

HOW HERBERT DIFFERS FROM DONNE

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One of the first people to draw attention to Herbert's qualities as a poet was Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who quoted favourite passages from time to time in his own writings. In one of his manuscript notes he set out a considered view of Herbert's qualities with an indication of his opinion why they might have suffered neglect:

“George Herbert is 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. To appreciate this volume it is not enough that the Reader possess a cultivated judgment, classical Taste or even poetic sensibility - unless he be likewise a CHRISTIAN, and both a zealous and an orthodox, both a devout and a *devotional*, Christian. But even this will not quite suffice. He must be an affectionate and dutiful Child of the Church, and from Habit, Conviction and a constitutional Predisposition to Ceremoniousness, in piety as in manners, find her forms and ordinances Aids of Religion, not sources of Formality. For religion is the Element in which he lives, and the Region in which he moves...”

Although it was partly his fine ear as a poet that enabled him to appreciate Herbert's unusual qualities as a poet, Coleridge's enthusiasm for Herbert was particularly prominent in his later years - a development which can be associated with his growing devotion to the established Church. But he also shared Herbert's feeling for music, something that one notices in other admirers of him. Coleridge himself is not always associated with music; his own account of the matter, however, was that he had no ear for music as such and could not sing an air to save his life, but that he delighted in fine music nevertheless, and was excellent at distinguishing good from bad.

Coleridge also showed his appreciation of Donne, whom he described in a short piece of verse as

Rhyme's sturdy Cripple, Wit's Maze and Clue,
Thought's Forge and Furnace, Mangle-press and Screw.

Coleridge's growing appreciation of Herbert is extremely interesting, given the fact that Herbert's reputation until then had been so obscure - the very survival of the texts having been largely due to his friend Nicholas Ferrar, to

whom he entrusted the manuscript collection of *The Temple*, and who, fortunately for us, proved faithful to the trust. It also aligns Coleridge with a later poet who went through similar processes of doubt and reconsideration. Just as Coleridge found himself unwilling to continue in the path of religious dissent that he had been attracted to in the mid 1790s, so T. S. Eliot, who had actually been brought up in the American tradition as a Unitarian, found that the adventurousness as a writer which had led to his being a leading poet and critic of his time had begun to lead him also into a desert country which had found him fearing to lose his bearings altogether. It was in his realization of that plight that he had suffered the nervous breakdown and period of depression spent on the Kentish coast at the end of the First World War, which led, paradoxically, to the composition of his brilliant poetic compilation *The Waste Land*, which included the autobiographical line,

On Margate sands I can connect nothing with nothing.

In previous years Eliot had been making more and more connections across the world of his intellect until the effect had been not to create the nexus of them that would constitute a grand interpretative whole of interpretation but a sense of depression and despair at his failure to do so.

From this despair he was rescued by perceiving that human minds did not need to pursue this line of amassing minute facts and subtle distinctions but could choose instead the path followed by a saintly figure such as Bishop Lancelot Andrewes and the shift away from pure cleverness that can be detected in a man such as John Donne. In dealing with Andrewes he points out his tendency to make a point by way of repetition: “he will not hesitate to hammer, to inflect, even to play upon a word for the sake of driving home its meaning: “Let us then make this so accepted a time in itself twice acceptable by our accepting which He will acceptably take at our hands.””

Equally, he praises the virtue of his ‘extraordinary prose’, “which appears to repeat, to stand still, but is nevertheless proceeding in the most deliberate and orderly manner”.

In contrast he quotes a well-known passage from John Donne’s devotions: “A memory of yesterday’s pleasures. a feare of tomorrow’s dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, an anything a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer. So certainly is there nothing, nothing in spirituall things, perfect in this world.”

In another passage, Donne deplures this effect in his audience as well: "I am not all here, I am here now preaching upon this text, and I am at home in my library considering whether S. Gregory, or S. Hierome, have said best of this text, before. I am here speaking to you, and yet I consider by the way, in the same instant, what it is likely you will say to one another when I have done, you are not all here neither; you are here now, hearing me, and yet you are thinking that you have heard a better sermon somewhere else, of this text before... you are here, and you remember your selves that now ye think of it: This had been the fittest time, now, when every body else is at Church, to have made such and such a private visit; and because you would be there, you are there."

Eliot could not easily disparage a mind so like his own as Donne's, with its fertile, ranging and questing qualities, but the effect of his recovery from its over-excess was to produce a balancing valuation of minds such as those of Herbert and Andrewes, which were directed, single of purpose and devoted to a single end. If one were looking for similar qualities at a later period one would probably be drawn to a figure such as John Henry Newman, where one suspects the pressure of a sophistication not altogether unlike Eliot's; but if one tries to align Herbert with devout figures such as Andrewes or Newman, my own feeling is that he would not have been altogether happy in their company either. It is as if he was still searching for an acceptable middle way that would enable him to acknowledge the mental habits of Donne that he shared, yet also keep alive the censoring presence of his conscience. What I think he came to find and value increasingly in Herbert was a quality which did not, as in Donne's case, produce ambiguities and enigmas for the mind to work at and tease out, but a different kind of ambiguity altogether, one that simply reinforced a particular sense, steadily increasing the note of emphasis. For Herbert this kind of emphasis could be effected simply by someone such as a priest, repeating a single formula or ritual over and over again.

It is because of his apparent blindness to this quality that I find it necessary to take issue with a critic such as William Empson when he sets his critical gifts to work on one of Herbert's most characteristic works. This is the stanza that Empson chooses from the poem entitled 'The Sacrifice'.

Oh all ye who pass by, behold and see;
Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree,
The tree of life, to all but only me.
Was ever grief like mine?

Empson's commentary runs: "The first line now at last, with an effect of apotheosis, gives the complete quotation from Jeremiah. He climbs the tree to repay what was stolen, as if he was putting the apple back; but the phrase in itself implies rather that he is doing the stealing, that so far from sinless he is Prometheus and the criminal. Either he stole on behalf of man (it is he who appeared to be sinful, and was caught up the tree) or he is climbing upwards, like Jack on the Beanstalk, and taking his people with him back to Heaven. The phrase has an odd humility which makes us see him as the son of the house; possibly Herbert is drawing on the medieval tradition that the Cross was made of the wood of the forbidden trees. Jesus seems a child in this metaphor, because he is the Son of God, because he can take the apples without actually stealing (though there is some doubt about this), because of the practical and domestic associations of such a necessity, and because he is evidently smaller than Man, or at any rate than Eve, who could pluck the fruit without climbing. This gives a pathetic humour and innocence (except ye receive the Kingdom of Heaven as a little child, ye shall in no wise enter."

All this is at once intelligent and entertaining; it may even give us a glimpse into the subconscious workings of Herbert's mind; but I would contend that as an account of Herbert's conscious process it is strictly irrelevant once we accept that that conscious process was engaged with the language of fidelity. By this he is concerned to avoid ambiguity; he directs attention to the tree of life on the one hand and the cross, the tree of faith, necessary to salvation.

W.H. Auden commented on Herbert's gift for securing musical effects by varying the length of the lines in a stanza. Of all the so-called 'metaphysical' poets he has the subtlest ear. As George Macdonald said of him "The music of a poem is its meaning in sound as distinguished from word... The sound which takes shape of a verse is the harbinger of the truth contained in it... Herein Herbert excels. It will be found impossible to separate the music of his words from the music of the thought in their sound."

T.S.Eliot tried to express something of the difference between such poets, on the other hand, by putting together three passages. The conclusion of Donne's "Batter my heart, three-person'd God..."

I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

was set against the conclusion of Herbert's first poem entitled 'Prayer':

Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices, something understood.

This last he compared to the lines by Keats:

...magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn,

commenting that both belonged to a kind of poetry that could be called 'magical'. When he says this it is a reminder that he is brought up in a poetic tradition that was essentially romantic: however much he might find to criticize in his forebears, there was still a streak in his mind that responded instinctively to the writing of Keats, Shelley and their successors. This subliminal awareness enabled him, in his *Four Quartets*, to produce a verbal music that was recognizably romantic.

Interestingly, I do not know that Coleridge ever showed any sign of having read the poem 'Prayer', though it would be fascinating to know what he would have made of it. Certainly, Herbert, sometimes puzzled him. On reading Stanza 48 of 'The Church-Porch' for instance,

If thou be single, all thy goods and ground
Submit to love; but yet not more then all
Give one estate, as one life. None is bound
To work for two, who brought himself to thrall.
God made me one man; love makes me no more,
Till labour come, and make my weaknesse score.

he wrote simply "I do not understand this Stanza."

His openness in confessing when understanding failed him may help to explain another puzzling point. Like many readers he was taken with the poem 'Virtue':

SWEET day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridall of the earth and skie:
The dew shall weep thy fall to night;
For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue angrie and brave
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye:
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet dayes and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie;
My musick shows ye have your closes,
And all must die.

Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
Like season'd timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

In his *Biographia Literaria* he chose to present this as a prize exhibit of the excellencies to which poetry could aspire, and yet he made two changes which indicated an opinion differing from the author's. The first was to change word 'box' to 'nest' in the third stanza. We cannot be sure why he did this, but when he states that he was at first attracted to Herbert for his 'quaintnesses' and only later perceived his true virtues, we are drawn to suspect that the word 'box' was one of the quaintnesses that he noted and which excited his disapproval. At the same time Coleridge expressed his enjoyment of Herbert's custom of employing homely words and phrases, so that one might expect him to enjoy a word such as 'box'. This suggests that there were limits to his tolerance of the homely, a surviving sense of the need for poetic decorum.

The other change is still more striking. In citing the poem he omitted the last stanza altogether, a change which he had already indicated in a manuscript correction. Here again his reason is not given explicitly, so that one is driven to surmise. It may well be that once more he had difficulty in making good sense of what was in front of him. The prospect of the whole world turning to coal, as if it were in the end nothing but compacted woodland, pressed in the course of ages into a more permanent substance, is strangely intriguing; but it also renders the conclusion mystifying. Why should seasoned timber seem more alive than that?

For the answer I think we have to look at the meaning of the word 'coal' itself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that it originally meant a piece of carbon that glowed without bursting into flame. Once one thinks of Herbert's lines with that in mind the image that rises is that of the whole

world becoming a great mass of glowing red heat. In such a world one can see that seasoned timber would stand out as the substance that could readily burst into flame, and so establish its quality of being more obviously alive than the rest. It may well be that Coleridge was not aware of that older sense and so felt it better to discard completely a closing stanza that seemed to make so little sense.

Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
Like season'd timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

PRAYER. (I)

PRAYER the Churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth ;
Engine against th' Almightye, sinner's 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 ;
Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bels beyond the stars heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices, something understood.

Coleridge was particularly drawn to empathize with Herbert's sense of unworthiness and of failure. His poem 'Employment' ends,

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

I am no link of thy great chain,
But all my companie is a weed.
Lord place me in thy consort; give one strain
To my poore reed.

Another poem, 'Praise', ends

O raise me then! poore bees, that work all day,
Sting my delay,
Who have a work, as well as they,
And much, much more.

Coleridge found it natural to produce a work of his own, the poem 'Work without Hope', which contains the lines

All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair -
The bees are stirring - birds are on the wing -
And WINTER slumbering in the open air,
Wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!
And I, the while, the sole unbusy thing,
Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.

He also wrote to Lady Beaumont: "My dear old Friend, Charles Lamb, and I differ widely (& in point of Taste & Moral Feeling this is a rare Occurrence) in our estimation & liking of George Herbert's Sacred Poems. He greatly prefers Quarles - nay, he *dislikes* Herbert - but if Herbert had only written the two following stanzas - & there are a hundred other that in one mood or other of my mind have impressed me - I should be grateful for the possession of his works. The stanzas are especially affecting to me, because the folly of over-valuing myself in any reference to my future lot is *not* the sin or danger that besets me - but a tendency to self-contempt, a sense of the utter disproportionateness of all, I can call *me*, to the promises of the Gospel - *this* is *my* sorest temptation. The *promises*, I say: not to the *Threats*. For in order to the fulfilment of these, it needs only, that I should be left to myself - to sink into the chaos & lawless productivity of my own still-perishing yet imperishable Nature - Now in this temptation I have received great comfort from the following Dialogue between the Soul & it's Redeemer -

Sweetest Saviour, if my soul
Were but worth the having,
Quickly should I then control
Any thought of waving.
But when all my care and pains
Cannot give the name of gains
To thy wretch so full of stains
What delight or hope remains?

What (child), is the balance thine?
Thine the poise and measure?
If I say "Thou shalt be mine,"
Finger not my treasure.
What the gains in having thee
Do amount to, only He
Who for man was sold, can see,
That transferred th'accounts to me."

One need not pursue his enthusiasm far into this praise of the poem 'Dialogue' to see that what he was describing as his own position simply takes him beyond Lamb's delight in the old and even unfashionable and into a Christian position more radical than Lamb's. What is described in this poem is not a 'Dialogue', but a breaking off from dialogue, as the Saviour so enforces the sense of his disproportionate sacrifice on behalf of mankind as to make any further dialectic of conversation impossible:

Ah! no more: thou break'st my heart.

This is what Coleridge means when he declares that to fully appreciate Herbert, it is not enough to respect his devotional nature; one must acknowledge the extent to which "religion is the Element in which he lives, and the Region in which he moves..." Charles Lamb was a genial and a witty figure, but he could not quite go that far.