Herbert's "Poetic Theory"

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Although scholarship has accumulated much valuable material, I believe that the main advance in our approach to Herbert in recent decades has been in the area of criticism. And this is where most progress was needed, in view of the tendency of earlier academics to see Herbert as some sort of inferior Donne, or at least a simple or plain poet. Mary Ellen Rickey and notably Helen Vendler have taught us to see Herbert with fresh eyes, making us aware of the real complexity and richness of his verse.¹

But with respect to Herbert's poetic theory, as Rosemond Tuve styled it,² these critics have rather let us down. For example, we find Rickey writing about "Jordan" (I) and (II):

We must not confuse the quality here lauded with any modern concept of plainness involving thinness, absence of adornment, or naivete. Verbal plainness for Herbert always was the vehicle of sincerity and sharpness of expression; its antithesis was not beauty or intricacy of idea, but pretension and imagerial clutter. The nightingale and spring incurring his disfavor in "Jordan" (I) do so because they are companionate to fictions onely and false hair, and the metaphors scorned in "Jordan" (II) offend him because they are a long pretense, a falsifying of the plain intention of devotion. (pp. 173-74)³

It is not difficult to see the influence of Tuve here, who had claimed that "Herbert is no ascetic" (p. 185) and (with special reference to "Jordan" [II]) that what Herbert criticizes is "Not subtlety of metaphor nor richness of style but his own intellectual pride, in his own earlier writing" (p. 190). In the
view of these critics, Herbert, in the "Jordan" poems, does not reject the beauty of poetic language, but the attitude of those using it — those writing about “fictions onely and false hair” in “Jordan” (I) and himself in “Jordan” (II) (“As flames do work and winde, when they ascend, / So did I weave my self into the sense”). Tuve warns us explicitly against trying to find in Herbert “a manifesto against fine style and over-subtlety” (p. 192).

At the risk of over-simplification, I would suggest that Vendler sees a significantly different theory of poetry when she speaks of “those sparkling notions and embellishments, which Herbert does not permit himself in ‘Jordan’ (II) and ‘The Forerunners’” (p. 253). According to this interpretation, Herbert does reject the beauty of poetic language, and, pace Tuve, would appear to show himself an ascetic in this. Others have adopted the view that this is his general, or at least dominant attitude to poetic beauty. H.R. Swardson saw “damaging arguments against poetry” in the first stanza of “Jordan” (I). He considered that “Jordan” (II) contends that “All of the devices that make for excellence in the literary tradition seem misapplied when the subject is heavenly joy” (p. 71), and, although not always, Herbert most of the time exhibits “a suspicion of poetic craftsmanship” (p. 81).

My own view is that it is as wrong to call Herbert an ascetic as not to regard him so, and in particular I feel uncomfortable with any attempt to impute to him some supposed “poetic theory” as something which he consistently adhered to. I would not go so far as to say that Herbert’s view of poetic beauty was as variable and temperamental as Aldous Huxley’s phrase about his “inner weather” suggests. But I do not believe that we can locate more than momentarily held positions in any of the poems. No poem is any more final and definite, as a statement of Herbert’s “poetic theory,” than any other. Even the following statement by Leonard Mustazza, in a recent article about “The Forerunners,” seems to me to go too far:

In some ways . . . “The Forerunners” bridges the gap between the plain expressions of praise the poet cherishes and the more elaborate verse he envies the amatory poets for. Perhaps more than any other poem about the poet’s craft in The Temple, this one synthesizes

Herbert’s view of poetry and helps the reader come to terms with what would otherwise be contradictory, even intemperate assertions elsewhere. Poetic invention applied to the right purposes, Herbert indicates here, lends itself to sublime praise of God, but even when such invention is lacking, the heart can still speak eloquently.6

I am less in disagreement with the final sentence than with the suggestion that “The Forerunners” could be construed as the one poem which actually “synthesizes Herbert’s view of poetry and helps the reader come to terms with what would otherwise be contradictory, even intemperate assertions elsewhere.” I rather feel that the reader, when confronted with Herbert’s poetry as with other great literature, should be mindful of Keats’s call for “negative capability.” In other words, if without “The Forerunners” Herbert appears to offer us contradictory — or even intemperate — assertions, we should accept that fact as part of his work, and we should not promote “The Forerunners” to the status of a document which somehow, by unifying them, rules them out.

A more helpful approach is provided, I think, by a statement which Vendler makes about “The Forerunners”: “His powerful love of his ‘beauteous words’ has its own independent force within the poem, but so does his gloomy denial of value to those words at the end” (p. 42). I am not bothered by the fact that this assertion appears to contradict to some extent her statement about “Jordan” (II) and “The Forerunners” which I quoted before. Inasmuch as Vendler disappoints us about the question of Herbert’s “poetic theory,” I think this is because she should have paid more attention to what one might call her own theory of reading Herbert. I trust I do not do her an injustice by claiming that she offers that theory above all in her second chapter, and that she aptly sums it up in her “Introduction” when she says that this chapter asserts
ones in other poets by being relatively invisible, since they bear no signals like “nevertheless” or “but” or “yet” which usually mark an alteration in perspective. Herbert’s method in these poems is one of tacit accretion of successive (and often conflicting) points of view, with the principle of accretion often masking the conflicts, making these poems sometimes seem blander than they are. (pp. 3-4)

It is by being faithful to this belief about Herbert's poems that Vandler comes to the correct conclusion that in “The Forerunners” the poet’s “powerful love of his ‘beauteous words’ has its own independent force within the poem” even though, as it happens, he starts his last stanza with a “Yet” which introduces a different (more ascetic) note. And, while I think it fruitful to read individual Herbert poems in the way Vandler suggests, I would extend her remarks to the interrelations between poems. Just as we witness changes of direction within poems, we also see them in going from one poem to another. Indeed, if we concede the correctness of Vandler’s remarks with respect to the internal workings of individual poems, it is merely logical to expect poems as entities to differ from each other. Thus there is no reason why “The Forerunners” should not be quite at variance with the “Jordan” poems in its attitude to poesy, and the quest for any consistent “poetic theory” within Herbert’s poetry would seem misguided. (I do not wish to suggest that his poetic practice is not consistent, but that is a very different thing, with which I am not here primarily concerned.)

After these general remarks, let us now proceed to consider the issues more specifically by examining relevant evidence. The following letter occurs (as a fragment) in Walton’s Lives (1670), and was written when Herbert was seventeen. He sent it to his mother, together with two sonnets.

— But I fear the heat of my late Ague hath dried up those springs, by which Scholars say, the Muses use to take up their habitations. However, I need not their help, to reprove the vanity of those many Love-poems, that are daily writ and consecrated to Venus; nor to

Herbert’s position here seems comparatively simple. He does not need the Muses, he says, for those inspire the vanity of love poems. By contrast, his abilities in poetry (poor though he claims them to be) will be fully devoted to the praise of God. The statement anticipates an essential contrast of the “Jordan” poems, particularly “Jordan” (I). Love poets are inspired by the springs of Helicon, while his own poems will be cleansed by the waters of Jordan, so that he writes under the guidance of a baptized Muse. Nothing is said, however, about the moral status of poetic beauty as such, and we must note that that clearly does not pose a problem to Herbert as yet. There is no indication that his own poetry will be in any sense “plain” as distinct from that of the love poets. His focus is fully on the question of content and moral intent. Going by this extract, it would be impossible to believe about “Jordan” (I) that it “is not a protest against love poetry but against its usurpation of the whole field and very title of poetry” (Tuve, p. 187). Here, at least, Herbert clearly does criticize love poetry as such, and shows no such tolerance as Tuve credits him with.

If we turn to the accompanying sonnets (Hutchinson, p. 206), however, it becomes more understandable why reactions of critics to the “Jordan” poems have been so contradictory. For my argument, it will be easiest (and not misleading) to turn to the second sonnet first. In rather excessive, but no doubt sincere, language the young poet asserts that there is enough in the Lord to dry “Oceans of Ink” (I. 2). Everything on earth is covered by the majesty of God: “Each Cloud distills thy praise, and doth forbid / Poets to turn it to another use” (II. 4-5). One might think that if each cloud distills God’s praise anyway, it would be impossible for any poet to avoid praising God anyway, no matter whether the ostensible subject is love or something else. But this is not the way Herbert sees it: “Roses and Lilies speak thee; and to make / A pair of Cheeks of them, is thy abuse” (II. 6-7). In other words, love poetry and religious poetry are mutually exclusive, and the love poet is automatically at fault in praising something other than God.
But Herbert is less censorious in the first sonnet:

My God, where is that ancient heat towards thee,
Wherewith whole showes of Martyrs once did burn,
Besides their other flames? Doth Poetry
Wear Venus Livery? only serve her turn?
Why are not Sonnets made of thee? and lays
Upon thine Altar burnt? Cannot thy love
Heighten a spirit to sound out thy praise
As well as any she? Cannot thy Dove
Out-strip their Cupid easily in flight?
Or, since thy wayes are deep, and still the same,
Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name?
Why doth that fire, which by thy power and might
Each breast does feel, no braver fuel choose
Than that, which one day Worms may chance refuse?

It is difficult to avoid the impression that here, too, love poetry is viewed with a degree of disapproval, particularly towards the end. The fire by which each poet is inspired is due to God’s power and might anyway, but the poets surely do wrong choosing not to recognize that fact and preferring love instead. The poet seems to derive some satisfaction from imagining the consequences of the love poets’ fallacious choice: they allow themselves to be inspired by something which will not last and “which one day Worms may chance refuse.” But while the love poets are surely foolish, they are not wholly evil, and Herbert attempts to be generous towards them. He regrets that modern poets have lost the “ancient heat” of the early martyrs, but when we read “Doth Poetry / Wear Venus Livery? only serve her turn” it is quite possible to interpret this as showing, in Tuve’s words, “not a protest against love poetry but against its usurpation of the whole field and very title of poetry.”

There is another important point to observe in this poem, and that is that it relates, to some extent, the matter of content to that of expression. This does not happen in the letter (as we have seen), nor in the other sonnet. But in this first sonnet, Herbert interestingly speculates that perhaps the love poets do not consecrate their work to God because religious poetry might be technically less successful: “Or, since thy wayes are deep, and still the same, / Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name?” (ll. 10-11). This is the first indication that we have that, to any poet, poetic beauty (as such) may be of concern. The predominant interest in these early verses is in matters of content and morality, and in general Herbert does not seem to care about poetic technique at all as something which either is of great importance anyway or which sets the love poet apart from himself. Here, he does not wish to suggest, of course, that his own (religious) verse does not run smooth, but that the love poets, in their general concern for the wrong worldly things, include an undue preoccupation with poetic beauty. And we must realize in particular that he is not saying that the love poets think that, as a result of their choice of subject matter, their verse will be smooth to boot: rather, the fact that if they write love poetry their verse may be technically superior is a primary reason why they feel attracted to their subject matter. Poetic beauty is thus not morally innocuous, but something that may tempt one to write one kind of poetry rather than another. On the other hand, to the extent that in this sonnet Herbert does not appear to be severely critical of the love poets, he probably does not feel any profound distrust of poetic beauty either. But some of the problems of the “Jordan” poems are already becoming apparent. These early sonnets exhibit an acceptance of love poetry while at the same time they reject it; poetic beauty may lead one astray from religious devotion although, in his practice, Herbert shows that it need not do so.

While the contradictions of these early poems are probably not wholly under Herbert’s control, it is important that we see them for what they are. There is no such thing as a consistent “poetic theory” here; rather, our attention is drawn to some complex issues which are not solved for us. In later poems, Herbert is probably more aware of the fact that he contradicts himself, but, for us, the final effect remains the same one of puzzlement, of witnessing a process of exploration rather than solution. This adds life to Herbert’s poems and does not diminish them in any sense.

Let us now turn to “Jordan” (i):

Who says that fictions onely and false hair
Become a verse? Is there in truth no beautie?
Is all good structure in a winding stair?
May no lines passe, except they do their dutie
Not to a true but painted chair?

Is it no verse, except enchanted groves
And sudden arbourds shadow course-suppe line?
Must purling streams refresh a lovers loves?
Must all be vail'd, while he that reades, divines,
Catching the sense at two removes?

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing:
Riddle who list, for me, and pull for Prime:
I envie no mans nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with losse of rime,
Who plainly say, My God, My King.

The titles of Herbert’s poems are generally highly significant, and certainly that is the case here. The river Jordan was crossed by the Israelites when they entered the Promised Land, and symbolically the title therefore stands for such things as cleansing, redemption, and so on. (Tuve has probably done more than anyone to explain to us what “Jordan” means in Herbert’s time; see pp. 182-203.) The general intent of Herbert’s title must be to indicate a conversion to Christianity and the loss of sin. For one thing, Herbert is saying that as a Christian poet he does not need Helicon for inspiration, as the other poets — again, clearly love poets — do.

The crucial question becomes then: what is Herbert’s attitude to those other poets? Does his use of the title suggest that he feels superior to them? I think probably so, since it is difficult to talk about cleansing, for example, without implying that there is also dirt (cleansing in Herbert’s case, dirt in that of the other poets).

Moreover, a second meaning attaches to the word “Jordan.” After the crossing of the Jordan, an altar was to be built, but without the use of tools. I do not think that critics have so far grasped the significance of this point as it relates to the “Jordan” poems. As I see it, Herbert is suggesting to us through his title that — in theory at least — he is building an altar for God, as a religious poet, and without tools, without any artificial aid of a technical nature. That is, I think that he indicates to us that while other poets, in not being “plain,” do use tools, he does not.

So far, then, we would interpret the poem as critical of other poets and their methods. Those other poets would in particular seem to be the writers of pastoral love poetry. In the third stanza they turn up as shepherds. Of course Herbert may for one thing refer to real shepherds, but more probably he is ironically calling pretentious pastoral poets “shepherds” because they are not in fact shepherds, not “honest people.” Thus the live-and-let-live tone of “let them sing,” too, is only superficially polite and tolerant. The poem throughout offers considerable criticism of the deviousness and falseness of other poets, and is in this respect not unlike the early sonnets that we have already considered, one of which, at any rate, appears to be quite unambiguous in its distaste for love poetry.

Of course, if we are to take it that Herbert is rebuking other poets, then he is also implying what his own verse is, or should be like. Not only is he not writing secular poetry — thus his message runs — but his poetry is also, he suggests, “plain.” As he concludes, he, in contrast to the love poets, “plainly” says “My God, My King.” By “plainly” he presumably means “simply,” but also “without undue embellishment” (and hence without dishonesty).

But as soon as we really begin to think about that statement, we become aware of unexpected implications and complications; and I think that that situation is wholly typical of our response to Herbert if we read him with an open mind. For one thing, he is not, of course, literally saying “My God, My King” at all. In fact, he has just written a poem which contains many such things as he has been criticizing. It would not be inappropriate to call the poem a “winding stair” with a “good structure,” for he only gradually, though firmly, leads up to his conclusion.

That phrase “My God, My King” sounds simple, but is not. It is monosyllabic and grammatically almost child-like with its lack of a verb. But Herbert’s supposedly plain expression is highly rhetorical in intent, for its seeming simplicity only makes us the more aware of the fact that a poem which appears to be avowedly “ascetic” or “puritanical” has its opposite built into it. Nor should we really be surprised by the double-barreled nature of the poem. The illogicalities of the early sonnets may well have been the result of confusion on Herbert’s part. It does not seem possible, however, to believe this of “Jordan” (I). For example, Herbert must have known that his poem was not, in fact, in any sense “plain.” Rather than
accuse him of lack of control here, we must assume that he knew what he was about, and that his complexities are deliberately signaled to the reader so as to make us share in a process of exploration. This, I take it, is a general characteristic of Renaissance literature. In my edition of Jasper Heywood's translation of Seneca's Thyestes I argued that this was due to the general nature of the times, but I also suggested that

It is with such events in mind that we must consider the importance of a recent book by Joel B. Altman, The Tudor Play of Mind. Altman's central thesis, as I see it, is that Tudor plays are not to be understood as presenting a one-sided picture of things, but that, on the contrary, the Renaissance mind was rhetorically trained to see both sides of a question and did so.7

Herbert, although a poet, is an author who ideally lends himself to Altman's approach to the dramatists. I do not mean, of course, that his complexities are only the result of his education, but, however important his social and personal background, we must never forget that as a University Orator and priest he was splendidly educated in debating and arguing. From a religious point of view, moreover, it was just as possible (and still is) to praise the world of the arts and the senses as to reject it. Of course only a good mind can embrace both positions at the same time. We have now largely lost this capacity, feeling that we must firmly settle for one stance or another. But "Jordan" (I), I suggest, is a poem in which Herbert did not make up his mind so firmly and one-sidedly as critics have been in the habit of arguing, whatever they see the final meaning of the poem as being. Puritanical critics believe that Herbert rejects the world of love poetry and poetic embellishment, while those who feel that Herbert was tolerant allow him acceptance of the beauty of this world in combination with the beauty of God. My proposal is that Herbert is adopting both attitudes at once, and if he is apparently paradoxical, then that is what we should expect his art to be.

We should of course relate "Jordan" (I) to "Jordan" (II). In the latter poem, Herbert deals with his own former poetic practice, not that of the love poets. Perhaps he indicates more clearly here than in "Jordan" (I) his disapproval of the non-religious way. He seems to say that he was formerly too much preoccupied with his self: "As flames do work and winde, when they ascend, / So did I weave my self into the sense" (II. 13-14). But I am not sure that his reaction to his former self is only one of condemnation. After all, it is possible to see the self in these lines as a sacrifice on God's altar, burning away as a victim; and Herbert is referring to an upward movement, not one towards Hell. And, perhaps even more tellingly, the process which he has been describing in the poem took its source in the "heav'nly joyes" of God mentioned in the very first line:

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

Clearly, though the point gets ignored in critical accounts, Herbert's preoccupation with metaphors and other technical devices started as a result of his quite proper preoccupation with God. So we need not assume that metaphors belong to the world of the devil. Yet, on the other hand it is not easy either to feel convinced that there is no suspicion of metaphors at all: if they were morally innocuous, why did the poet feel so attracted to them, and why are they associated in his mind with the evils of commerce?

Such puzzled uncertainty on the part of the reader is not dismissed by consideration of the end of the poem, where Herbert hears "a friend" whisper that there is in love "a sweetnesse readie penn'd" which he is to copy out while saving the "expense" of misdirected poetic craftsmanship. At first, it would seem that he will embark on a very different way of writing, characterized, presumably, by a greater forthrightness. But, if we reflect further, we come to realize that it is exactly the divine love now to be copied out which also originally his lines had made mention of, so that there is no guarantee that the whole process of roundabout labor will not re-commence. Once again, in this poem, Herbert is setting up things in tension and paradox, and he is giving us a problem with its many facets rather than a straight-lined solution. The fascination of the poem lies in its ability to see matters in their
full complexity rather than that any effort is made to solve the insoluble.

Ambiguous though they are, the "Jordan" poems perhaps express disapproval of poetic beauty rather than accepting it. The emphasis appears to be different from that of "The Forerunners," where in the last analysis metaphors are seen as not necessary, but certainly as a positive good. "The Forerunners" makes explicit several of the things we have already seen in the "Jordan" poems. It considers the various aspects of the relation between religion and poetic beauty more fully. It certainly does not arrive at a straight answer; indeed, the reader is taken through an argument which delights in finding new turns at every point.

The poem particularly examines the status of the phrase "Thou art still my God" in relation to the more elaborate and more apparently beautiful language which poetry normally employs. In the first two stanzas, the phrase "Thou art still my God" is related to the heart, while it is the brain which Herbert sees as creating "sparkling notions" (l. 4). The first, and the final, inclination of the poem is to celebrate, above the "sparkling notions" of the intellect, the devotion of the heart, expressed with minimal use of language in "Thou art still my God."

However, the language of poetry is not, in this poem, seen with any hostility. Even at the end, Herbert still grants that such things as the "sweet phrases" and "lovely metaphors" of the third stanza can perhaps embellish the simple devotional statement of the heart. While (typically) he is finally uncertain of the status of beautiful poetic language, he is willing to allow the possibility, at least, that it is a pleasing aid to devotion, as distinct from the problem which it appears to pose in the "Jordan" poems. Although in the last resort the poem accepts a decline in poetic power as inevitable now that the "harbingers" have come, the poem itself shows splendid poetic accomplishment. There seems no friction between a "theory" of plain language and a poetic practice which belies it, as in "Jordan" (l), and it hardly seems useful to claim, as Vendler does, that "Herbert died before writing a series of poems in bleak language" (p. 268). In fact, the third stanza makes clear that Herbert believed that he, as a religious poet, had quite properly taken over the language of love poets but improved on it for his purpose; again, there is no distaste whatever for poetic beauty, no strident declaration that in contrast to the love poets with their complicated language he had meant to embrace a poetic of simplicity (e.g., "My God, My King"). This poem openly celebrates the beauties of poetic language: "Lovely enchanting language, sugar-cane, honey of roses, whither wilt thou fly?" (II. 19-20). There is no puritanical attitude here. We can see that if this poet does abandon the lovely language of poetry, it will be with regret. The difference in emphasis with the "Jordan" poems is such that we might almost be forgiven for thinking that we are listening to another poet. And the beauty of poetry is not merely a matter of earthly joy, for as the fifth stanza reveals, there is a connection between God's beauty and earthly beauty, including that of poetic language:

True beautie dwells on high: ours is a flame
But borrow'd thence to light us thither.
Beautie and beauteous words should go together.

(II. 28-30)

Certainly God's beauty is superior, but the beauty of language should reflect that, and is not detached from it but part of it. For this reason, one is not only allowed to use beautiful language, but should do so, protecting it from unworthy use to which it might be put by the love poets. After we have read the whole poem, we are convinced that Herbert places God's beauty first, and devotion to God, but we are equally sure that Herbert is not only attracted to poetic language, but even sees it as a positive, sacred good which he must protect as best he can. The ideal remains that "Beautie and beauteous words should go together" even though the reality of the situation may well leave him with no more than the spare "Thou art still my God." It is the tension between these two attitudes, I think, which gives the poem its particular strength. It would have been very easy for it to become unconvincingly pious in stressing the value of "Thou art still my God" while supposedly rejecting beautiful language. Or the emphasis might have been wrong the other way round. As it is, Herbert does engage in the use of beautiful language, but he may (no more than "may," I feel) also persuade us of its limitations in the face of the emotional religious intensity of the simple "Thou art still my God." In part, one's reaction as a reader may well be guided by one's own emotional attitude; and poetically that is no disadvantage. Herbert's tact is such
that we are not compelled to adopt a one-sided view.

We thus see different perspectives being developed not only within individual poems, but also from one poem to another. It might be thought that our analysis so far has revealed a chronological growth in Herbert's thinking, and it does indeed seem likely that such differences as we find between the early sonnets and "The Forerunners" are at least in part of this nature. But even "The Forerunners" itself, I think, is so ambiguous in its stance that it cannot be interpreted as predicting just what Herbert might offer next. And I should like to place much more stress on what happens in individual poems than on any chronology which we might hope to discover. Our hope would in any case have to be limited by the fact that we have imperfect awareness of just what the chronology of the poems is. But apart from that there is the fact that Herbert is so versatile that one must doubt whether we would ever have seen anything like development in one particular direction even if we had known in which order the poems were written.

"Ambivalence," even if changing in emphasis and perspective, seems to me a hallmark of Herbert's poems, and thus if my approach to the poems so far has been to the point, it should also be applicable in other cases, no matter the question of chronology. I believe that it is indeed applicable, and should now like to examine two other relevant poems to strengthen my case. The first of these will be "The Quidditie":

My God, a verse is not a crown,
No point of honour, or gay suit,
No hawk, or banquet, or renown,
Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute:
It cannot vault, or dance, or play;
It never was in France or Spain;
Nor can it entertain the day
With my great stable or demain:
It is no office, art, or news,
Nor the Exchange, or busie Hall;
But it is that which while I use
I am with thee, and most take all.

The "quiddity," we know from Hutchinson, is "properly the schoolmen's term for the nature or essence of a thing" which "came to be used for any over-subtle or captious distinction" (p. 500). At first sight, we might be excused for thinking that Herbert is defining the nature/essence of verse through a process of elimination, stating primarily what verse is not. Inasmuch as this is indeed his procedure, it would seem to follow that the worldly things which he enumerates and with which verse is contrasted are to be rejected. In that event, the direction of the poem would appear to be puritanical, and to work towards the view that verse should be devotion merely, or else only use the "minimal" language appropriate to proper devotion, the kind of language of which such statements as "My God, My King" and "Thou art still my God" are examples.

Certainly the poem can be read in this way, and I do not wish to suggest that this interpretation, as far as it goes, is invalid. I do, however, feel that this interpretation is one-sided and should be complemented by what is virtually its opposite. Herbert does not exactly say what the language of his verse should be like, and it may be that, if we were to reject all of the worldly things mentioned, we should be guilty of making an "over-subtle or captious distinction." After all, as so often, Herbert's poem largely consists of the very things which he rejects, and possibly he is to some extent poking fun at spurious distinctions. We may believe that religious verse could be either silent or, if it is entitled to making use of the beauties of language (and of this world in general), it can do so fully; indeed, Herbert might be understood as proposing that the way to religion is through the beauties of verse. The poet does not say that when he is with God he writes verse, but that while he uses verse he is with God.

I consider that there is nothing in the poem which prevents us from reading it into these two directions, and that fact is probably not accidental. For example, the word "art" in the last stanza might lead us to suppose that Herbert is saying that poetry should not be artistic. But "art" may also have the negative sense of "cunning, artfulness," in which case it is merely this quality which Herbert appears to reject, not all artistic devices. And the fact remains that we have no reason for supposing that he genuinely and totally does reject all the things which he is writing about and which make up so much of his poem. It would seem possible that he means that each thing on its own would not make a verse, but that the totality of God's world (to which "art" in all senses belongs) does. In any case,
the poem becomes more complex the longer we look at it, not less.

My last example is "A true Hymne." In this poem, Herbert stresses the importance of the connection between the work of art and the life of the soul, giving priority to the latter, as, without the soul, seemingly fine lines are in fact not fine: "The finenesse which a hymne or psalme affords, / Is, when the soul unto the lines accords" (ll. 9-10). Conversely, even a few words can become the best in art if spoken truly; thus it is with the phrase which has been haunting Herbert: "My joy, my life, my crown" (l. 5). In the end, however, Herbert works towards a combination in which, with the help of God, one writes poetry which is both aesthetically fine and morally so. For, if one's attitude is right, then God will no doubt complete one's verses. The poem's conclusion is of crucial significance in this regard:

God doth supply the want.
As when th' heart sayes (sighing to be approved)
O, could I love! and stops: God writeth, Loved.
(ll. 18-20)

One may feel inadequacy on two grounds when writing "O, could I love!" First, one feels that there is something wanting in one's attitude, because one's attempt to love falls short of its purpose. Secondly, one feels one is producing incomplete verse. But, Herbert implies, if one's attitude is right, then one's technique will come right too, since God will complete one's sentence. God adds the word "Loved." Thus one gets completion of rhyme at the same time as completion of sense, and the technique expresses moral and metaphysical harmony. God returns one's love, for one loves while being loved. Because of one's good intention, God actively expresses His love, both in deed and in word.

But, despite this move towards harmony, some oddity remains. What is clear at the end is that God expresses love. What is also clear is that as a result Herbert can finish his poem. The final line has within it a variant of a traditional love phrase which normally occurs in the form "I love loved" — that is, "I love while being loved." Herbert, however, gives us a new sense of love, and not only in that he is not concerned with secular love. What he in fact says is: "O, if only I could love God while God loves me," which means that we can be sure of God's love for Herbert, but not of Herbert's ability to love God. In that respect, then, the final harmony of the poem is only apparent, and we cannot be at all confident that it is complete. Herbert still presents himself as in fact not necessarily capable of wholehearted devotion. The poem ends with an ambiguous poise, and once again it is a poem of exploration rather than an assertion or definite statement.

As such, it confirms what we have seen elsewhere. Critics may argue, for example, that Herbert is an ascetic or that he is not, but the complexity of the poems themselves is such as not to allow a final answer. His attitude to poetic craftsmanship varies and evolves, and there is thus no point in speaking of Herbert's "poetic theory." His very attitude to God is dynamic and changeable, and his attitude to poetic beauty — quite logically — is not stagnant either. This does not mean, of course, that we must not try to discover just what that attitude is. But if we are to do so we can only achieve success by close analysis of individual poems, however unfashionable such attentive reading may now appear to be in English studies.

I am not suggesting that Herbert's exploratory, uncertain attitude is somehow "un-Christian." On the contrary, he seems to me more honest about the difficulty of being a Christian than many believers and disbelievers, and I do not think that his attitude is uncharacteristic of a century when it had seemingly become necessary to justify God's ways to men. To acknowledge that the faith is difficult is not the same as rejecting it.

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Notes

3It is not my intention to suggest that Rickey's work needs to be
single out as somehow remarkably defective. In all instances, when I refer to critics and disagree with them, I do so in order to highlight certain representative opinions which seem to me to be only partially true; they are valuable nevertheless.

4All quotations of Herbert's writings are taken from The Works of George Herbert, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (1941; corr. rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), and will be indicated by line or page number only in the text of my essay.


