A WRITER IN HIS TIME: GEORGE HERBERT AND HIS LITERARY CONTEMPORARIES

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Introduction: setting Herbert (GH) in the literary, ecclesiastical and political contexts of his lifetime. Notable juxtapositions include –

1593 – Birth of GH; death of Marlowe; publication of Shakespeare's *Venus & Adonis*

1599 – GH and family move to Oxford; translation of the *Psalms* into English lyric verse by Sir Philip Sidney (d. 1586) and his sister Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, presented to Queen Elizabeth I (probably the most important literary/spiritual influence on GH's poetry); Globe Theatre opens

1605 – GH at Westminster School when Lancelot Andrewes (great preacher of H's day) is Dean of Westminster, and the Gunpowder Plot is foiled just across the road!

1611 – GH a young student at Cambridge when the Authorised (King James) Version of the Bible in English is published; first book of religious poems by a named Englishwoman, Aemilia Lanyer, also published; Shakespeare's *The Tempest* performed for the first time

1613 – GH still at Cambridge when first play by an Englishwoman, Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedie of Mariam*, published; in the same year (not connected!) the Globe burns down

1620 – GH Cambridge University orator; Pilgrim Fathers set sail to find religious freedom in America

1624 – GH ordained deacon; John Donne, family friend and now Dean of St Paul's, publishes his prose *Devotions*

1628 – GH preparing for marriage (1629), Bemerton and ordination as priest (1630); meanwhile, William Harvey publishes his discovery of the circulation of the blood

Against this backdrop, many perspectives on GH's work in relation to contemporary works or writers are possible: GH and the King James Bible, for instance, or GH and Shakespeare, or links between GH and secular love poets of his day. But since GH was author of some of the most exquisite devotional poetry in the English language, my focus is on him in relation to contemporary writers in his own genre. What are the parallels between GH's devotional lyrics and those of his contemporaries – and what can we learn about H's own distinctive characteristics as a writer by setting him in this context?

First pair of poems: about last things ...

1. ‘Holy Sonnet’ VII by John Donne (1572-1631)

At the round earths imagin’d corners, blow
Your trumpets, Angells, and arise, arise
From death, you numberlesse infinities
Of soules, and to your scattred bodies goe,
All whom the flood did, and fire shall o’erthrow,
All whom warre, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
Despaire, law, chance, hath slaine, and you whose eyes
Shall behold God, and never taste deaths woe,
But let them sleepe, Lord, and mee mourne a space,
For, if above all these, my sinnes abound,
‘Tis late to aske abundance of thy grace,
When wee are there; here on this lowly ground,
Teach mee how to repent; for that’s as good
As if thou’hadst seal’d my pardon, with thy blood.

2. ‘Vertue’ by George Herbert (1593-1633)

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.

Donne: using the sonnet form, but with an energy that bursts out of its seams; colloquial voice working against the poem’s metre and across line ends; commanding tone; imaginative reconstruction of the scene of the Last Judgment and analysis of the causes of death; intense drama; contrast between first and second parts of the sonnet, between last day and the present, between eternity and now, heaven and ‘lowly ground’; fear of judgment leads to self-focus in conclusion.

Herbert: a poised, transparent lyric, ‘clear’ and ‘calm’ like its ‘sweet day’; structured in lyric stanzas, using the form to underline the sense of ending; repeated short final line a kind of refrain, changing slightly with each repetition; celebration of ‘sweet’ things suggests a poem which will conclude with ‘carpe diem’, or seize the day while it lasts, but in fact the argument changes direction in the final stanza and asserts where true life really is, in the ‘vertuous soul’ on the last day when the ‘whole world’ burns up; intense use of ‘sweet’, redefining it by moving away from innocence (day), beauty (rose) and promise (spring) to a much tougher sense of sweetness as the strength achieved by virtue and affliction (‘season’d timber’).

Both poems are concerned with how to face the end of things, but while D stresses drama and fear, H ends with quiet confidence as expressed in the last word, the active verb ‘lives’.

Second pair of poems: about the intense passionate experience of loving God ...

3. ‘A short oblation’ by Dame Gertrude More (1604-1633) – poem dedicating her devotional writings to ‘our most sweet and merciful God’.

[English Catholic nun at Cambrai; great-great-granddaughter of Sir Thomas More]

My God to thee I dedicate
This simple work of mine.
And also with it hart and soul
To be for ever thine.
No other motive wil I have
Then by it thee to praise
And stir up my poor frozen soul
By love it-self to raise.
O I desir neither tongue, nor pen
But to extol Gods praise,
In which exces ile melt away
Ten thousand thousand ways,
And as one that is sick with love
Engraves on every Tree
The Name and Praise of him she loves
So shal it be with me.

4. ‘Bitter-sweet’ by George Herbert

Ah my deare angry 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.

More: clarity and simplicity of style (principles shared with GH); echoes of the Petrarchan tradition of love experienced as extreme physical sensation ('sick with love') and paradoxical sensations (freezing and melting); sensual impact of devotion; ends with the spiritual equivalent of carving an earthly lover's name on a tree, but in this case it is subtly transformed into the 'Tree' of the cross and the 'Name' is holy.

Herbert: similarly plain style and use of paradoxes (sour and sweet at once, as in the title – the poem complains and praises in the same breath); similarly gendered relationship with God (soul is female, 'anima'), even though the speaker here is probably male; takes the Petrarchanism one step further, by suggesting that God himself is 'deare' and 'angry' like a wayward human lover, and therefore his actions are merely being copied by the speaker; the boldness of this reciprocal gesture suggests that this is the speaker's perception of God, the familiar experience of God appearing to support and test us, 'love, yet strike', as in the ups and downs of life both material and spiritual; crucially, the poem ends on the positive again, on 'love' as the final action.

Third and final pair of poems: on visionary moments, glimpses of the eternal in the present ...

5. 'Prayer' (I) by George Herbert

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;

Engine against th' Almightie, sinners towre,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-daies world transposing in an houre,
A 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 starres heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices; something understood.

6. 'The Retreat' by Henry Vaughan (1621-1695) [GH's most famous follower]

Happy those early days! when I
Shined in my Angel-infancy.
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy aught
But a white, celestial thought,
When yet I had not walked above

A mile, or two, from my first love,
And looking back (at that short space),
Could see a glimpse of his bright-face;
When on some gilded cloud, or flower
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity;
Before I taught my tongue to wound
My conscience with a sinful sound,
Or had the black art to dispense
A several sin to every sense,
But felt through all this fleshly dress
Bright shoots of everlastingness.
O how I long to travel back
And tread again that ancient track!
That I might once more reach that plain,
Where first I left my glorious train,
From whence the enlightened spirit sees
That shady city of palm trees;
But (ah!) my soul with too much stay
Is drunk, and staggers in the way.
Some men a forward motion love,
But I by backward steps would move,
And when this dust falls to the urn
In that state I came return.

Herbert: here uses the sonnet form (compare Donne) but in a radical way, with no main verb or statement (not 'prayer is', just 'prayer'); a series of epithets, attempts at suggesting the nature of prayer (and therefore implying how difficult it is to encapsulate this phenomenon); full of inspired metaphors for prayer, which is communal, two-way, necessary, purposeful, joyful, all-encompassing; expresses the experience of prayer as glimpses of 'heaven in ordinarie' or echoes of the music of eternity; complex phrases such as 'church-bels ...' suggesting that prayer is reciprocal, being both heavenly worship heard below and earthly sounds ringing upwards to God; astounding final phrase, setting aside all the complex phrases and metaphors, all the attempts to pin down what prayer is and how it works, and concluding with a plain phrase, 'something understood', which is open to almost endless interpretation (the one who prays being understood by God, or things divine perceived by the praying person, or the very process of trying to understand being prayer itself ...)

Vaughan: a very different mode of writing, more expansive than GH's lyrical concision; based in narrative, telling a story of a lifetime as moving from pre-conception closeness with God to an increasing distance from him; therefore wanting to see life as an attempted return to God, a necessarily 'backward' movement or 'Retreat'; written in rhyming couplets, steady in structure, yet containing momentary glimpses of visionary intensity; greatest of these is 'bright shoots of everlastingness', a magnificent phrase suggesting the presence of a spiritual state, 'everlastingness', implicit and growing in spite of our mortal 'fleshly dress'.

To end with a poem reminding us of the particular qualities of GH's verse:

7. 'Deniall' by George Herbert

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:

My bent thoughts, like a brittle bow,
Did flie asunder:
Each took his way; some would to pleasures go,
Some to the warres and thunder
Of alarms.

As good go any where, they say,
As to benumme
Both knees and heart, in crying night and day,
Come, come, my God, O come,
But no hearing.

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.

Therefore my soul lay out of sight,
Untun'd, unstrung:
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,
Like a nipt blossome, hung
Discontented.

O cheer and tune my heartlesse breast,
Deferre no time;
That so thy favours granting my request,
They and my minde may chime,
And mend my ryme.

This poem has the intense spiritual drama that we also saw in Donne's poetry; the passionate longing that we discovered in More's verse; the metaphors and the vision that we found in Vaughan. GH has a great deal in common with his contemporaries and they were all inheritors of the same literary traditions, post-Reformation religious developments, shared cultural and political climates, linguistic expansion and biblical influence. Yet GH has his own distinctive features, including: inventive use of lyrical structures (here, the deliberately unrhymed last line of each stanza, giving way in the end to the triumphant re-establishment of the harmonious 'chime' of 'ryme' which expresses a restored relationship with God); Psalm-like combination of individual perspective and shared expression; choice of titles (GH was the first to make use of these for short lyric poems) compressing a number of possible meanings into a word or phrase (here, 'Deniall' suggesting the initial sense that God is denying the speaker access to him, which shifts by the end to the sense that it was the speaker who had been denying God the chance to offer help); a winning balance of complexity and simplicity, mixing technical brilliance with accessible metaphors – in this case, music, the body, conflict, nature – ensuring that his work is always open to, and transformed by, the experiences brought to the poems by their readers.

References:

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