or a likeness that is to graduate to essence—and to do so without imagining the final act as a kick of liberating ascension. But there are worse things, as when the likenesses have to be praised. Then even a great master of expression like Donne may sound like any other ecclesiastical hack trying to blow life into the authorized images of similarity and degree: “How glorious is God, as he looks out amongst us through *the King*? How glorious in that Image of his? How glorious is God, as he calls up our eyes to him, in the beauty, and splendor, and service of the Church? How glorious in that spouse of his?” (p. 129).

²⁵ Hutchinson points to the illuminating parallel of a passage in Southwell, which Martz amplifies, pointing also to the connection with secular love poetry and with the *Imitation of Christ* (pp. 196–97, 319). In the wit of its repartees and in some of its method the poem also recalls Herbert’s own “Dialogue,” “Time,” and “Hope.” The last of these conducts most of its witty argument by the silent exchange of symbolic objects.

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

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.

The poem begins with an entrance already accomplished. The how and why are not recorded, but only the first motion of resistance; and that motion is attributed to the consciousness of "dust and sinne," which are literal, but are also conceptual symbols the private and public meanings of which are stable but not fixed. Love, the host, is busy and follows up his welcome with the movements and language of polite service. His gestures are definite and characterizing, but their effect is complicated by his question. On the one hand, what he asks translates itself into a statement, signifying an immediate readiness to serve. (What service really means, in the traditions of social and religious rituals, in the exchanges symbolized by the common acts of humble and exalted figures—this is a concealed question that we may see coming, but that never fully emerges.) The question itself not only states and assures but points toward an ultimate awareness, widely accepted in philosophical and religious thought, that all creatures are by definition incomplete and that what they "lack" is the source of their being. If they know themselves they will recognize this longing as the true source of all their desires. But the "Answerer" does not respond to this aspect of the question.

The stanza ends and there is a formal silence. The immediate reply expresses only the consciousness of dust and sin:

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?

Love is a humble host-servant until resisted. When he replies, "You shall be he," the statement is astounding. What in ordinary speech

Questions of Style and Form

would be an assertion of willful fancy, a common imaginative *fiat*, is here a statement of fact proved true by human experience. The transforming power of love can do this, can make worthy the unworthy. Nor is the power limited to the miracles of divine love; the records of human love also apply. The polite human rhetoric has offered the repartee of an easy disclaimer, a verbal clench. But the divine repartee goes straight to the mark, cutting through the human evasion begun in the very first line.

Consciousness of guilt, however, cannot be disarmed with a single thrust. It defends itself with a stubbornness worthy of the protagonist of "Redemption." Sin and dust fall back behind the shield of unnaturalness and ingratitude, and advance with another gesture of evasion, a protestation of love but humble incapacity: "I cannot look on thee." The answer begins with a touch and a smile, the most elementary forms of assurance, and then offers the ultimate reason for assurance: "Who made the eyes but I?" The wit is benevolent, but again it cuts through the evasion.²⁶ Human love, in the beholder's eye, may transform, but this is Love, the Creator, referring to the full implications of the primal act.²⁷

The stanza ends with an ultimate question that goes beyond the fiction of present politeness, but the narrator snatches at that part of the question that seems best to defend his guilt:

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.

This is the climactic disclaimer, and it partially breaks away from the terms in which the soul has been courted, those of the host-guest relationship. As the invitation of Love goes beyond present gifts and

²⁶ Love's repartees are always accurate and concise, going to the heart of the matter without verbal cleverness. Something of the same ideal governs many of the speeches of Milton's hero in *Paradise Regained* and of Marvell's Resolved Soul in his "Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure."

²⁷ It is possible that Love's answer releases a delayed meaning in the narrator's last reply. To look away because unworthy is a familiar action in the annals of human love; on the other hand, not to be able to look at God is, according to report, a standard condition even in heaven, at least until after Judgment Day.

benefits to the original gift, the narrator willingly shifts his defense to these larger terms and strives for disengagement on the basis of having violated the primal relationship. The mind's eye can acknowledge ingratitude and the spoiling of gifts, but it can also intimate the unexpressed, for the intensity with which the larger terms are grasped is a silent indication of the soul's bewilderment. Reminded of the history of Love's power, the soul proposes that it be turned away. But in this dialogue, which takes the form of a contest in courtesy and humility, the soul cannot see where humility leads. The reminder of creation implies redemption, and Love's answer finally reveals the "aim" of the discourse: "And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?" The soul's only remaining answer is the retreating quibble of the humble guest who asks to share the privileged humility of the host: "My deare, then I will serve." But Love is the perfect Host and becomes the body of Christ in the Eucharist:

You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

In other poems the human desire for absolute independence, in various disguises, obstructs the full giving of love. That range of human reluctance is one of Herbert's great themes, and he explores it with powerful and subtle originality. In this poem he presents, with disarming simplicity, the other side of the problem: the human reluctance to accept love as a gift entire. In other poems we have had to observe the imaginative scrupulousness with which Herbert maintains the differences within the similarities that images propose. Time and again, this disciplined control of differences-and-similarities—this imaginative capacity to increase or diminish the differences or to transform them—creates the finer tensions and their resolution, the forms of movement and feeling which are the poetic figures for questions and answers.²⁸ In "Vertue" we noticed that the tact of the poet does

²⁸ It will be apparent that I cannot accept M. E. Rickey's emphasis on the simple "precision and orderliness" and "tightness" of Herbert's metaphors. Such an account tends to regard "precision" as an accomplishment which needs only to be recognized and admired, not questioned. Nor do I think it helpful to present Herbert's growth as a "gradual retreat from the simile," by which

Questions of Style and Form

not encourage us to identify the soul with the seasoned timber; the soul, even as it moves beyond imaginative figure to become part of an authoritative myth, does not quite give up its fine distinctness. In "Love" (III) all the elements of the fiction are more than transformed. The end of the dialogue is reached when the meaning of the final question is felt. But Love's final word and man's final act do more than complete a chain of reasoning. The particular fictive scene and debate are revealed as a ritual that re-enacts a religious mystery of timeless recurrence. When the union is consummated, so is the poem—not finished, not even transformed, but in effect consumed. Our otherwise useful terms—equilibrium, closed form—seem utterly inadequate; one might as well say that the poem disappears. It is no wonder that Herbert, who was going to write this poem, expressed occasional impatience with the limits of art and the division between truth and beauty. This poem is a perfect example of what Eliot called "poetry standing naked in its bare bones." But it is more than that, and more than "poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem *points at*, and not on the poetry." It is one poem that simply does, without apparent effort (no small difference), what Eliot adumbrates: "this seems to me the thing to try for. To get *beyond poetry*."²⁹

"the poet calls attention to the fact that the likeness which he draws is at most tentative . . . referring only to highly selective qualities of the things compared" (see *Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert* [Lexington, Ky., 1966], pp. 110–12). I am reminded at this point of my occasional disagreements with Rosemond Tuve which, to me at least, indicate how much is at stake in what one sees and values in metaphor. To be brief, in her *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* Tuve does not neglect the traditional flexibility of metaphor to propose dynamic likenesses which may approach or retreat from full identity. But in the book on Herbert metaphors are chiefly symbols, and symbols are compressed myths believed in as true. So the desirable aesthetic response, after the homework is done, consists in seeing and feeling the identity between the likeness proposed and the truth behind it. Not a little of Tuve's trained capacity to see differences has been diverted to the purpose of pointing out the gulfs between Herbert's language (in the larger sense) and ours.

²⁹ Quoted by F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, rev. ed. (New York, 1947), p. 90. The essential resolution of "Love" (III) is clear even if one reduces the intellectual and psychological content to the

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

"The Flower" is one of the greatest lyrics in the language, and it responds marvelously well to the kinds of detailed questions already asked of "The Temper" (I), "Death," "The Crosse," "Dulnesse," "Gratefulnesse," "Mortification," "Life," and many other poems. But those demonstrations do not need repeating; if they have not

"bones" of the barest verbal signals: "Then I will"—"You must"—"So I did." Or, looking back, one may see how much the eloquence owes to the transformation of "then" to "so." As for getting "beyond poetry," I do not find myself attracted by this particular mystery and have nothing to add on the subject—except to mention the record of one extraordinary response to the poem. In 1938 Simone Weil discovered it and recited it to herself during periods of extreme physical pain, "fixing all my attention on it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines." The poem became a prayer and, more than that, the unexpected bridge to a mystical experience. See the account in Richard Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait* (Carbondale, Ill., 1966), p. 58.

Perhaps it will be useful if I add a retrospective comment at this point. In debates where man clearly takes the initiative, as in "Dialogue" and "The Collar," God's answers may deliberately choose to ignore the terms man lays down. Yet one could say of these poems, as of "Love" (III), that man's clumsy, determined efforts to assert himself do have the effect of producing from the "world of grace" an answer that shows God a "new creatour" and man, as it were, newly created. The allegory of "Redemption," taken as a model of translated dialogue, exhibits the same strange failure and success. Another such "model" is "Prayer" (I). Prayer as "Gods breath in man returning" but also as the violence against God, "Christ-side-piercing spear," and as the varied, self-displaying, imaginative experiments of the sestet—all these images exhibit the range of the necessary human effort and initiative. But the lines of initiative in "Love" (III) are not clearly distinct. On the one hand, the Host subtly controls the argument and leads the questions to their simple answer. On the other hand, the Guest's feelings of reluctance and evasion move by their own "natural" steps and call for increased counterpressure by the Host. The role of the divine Questionist is enlarged in this poem; his knowledge, skill, and authority exceed those of Socrates—or so, I believe, we are expected to observe. But so is the role of the Answerer enlarged; he is no wiser than in other poems, but he is more deeply divided between passionate fear and hope, and more cooperative in turning the strength of his inventiveness against himself. As a result, the dialogue is fuller; its movements and countermovements are both freer and more completely responsive to each other. The action registers as fresh and immediate in every detail—while every turn of the action fulfills established laws and reproduces the known history of relations between God and man.

Questions of Style and Form

been persuasive the argument they serve cannot be rescued at this last moment. So I shall approach "The Flower," as I did "Love" (III), mainly to ask what its form tells us of the art of the "Questionist."

The first stanza celebrates the return of God's presence:

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! ev'n as the flowers in spring;
To which, besides their own demean,
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.
Grief melts away
Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.

The lyrical immediacy of the moment also takes note of the contributions made to simple joy by the complex human awareness of time, an awareness that converts, heightens, registers, and suspends that which is "as if."

The second stanza proceeds to the history before the moment of recovered joy:

Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart
Could have recover'd greenesse? It was gone
Quite under ground; as flowers depart
To see their mother-root, when they have blown;
Where they together
All the hard weather,
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

It is a simplified history, in which human awareness concentrates on those details which mark the similarity between the heart and flowers. Most of the imaginative traffic moves in one direction, though "Dead to the world" may have particular human reference, and "keep house" draws modestly upon human credit.

The third stanza summarizes, explains, and introduces a decisive contrast:

These are thy wonders, Lord of power,
Killing and quickning, bringing down to hell

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

And up to heaven in an houre;
Making a chiming of a passing-bell.
 We say amisse,
 This or that is:
Thy word is all, if we could spell.

The wonders are those already described and those about to be described. They are now translated into terms which concentrate their human reference: hell, heaven, the conversion of a death bell into "a chiming." The images of God's power are presented without regard for the human feelings. These "wonders," the record of peremptory exchanges between death and life, answer the imaginative efforts of the preceding two stanzas by making them seem leisurely and personal, the product of indulgent fancy. The judgment is that "We say amisse" and spell God's word to suit ourselves.

An effort must be made to answer the questions raised by the display of God's power. But the next stage of the poem begins by turning back to wish for an imagined state:

O that I once past changing were,
Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!
 Many a spring I shoot up fair,
Offering at heav'n, growing and groning thither:
 Nor doth my flower
 Want a spring-showre,
My sinnes and I joining together.

Once that deep human longing symbolized by paradise has been got out into the open, then the poet can turn to his main imagistic effort. If he cannot spell God's word he can spell his own and can make a personal display of saying "amisse." The fourth stanza mocks itself gently—echoing, among other things, those imperious gerunds of power, "killing," "quickning," "bringing," "making," with its fainter human participles, "offring," "growing," "groning," "joining." The pretenses are openly admitted in the fifth stanza:

Questions of Style and Form

But while I grow in a straight line,
Still upwards bent, as if heav'n were mine own,
Thy anger comes, and I decline:
What frost to that? what pole is not the zone,
Where all things burn,
When thou dost turn,
And the least frown of thine is shown?

But though the display of God's power wholly dominates the image of man as a flower, still that image survives the faults of its own making and saying, and endures the unanswerable images that record the power of God's word.

The climax of the poem comes quickly and simply:

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
On whom thy tempests fell all night.

In spite of all the errors of a human consciousness handicapped by an elementary ignorance, there is a persistent rightness in the flower as an image of the human feelings. The inadequacies of man's word have been spelled out, but the comparisons and admissions have not negated something authoritative in his expression. Even though the poet has moved to the threshold of a clarifying definition, the "aim" of his final stanza, he has not been driven there by a fixed order of reasoning. On the contrary, just as he seems to have exhausted the relevance of his flower image, having displayed the follies of his personal attachment, and having abandoned the figurative language of spring and winter for the absolute expressions of God's judgment—suddenly the human spring is felt again. The joy of the first stanza returns, without an "ev'n as" or an "as if"; though the poet presents himself in actions and responses that reflect a human imagi-

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

nation of flowers, the joy owes nothing to the contributions of imaginative self-consciousness. The sense of being alive "After so many deaths," and the sense of pleasure in writing—these are intellectual perceptions that offer themselves as natural feelings. All of the complex human awareness of self is concentrated at one point: the difficulty of feeling oneself to be the same person in the morning of joy as in the night of grief, though both extremes derive from God.

The last stanza now takes up the task of discovering a retrospective order in the implied questions and answers:

These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
To make us see we are but flowers that glide:
Which when we once can finde and prove,
Thou hast a garden for us, where to bide.
Who would be more,
Swelling through store,
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

The answers of the God of power revealed the incompleteness and the limitations in the human sense of the interchanges between life and death; the answer of the God of love reconciles the apparent differences. If one essential correction is made, man can truly "spell" God's word without giving up the natural language of his own feelings. The God of power may overpower, encouraging man to mock himself without finding a way out of his bewilderment. But the wonders of the God of love authenticate what was felt in the sixth stanza, and supply the missing key: "To make us see we are but flowers that glide." "Glide" is a precise answer to the full display of flower movements in the poem. No less important is the simple word "but." We are flowers like and not like the lilies of the field, for we must learn what we are: we must know and act upon our knowledge that we are human beings who "are but flowers that glide." That accomplishment will free man, not from the immediacies of change, but from his own excessive reactions, and will point him toward *the* paradise represented by its image hopelessly invoked in the fourth stanza.

Questions of Style and Form

Though the final answer illuminates and orders, it points beyond the poem to the necessity of controlling that answer. "The Flower" does not, like "Love" (III), "Death," "Life," "The Temper" (I), and "Vertue," for instance, demonstrate by the final action the clear possession of that control. In effect, "The Flower" turns back to comment on its process of development, which has "found" this happy answer but has not "proved" it. The last word of the poem opens on a further question. We may note also that, as in "Mortification," "Life," and "Vertue," the argument with time orders imaginative materials in depth and discovers its answer in a felt present. And as in many poems, the very persistence of the human feelings provides the necessary materials and invokes the saving counterforce.³⁰ "The Flower" offers no "plain and easie framing" of questions. The poem is "a set, and laboured, and continued speech" based upon a concealed dialogue which finds philosophy in the "silly" imaginations that derive from man's affective nature—a "continued speech" that achieves great freedom of movement and the sense of lyric spontaneity, and is able to arrest and discover while it demonstrates.

5

We come now to some final considerations. Wherever possible we have tried to draw on Herbert's own thoughts concerning the problems and aims of expression. Even if he were not so articulate on the subject, we could hardly miss the evidence that marks him as one of the most self-critical artists in the language. But the most valuable

³⁰ If what I have said of the flower image is persuasive, then a theological distinction must also follow. For the Augustinian formula of the human love which "uses" and the higher love which, by deriving from and referring to God, "enjoys" does not seem to provide much room for a free human contribution. But in this dialogue Herbert dares to "please" God, not by repeating such "borrow'd" language as "Thou art still my God," but by writing "fine and wittie" in his own words and voice—as the stubbornness of the human feeling works out its own personal method of justifying God's ways. We may also be reminded here of the special privileges and personal hopes that are allowed, and that Herbert exercises, in the poetry of complaint. And the passionate immediacy of the climactic stanza, which leads to clarification, recalls the somewhat similar movements in "The Pearl" and "Death."

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

things Herbert says about poetry he says in poems, which are not sterile containers for delivering messages. Besides, the moments of a lyric poet must be varied and individual; the poems together convince us of their constitutional similarity by first convincing us one poem at a time. The boys who "step into their voluntarie graves" carry several messages, none literal and none affirming that "childhood is health." The sweetness in love needs only to be copied, we hear, and the poem is not embarrassed by overlooking other means of recording love—by lament or praise, by seeking to escape, by the excesses of humility or pride, by the strenuous efforts of dialogue. What is said in a poem must be judged by what is done in that poem, and by what is said-and-done in other poems.

Much of our evidence, to be sure, does not depend on statement at all, but is no less present in the poetic language than, say, the messages of imagery or emphasis. One may miss or misread these messages more easily than those of simple statement, for the subtleties of style and form depend on glancing interactions, complex and always in movement. And so what Herbert thought and felt as a poet requires the critic to develop his own art of asking questions. For in one respect poems resemble Socrates' "silly Trades-men": the finer knowledge they contain must be sought.

These remarks are intended to introduce my last topic, Herbert's attitude toward imagination. Almost every poem would offer evidence, but the points I have in mind are limited, useful chiefly as part of a final perspective. In "A true Hymne" the heart "runneth mutt'ring up and down," repeating a few words that have not yet become a hymn. In "The Elixir" the poet prays,

Not rudely, as a beast,
To runne into an action.

In both instances he is describing a preliminary stage of understanding, one traditionally associated with the lower range of sensuous imagination.³¹ Though in "The Elixir" he seems to be preparing for a

³¹ In the *Centuries* (2. 69) Traherne contrasts loving rationally, "in the Image of God," and loving "in a Blind and Brutish maner, as Beasts do; by a

Questions of Style and Form

visionary ascent, with the eye of the mind passing through glass to a vision above the senses, the transforming scene is one of humble action—sweeping a room. The imaginative solution is deeply characteristic in its not striving to free thought of sensuous content. The spiritual clarity at the end of “Death” is expressed with nonchalance, not elevation, and in a language of common objects. Many aspects of Neoplatonic thought touch Herbert, but he seems relatively uninterested in the general assertion that the most valuable truths cannot be recognized, much less communicated, through the assistance of imagination and sense.

In “Conscience” Herbert writes, “My thought must work, but like a noiselesse sphere.” That musical harmony of peace, to which

meer Appetite and rude Propensitie.” The governing idea and the image have a long history in philosophical and religious thought. For a brief illustration we may turn to a medieval concept of mind distinguished for the extended range it allows the imagination. In his *Benjamin Minor* Richard of St. Victor emphasizes the sensuous base of all knowledge: “If it were not for the imagination the reason would know nothing” (*Patrologia Latina*, CXCVI, 4). The lowest range of mental activity derives from the imagination we share with all animals when we respond to whatever we see right in front of us and, without deliberation or purpose, “run aimlessly hither and thither with a vague mind” (p. 11). In *Benjamin Major* this rudimentary imagination furnishes the materials for *cogitatio* and is characterized by *evagatio*, that undirected action of the mind which we know best in Milton’s great pejorative word, “wandering.” “*Cogitatio* strays through byways aimlessly and roves at random” (p. 66: “per devia quaeque lento pede . . . passim huc illucque vagatur . . . serpit”). *Cogitatio* is effortless and fruitless, while the disciplined, purposive reason of *meditatio* is laborious and fruitful; in *contemplatio* the liberated intellect is also effortless, but fruitful (pp. 66–67). In its higher range, the imagination is linked to the order of *contemplatio*; being effortless, it attempts to solve nothing by process of reason and is content, being aimless, to marvel at the manifestations of God’s greatness. For in imagination “the free mind,” not unlike “the vague mind,” may “run aimlessly hither and thither” wondering at large (p. 70: “libera mens nostra huc illucque discurret, quo eam in hoc spectaculorum genere admiratio rapit”). *Mutatis mutandis*, the effortless imagination may come down to Keats’s “negative capability,” in which there is no “irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Fewer changes are required to recognize the imagistic line persisting when Hobbes or Dryden talks about the lower imagination, and fancy runs hither and thither like a spaniel.

thought retreats from the babel of words, represents a traditional attitude immensely influential and appealing—a symbol for poets, a goal for contemplatives and mystics, a basic premise for philosophers. If thought approaches the higher truths by virtue of corresponding to their silence, immobility, and immateriality, it follows that the most important functions of intellect will divest themselves of imaginative movement, feeling, and sound. One may be reminded of such moments in Herbert, when his “wranglers” are finally quieted—when, after a complex struggle, an authoritative clarification is marked also by its apparent effortlessness. To the concept of “a noiselesse sphere” we may attribute those clear moments when Herbert disparages the whole enterprise of expression, or his own immediate possibilities. But it hardly needs to be argued that in the main he turns away from these traditional attitudes. Most of what he has to say to God and himself is relatively unhandicapped by the forbidding prestige of pure intellect.

He does what all poets do, and shapes the flow of sound by an expressive punctuation of silence. Occasionally silence may contribute to metaphor—as when the brilliant clatter of invention in “Prayer” (I) moves toward its expressive aim, “something understood,” which is one part silence. Indeed, some of his resolving gestures, like “Making our pillows either down, or dust,” are more than quiet;³² they represent an integration that, in the language of “The Elixir,” has made God “prepossest.” They are eloquent in their silence, but their tribute can seldom be thought a contemplative offering. No poem of Herbert’s makes more valuable use of silence than “Love” (III), but the values are expressive, not philosophical. One may say much the same of the beautifully contrived stammering at the end of “Affliction” (I). Herbert’s grasp of the subtleties in pride no doubt left him not a little diffident toward the claims made for the divested intellect. Part of the argument in “Frailtie” turns on the blindness to which even approved intellectual positions are subject: “Lord, in my silence how do I despise.”

³² One secret of his mastery here, as often, is that he makes the words plain and unassuming; the actions represented by the words, and what the actions themselves represent, release the latent power.

Questions of Style and Form

Toward another traditional view of the imagination (much commented on by the Stoics) he shows a discriminating awareness which does not, however, inhibit his own practice. Occasionally he employs the kind of imagination characterized by its easy departure from external reality and by its power to move freely, making strange and unprecedented combinations. Herbert makes a conscious display in "The Pearl":

I know the wayes of Honour, what maintains
The quick returns of courtesie and wit:
In vies of favours whether partie gains,
When glorie swells the heart, and moldeth it
To all expressions both of hand and eye,
Which on the world a true-love-knot may tie,
And bear the bundle, wheresoe're it goes.

In "The Collar" there is a companion piece, not so staggering in its overburdened fertility but no less wild:

Forsake thy cage,
Thy rope of sands,
Which pettie thoughts have made, and made to thee
Good cable, to enforce and draw,
And be thy law,
While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.

But Herbert is not intimidated by the false work of imagination. It is an indispensable instrument in sorting out the contrarities he discovers. Nor does he embrace the fantastic only to reject it. "Love unknown" is a full exercise in fantasy, and some of his allegories create surprising interchanges between the familiar and the fantastic. Out of a faculty of mind formally explained away for centuries, granted only minor and peripheral activity, often despised and never seriously defended, but still the humble pleasure of artists and those they entertained, Herbert gladly creates many of his most impressive images: the groans that are "countrey-aires" which God loves no less

than the "better tunes" of celestial music, groans that fly and sing like larks, skeletons that cannot fly but are "The shells of fledged souls left behinde," skulls agape that cannot sing, the soul that desires to "roost and nestle," infants diapered in shrouds, sleepy boys stepping into their graves which are also vessels journeying quickly on the waves of "successive nights" toward death, man surrounding himself with a home in order to make love to the coffin, the mind smelling its "fatal day."³³

The free play of the fantastic imagination, its power to combine, is not limited to the making of images. We have noted many strange moments created by the illusions of arrested movement and by expressive oppositions joined together. When the rhythmical flow of emphasis controls and directs meanings, it resembles metaphor in the service of the "cataleptic" imagination, presenting, clearly and distinctly, real objects of the mind. But the rhythms that discover new and unexpected meanings are like the metaphors of the fantastic imagination. For examples of both kinds of rhythmical metaphor I remind the reader of the third and fourth lines in each stanza of "Mortification," where we observed some remarkable effects. And in Chapter Two examples were noted in which the rhythmical management of release and contraction, the control of order, timing, and juxtaposition, created surprising movements of the meaning.

Furthermore, the structural development or "foreconceit" in some poems may operate partly under the license of the fantastic imagination. Here we may point to the strange exhilaration and sudden turns of "The Forerunners." Or we may note the forms of irrationality invented for poems like "Dulnesse," "The Collar," and "Gratefulnesse." But let us conclude the point with a fresh example, small and characteristic. In "Lent" Herbert argues the case for temperance. If we are successful in "starving sinne" we may hope for some radical shifts and recognition:

³³ Quotations are from "Gratefulnesse," "Sion," "Death," "The Temper" (I), "Mortification," and "Life." Herbert is not, to be sure, always in perfect control. One piece of unsuccessful writing I do not recall seeing discussed is the second stanza of "Vanie" (I).

Questions of Style and Form

That ev'ry man may revell at his doore,
Not in his parlour; banquetting the poore,
And among those his soul.

The reveling is converted to a spiritual sense; the change of location is both literal and symbolic. The poor will be “banqueted” even by a modest meal provided out of cash savings from the parlor budget, and will no doubt draw spiritual nourishment from the kindness intended them. The soul will also join in that banquet, not as a regularly invited guest (not one of the hungry poor but one of the hungry rich)—discovered and recognized, as it were, in the casual throng putting away their victuals and registering their individual satisfaction. It is a strange moment, turning inward and outward, freely mixing its modes of imagination, and centering like a painted scene on that axis which connects the host and his unexpected guest. Part of the value of such an example is that it demonstrates how easily Herbert escapes the usual categories of analysis we advance. The literal and the imaginative move in and out of each other. As we note a movement of expansion, as of open form, it contracts, and vice versa. What the scene owes to fantasy is converted from invention to discovery—not of the esoteric but of the common, which is most easily forgotten, obscured, or ignored. The humor is grave, like groans that sing; the grotesque is refined and brought home to ordinary human concerns.

Herbert's ways with imagination reflect his basic approaches to artistic expression. The poet who does not suppress or overlook the reluctances in himself when writing about man and God, whose major theme is the mystery of God's art with man, does not stifle his talents for imaginative expression. His themes are limited in range, though not in depth, but few if any poets more fully use all their resources, or more intimately reveal themselves by the special grace of artistic freedom-in-discipline. One of his personal resources and talents everywhere observable is 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. “My God must have my best, ev'n all I had.” “And if I please him, I write fine and wittie.”

GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

Nor does he need to restrict the natural play of his mind, fearing that he will please only himself. His artistic and personal seriousness combine gravity and grace in deliberate play—not seldom as if he were David dancing before the Ark.

He is a splendid master of that basic illusion upon which his poetry depends, that the language and forms of art are only another, if better, way to talk naturally. And he is a master of the mysterious unity of style and subject, so that moving thoughts appear, as if spontaneously, to assume the language that gives them expression, so that the words, if one looks back, seem casually inevitable and yet reward the closest study; but if one does not choose to look back the words remain inconspicuously graceful, right, and modest, so perfectly does what they say shine through them. He cultivates plainness, but rarely with the self-conscious belligerence, and never with the pride and sense of alienation, that few heroes of stylistic humility escape. As a stylist he is aristocratic, serving both humility and asceticism with a sure sense of grace. The beauties of the natural world are celebrated in "Vertue" and not despised; nor are they set up merely to be trampled upon: they are assimilated into a higher purpose, but with becoming tenderness. He does not lecture stiffly on the urgency of the message; he rejects without scorn, and the feelings to be disengaged are his own, which he treats gently and generously, with imaginative courage. The accord he seeks does not outcry the resistance of human nature and art, for he grants resistance the dignity of being real. Though he prefers the muttering of a reluctant, or sad, or wondering assent to the ready answers of selective omission, his most valuable answer is to transform, by tempering, the affections. The categories of style, if pedantically applied, are sure to be misapplied.³⁴ We learn to hear many voices, and even the false ones do not register themselves as pure inventions. The varieties of egocentric rebelliousness are all specialized projections of a voice that we sometimes hear expressing its earnest passion with full resonance.

³⁴ Herbert can say almost everything he wants in his own versions of plain style, which do not call attention to their triumphs. He assimilates adornment as a matter of course, and without overt classicizing he achieves the grace and compactness that English poets admire in the best Latin lyrics.

Questions of Style and Form

As for the questions on which most of this chapter has turned—involving aspects of conceptual form and prior beliefs and involving the smaller forms produced by the immediacies of expressive invention—they were not proposed as pseudo-questions. They do not, however, lead to full answers in their own terms, though they are helpful in making intermediate discriminations. In many poems the smaller forms do not so much oppose the main design as quicken it by bringing in their own significant moments of tension and relationship. These moments are often individual and complex, not “chained” together, answering an “aim,” but positioned so that they speak like questions across controlled intervals of silence. They create overlapping forms that, whatever else they do, by their existence authenticate the main design and its claim on us. The experience presented in such poems, though familiar and common, though grounded on argument, will seem less demonstrated than revealed—by the imaginative form taking shape in the process of being discovered. The illusion of simultaneity produces its own characteristic tensions, and one cannot draw a firm line between demonstration and revelation, which in the strange discourse of poetry consort well, to mutual advantage, saying what neither alone could say, and varying the relationship unpredictably. We must perhaps be content to mark differences in proportion, emphasis, and degree—as when we observe the influential contributions of “unexpected moments,” or of the imaginative materials of time or consciousness, to the main design. What we cannot fail to recognize is that Herbert’s best poems never lack such a design.

The conflicts work within clearly established values and limits. They are not less remarkable for the imaginative power which breathes the individuality of poetic life into prior beliefs and predetermined arguments. The subtlety, range, and bulk of modern criticism are admirable. We have made and consolidated many advances, while brightening not a few lights which had gone dim. But prepossession with our own problems has been, as may be expected, both help and hindrance. To come to the point: we have grown so used to admiring those poetic conflicts which convince us that their issues, and the values on which they are based, are wholly in doubt that we are in some respects not well prepared to see the finer tensions of a mature

poetic conscience that can be absolutely scrupulous in its imaginative expositions of fixed values.

But one does not need to rebuke modern attitudes, as if we were incapable of appreciating Herbert. He shares with Donne and Marvell a reputation and living influence which speak for themselves. Nor do I regard any of the major points made in this book as outside the range of modern interest. To cite some examples: the dignity and force of human desire which is felt in Herbert's acceptances; the quality of the effort he makes to arrive at a fully imagined present; the intellectual discipline which brings him to a Socratic balance, having purged folly and ignorance; the spiritual discipline which brings him to a perfect religious poise; and the distinctness within the unity of the overlapping forms, which not only authenticate the main design but achieve their own intellectual and aesthetic poise, giving to and asking of the reader a fresh sense of all the internal movements of a poem as both separate and related.

All true lyric poets, one may believe, stand naked behind their enabling fictions, behind the cultivated deceptions of verbal art. They are not satisfied by the superficial discoveries of ordinary candor but search for the deeper points of personal understanding, or revelation, which will not yield themselves to direct ways of thinking or saying. And all poets take chances when they submit the honesty of their intelligence and feelings to the judgment of art. Herbert's range, his talent for dramatic projection and objectivity, his mastery of expression on any subject he undertakes; his power to make the common seem distinctive and the uncommon immediate, to make the ordinary seem invented and the unusual seem discovered—these are gifts that merit our interest and attention. He invites us to go much further: the poems that are most widely admired, and those that deserve wider recognition, convince us that their fictions, their inventions of wit, rhetoric, and imaginative play, are more than in earnest, as we understand nonfictional seriousness. They convince us that they are imaginative expressions by which the poet confronts and attempts to master his own life or death.

INDEX.

A

- Allen, Don Cameron, 148n
Answers: and individual questioning, 120–21, 186, 201 and n; metamorphic, 186–89; and transformation, 208. *See also* Questions
Aristotle, xiv, xxxiii, xxxvn, 31, 32n
Auerbach, Erich, xxin
Augmentation of pattern, 77–79, 81–83, 149–50
Augustine, St., xviii–xxix, 14–15, 31, 32, 35–36, 104n, 190n, 201n

B

- Bacon, Francis, xxx–xxxviii, 12, 23, 120, 152
Beaumont, Sir John, xlii
Boccaccio, Giovanni, xxix–xxx
Bowers, Fredson, 30n, 116n
Brown, Norman O., 170n
Browne, Sir Thomas, 113
Bundy, M. W., xxn
Burton, Robert, 13

C

- Cases of conscience, 23, 120
Cassirer, Ernst, xxxiv
Cicero, xviii, xvii
Clement of Alexandria, xxviii
Closed form: reflective relevance, 141, 153, 158–69 *passim*, 175–77, 179, 200–1; related to conceptual opposite, 151–53, 156, 168–69, 201, 207; repetitive contracting develop-

Closed form (*continued*)

- ment, 143–49, 150; as restricting commitment, 153, 177
Coleridge, S. T., 43–44
Colie, Rosalie, 91n, 116n
Complaint: conclusions 96–101; Herbert's practice, 87–96; and knowledge, 91–96, 101; major theme human failure, 87; related to praise and love, 85–87, 98–101, 119, 133–34
Consciousness and thematic development, 159–68 *passim*, 170–77, 196n, 197–201
Cowley, Abraham, xxxvii
Cudworth, Ralph, 23–24

D

- Diminution: in rhythmical phrasing, 49, 163–64; in structural pattern, 37, 153
Donne, John, xxxiv, 43, 120, 190–91n, 210
Dryden, John, 203n
Duplicities of thought, style, or language, 21 23, 35–36, 107, 118, 124–25, 199, 204, 210: by excess or defect, 27, 29, 106, 152–53

E

- Eliot, T. S., 195
Ellrodt, Robert, 108n, 134n, 181n
Expanding and contracting: of expressive elements, 153–56, 179; resembling metaphor, 74–76; of rhythmi-

INDEX

Expanding and contracting (*continued*)
 cal movement, 72-76, 81-82. *See also* Closed form; Open form

F

Fiske, G. C., xvii, 13n
 Fluency, 152-56. *See also* Duplicities
 of thought, style, or language; Open
 form
 Freeman, Rosemary, 98n

G

God's art with man, 25, 93, 103-4,
 112, 123, 129, 132
 Greenwood, E. B., 108n, 116n
 Greville, Fulke, xxxvii
 Groans: and music, 116; and sighs,
 115-16

H

Herbert, George: works quoted and
 discussed

The Temple:

"Aaron," 19, 113n, 118, 148-49
 "Affliction" (I), 104, 122, 126-
 27, 143, 204
 "Affliction" (III), 94-95
 "The Agonie," 95
 "The Altar," 108-9
 "The Answer," 25, 92-93, 94
 "The Bag," 32n, 79, 93, 122-23
 "H. Baptisme" (I), 149
 "H. Baptisme" (II), 26-27, 77-
 78, 147
 "Bitter-sweet," 80-81, 85-87
 "The British Church," 54
 "The Call," 146, 154
 "Christmas," 115
 "Church-lock and key," 94, 107,
 153-54
 "The Church-Porch," 13-14,
 21, 128

Herbert, George (*continued*)

"Clasping of hands," 150-51
 "The Collar," 27, 35, 123-24,
 125, 126, 153, 169, 196n,
 206
 "Confession," 88-89, 103, 130
 "Conscience," 203-4
 "The Crosse," 64-72, 116, 123,
 153, 177, 196
 "Death," 37-43, 56-57, 116,
 177, 196, 201 and n, 203,
 204, 206n
 "Decay," 135n
 "Deniall," 16, 93-94, 114
 "Dialogue," 95, 124-25, 126,
 191n, 196n
 "The Discharge," 134n
 "Dooms-day," 111, 118
 "Dotage," 90-91
 "Dulnesse," 6, 21, 46-50, 54-
 56, 97-101, 113n, 119, 135n,
 196, 206
 "Easter," 5, 106, 115, 141-43
 "Easter-wings," 149
 "The Elixir," 74, 139-41, 202-
 3, 204
 "Employment," (I), 59-64, 115,
 134n, 154-55
 "Even-song," 104-5, 109
 "Faith," 76-77
 "The Flower," 19, 51, 53, 119,
 122, 130-31, 196-201
 "The Forerunners," 17-19, 206,
 207
 "Frailtie," 181n, 204
 "Giddinesse," 90
 "The Glance," 72-74
 "Gratefulnesse," 57-58, 90,
 116n, 129-31, 133-34, 196,
 206 and n
 "Grief," 15, 152
 "Grieve not the Holy Spirit,"
 116
 "Home," 16, 87, 101

Index

Herbert, George (*continued*)

- "Hope," 191n
- "Jordan" (I), 11–13
- "Jordan" (II), 19, 21–22, 28, 106, 152
- "Josephs coat," 51, 91–92, 118
- "Justice" (I), 25–26, 90, 107
- "Lent," 206–7
- "Life," 131, 170–77, 178, 179; 180n, 186–87, 196, 201, 206n
- "Longing," 87, 88, 101
- "Love" (I and II), 2–6, 28–29, 134, 152
- "Love" (III), 3, 131, 191–95, 195–96n, 201, 204
- "Love unknown," 205
- "Man," 101–2, 175
- "Mattens," 103–4
- "Miserie," 95–96, 106–7, 111, 184
- "Mortification," 26–27, 112–13, 131, 156–69, 170, 177, 178, 179, 186, 196, 201, 206 and n
- "Obedience," 53, 127–28
- "The Odour," 22, 150, 180n
- "An Offering," 130
- "The Pearl," 33–37, 112, 113n, 117, 125, 153, 201n
- "The Posie," 147
- "Praise" (I), 107
- "Praise" (II), 131–33
- "Praise" (III), 105
- "Prayer" (I), 107–8, 152, 183–84, 196n, 204
- "Prayer" (II), 117
- "The Priesthood," 128–29
- "Providence," 101–3, 109
- "The Pulley," 90
- "The Quidditie," 19
- "The Quip," 31, 112, 147–48
- "Redemption," 51, 52, 113n, 123, 184–85, 196n

Herbert, George (*continued*)

- "Repentance," 75–76
 - "The Reprisall," 24, 96, 110
 - "The Rose," 15, 148
 - "The Sacrifice," 87, 95, 123
 - "The H. Scriptures," (II), 121–22
 - "The Search," 52, 58, 93, 94, 116
 - "Sighs and Groanes," 87, 101
 - "Sinne" (I), 75, 151
 - "Sinnes round," 145, 154
 - "Sion," 12n, 116, 155–56, 206n
 - "The Size," 118, 119
 - "The Storm," 129
 - "Submission," 128
 - "Superliminare," 13, 22
 - "The Temper" (I), 3, 27–32, 36, 51, 78–79, 81–83, 106, 111, 125–26, 177, 196, 201, 206n
 - "The Temper" (II), 22, 24, 32n, 122, 133n
 - "The Thanksgiving," 24, 95, 110, 112, 122
 - "Time," 191n
 - "Trinitie Sunday," 149–50, 154
 - "A true Hymne," 6–11, 16, 32, 88, 102, 127, 130, 153, 202
 - "Vanie" (I), 174n
 - "Vertue," 51, 53, 112, 131, 170, 178–82, 186, 187–89, 189–91n, 194–95, 201, 208
 - "The Windows," 31n
 - "A Wreath," 143–45, 154, 170
- Poems from Walton's *Lives*:
Two sonnets, 2–6
- Prose:
- "Briefe Notes on Valdesso's *Considerations*," 12n
 - A Priest to the Temple*, 20–21, 23, 32n, 89, 115n, 121n, 128, 133n, 182–83
- Hobbes, Thomas, 203n

INDEX

Hollander, John, 110n
Horace, xvi-xvii, xxi-xxii, 31n
Hoskins, John, 14, 32n, 40n, 167n
Hughes, R. E., 185n

I

Imagination: Herbert's attitude toward, 202-7, 209-10; and thematic development, 170-77; varieties of, 42, 169, 170-77, 199-200; and vision, xx and n, 35-36, 189-91n. *See also* Consciousness and thematic development; Time

J

Jonson, Ben, 31n
Junctures: and cognitive structures, 79-80; and rhythmical choice, 48

K

Keats, John, 203n

L

Lipsius, Justus, 145-46n
Love: conclusions, 132-35; effort to escape, 123-27; effort to force, 127-32; as gift, 194; as meditation, 120-23, 204; related to complaint and praise, 127, 129, 132-33

M

Marcuse, Herbert, 170n
Martz, Louis L., 72n, 97-98n, 110n, 120, 143n, 152n, 153n, 170n, 191n
Marvell, Andrew, 34n, 174, 176, 193n, 210
Mazzeo, Joseph A., xxin
Metaphor: expression as, 8-10, 18; in rhythmical structures, 56-57, 74-76, 80, 160-66, 206; and silence,

Metaphor (*continued*)

204; similarities and differences in, 40, 171, 175-76, 180-82, 187, 194-95 and *n*, 197; styles of, 158-69 *passim*, 173, 180 and *n*; and symbol, 10-11, 80, 164-67, 170-71, 195n. *See also* Duplicities of thought, style, or language; Groans; Music; Prayer
Milton, John, 23, 102, 193n
Montgomery, R. L., 185n
Mortifications: as emblems of musical form, 113-14; formal limitations, 154, 170; and meditation, 123
Music: art of tension and conversion, 115, 116; of feeling, 34n, 112-16, 128-29; of thought, 30, 110-12, 180, 203-4. *See also* Groans; Metaphor; Transformation

O

Open form: by expanding movements, 149-51; falling off at end, 150-51; purposive outward movement at end, 141, 143, 168; related to conceptual opposite, 151-53, 156, 168-69, 201, 207. *See also* Fluency
Overlapping forms, 52-54, 209-10

P

Paul, St., xx, xxii-xxiii
Peterson, Douglas L., xxin
Petrarch, xxix
Petronius, xvi
Philo, Judaeus, xxii
Phrasing: colloquial, 51-54, 57-58; and metaphor, 56-58, 166; metrical, 48, 50-54, 57, 66, 68, 69, 71; rhythmical, 52, 57-58
Plain style: assimilative, xxiv, 43, 204n, 208 and *n*; Augustinian, xviii-xxiv; classical, xiv-xvii; Cynic features in "The Church-Porch,"

Index

Plain Style (*continued*)

- 13–14; seventeenth-century, xxxix–xliv
Plato, xivn, xviii, xxi, xxxiii, xxxvii, 11–12, 17, 34, 190n, 191n
Play of mind, 118–19, 207–8
Praise: the argument of design, 102–3; difficulties of, 105–10, 114–19; related to complaint and love, 117–19, 132–33. *See also* Music
Prayer: as metaphor, 10; as transitional and transforming, 107–8

Q

- Questions: art of, 121; and conceptual structure, 183–85, 196n; and the country parson, 182–83; and poetic form, 185–86, 191–95, 197–201, 209. *See also* Answers

R

- Rice, Eugene F., Jr., xxixn
Richard of St. Victor, 203n
Rickey, M. E., 194–95n

S

- Shakespeare, William, 115n: *The Winter's Tale*, 40n
Sidney, Sir Philip, 32n
Sincerity, xiii–xiv, 2, 5–8, 16, 29
Smith, Henry L., 45
Socrates, 121, 182, 196n
Southwell, Robert, 171n, 191n
Stress: advancing intensity of, 58–64, 67, 68, 70, 71; general comments, 45–50
Summers, Joseph H., 110n, 120, 153n, 185n

T

- Thematic movement: comparison of complaint and praise, 132–33; development by, 160–64, 168, 170, 200, 201n
Time: imaginative organization of, 39–42 *passim*, 131–34, 159–68 *passim*, 171–77, 179, 197, 201; perverse use of, 123–24; source of structural forms, 177–78
Trager, George L., 45
Traherne, Thomas, 202–3n
Transformation: as God's art, 123, 129–30; and musical form, 115, 116; as personal aim, 109–10, 117–19, 127, 132–34, 208; as poetic aim, 117, 134, 168–69, 175
Trimpfi, Wesley, xxin
Tuve, Rosemond, xli, 20n, 22n, 28n, 33n, 72n, 98n, 104n, 120, 135n, 195n

W

- Weil, Simone, 196n
White, Helen, 141n
Wisdom, xx, xxviii–xxxiii, xxxv, xli–xli, 23, 26–27, 32; and clarity, xxiv–xxv, xxxv, xxxix–lxi; and eloquence, xix, 14–15, 21, 31–32, 36, 42–44; and hidden meanings, xxii, xxiv–xxx, xxxviii–xli, 12–13; hidden meanings and pleasure, xxiv–xxvi, xxxv–xxxvii, xli–xlii, xliii; in “Mortification,” 163–65, 168; parabolical, xxx–xxxviii; and the “pre-logical” mind, xxxii–xxxiii; and the “soul” of words, xx–xxi, xxxvii, 6, 7, 11; truth and beauty, 11, 13–21, 32
Wolfson, H. A., xxii, xxviii

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