CROSS-BIAS: THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF BEMERTON HONORING GEORGE HERBERT 1593-1633

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The Latin Poetry in an Evaluation of George Herbert

The devotional verses grouped together in *The Temple* are, as T. S. Eliot points out, "The poems on which George Herbert's reputation is based" (236). An overemphasis on this collection (particularly the part known as "The Church") in our evaluation of Herbert, however, can lead us to a distorted understanding of the whole of his work. L. C. Knights, for instance, makes the sweeping assertion that "Herbert's poetry was for him very largely a way of working out his conflicts" (243). If one is only considering the Herbert whom we see in *The Temple*, this statement seems accurate enough. If we consider the whole *corpus* of his poetry, on the other hand, our understanding of Herbert as a poet, and also the nature of the conflict we are witnessing in his poetry, changes significantly.

The Temple is, in fact, only one of five carefully constructed collections of poems written by Herbert. It is the one most widely read now, no doubt, because it is the one that accords most closely with modern literary tastes: *The Temple* is known for the highly personal, often emotional, devotional verses it contains. The other collections, *Musæ Responsoriæ*, *Passio Discerpta*, *Lucus*, *Memoriæ Matris Sacrum*, as well as the miscellaneous efforts grouped together as *Alia Poemata Latina*, contain mostly polemical, didactic, satirical, or commemorative religious verses, things which seem more foreign to modern tastes. In addition, there is another impediment to modern readers: all these other poems are in Latin (or classical Greek).

W. Hilton Kelliher says of them that Herbert's "Latin verses, representing for the most part the outcome of a conflict that has been resolved in God's favor, lack the drama and compulsion that we

find in his *Temple* poems" (35). The author of these other works, in fact, reveals a firm and precise conception of the proper form and function of the Church that is only vaguely perceived in *The Temple*. To ignore these poems is to risk misunderstanding both Herbert's understanding of religion and his overall approach to poetry.

We know from "The British Church" that Herbert valued Anglicanism as a "middle way" between Puritanism and Roman Catholicism:

> But dearest Mother, (what those miss)
> The mean thy praise and glory is,
> And long may be.
> (DiCesare 45)

He avoids discussion, however, of specific details, merely describing the Roman Catholic Church as "painted" and Calvinism as "undrest."[1] This vagueness may lead readers to the conclusion that Herbert sought to avoid religious controversy. One of his earliest works, however, *Musæ Responsoriæ* is a point-by-point defense of Anglican religious practices, some as specific as poems "On the Surplice" and "On the Biretta."[2] Herbert wrote these as a response to the Puritan Andrew Melville, who had earlier addressed a poem to King James urging acceptance of the Millenary Petition, which sought to abolish the practices that Herbert here defends.

While not all of these poems are terribly serious in tone (one of his arguments in favor of the sign of the cross is that adopting a cruciform posture keeps a swimmer afloat), and while he does not construct one coherent defense of ritual, Herbert nonetheless comes down firmly on its side. Kelliher's explanation is that

> Herbert valued the ceremonies current in the English church since the Reformation not because he felt they enshrined mystical elements or were in themselves essential to salvation, but being grounded in scripture, rich in Christian symbolism and instinct with holiness they were such, he believed, as no reasonable worshipper could reject. (29)

While this is certainly true, it amounts to only a passive defense of ritual: it argues why ritual should be permitted, but not why it should be maintained. Given that, over the course of his life, "Herbert underwent nothing like a serious change in his religious convictions or practices" (Stewart 26), it is reasonable to look for a stronger motivation for his staunch defense.

Looking further, it becomes clear that Herbert saw ritual as an important instrument in bringing people to religious truth. Why human beings require such an agency is clear from "In Angelos" ("On Angels"), a poem from the collection *Lucus*:

> Intellectus adultus Angelorum
> Haud nostro similis, cui necesse,
> Ut dentur species, rogare sensum;
> Et ni lumina ianuam resignent,
> Et nostræ tribuant molæ farinam,
> Sæpe ex se nihil otiosa cudit.
> A nobis etenim procul remoti
> Labuntur fluuii scientiarum:
> Si non per species, nequimus ipsi,
> Quid ipsi sumus, assequi putando.
> Non tantum est iter Angelis ad undas,
> Nullo circuitu scienda pungunt,
> Illis perpetuæ patent fenestræ,
> Se per se facili modo scientes,
> Atque ipsi sibi sunt mola et farina.
>
> The perfected mind of Angels
> Is not like ours at all,
> Which must by nature
> Look to our senses

For concrete images.
Eyes must unlock
The outer world and to our mills
Yield grain; of itself the mind
Often will grind out, being slow,
No bounty. Far off indeed
From us do knowledge's obscure
Streams descend: if it weren't
For concrete things, we ourselves
Could not by thinking find
What we are in ourselves.
To the water Angels don't have to travel
So far: they can be roused
By knowledge that is not
Roundabout; to them
Eternal windows are open;
By virtue of themselves they have
An easy way to know themselves; they are
To themselves both grain and mill.[3]

Angels, he says, are pure intellect, but people must rely on sense experiences to attain knowledge. This idea is hardly original to Herbert, of course, but it is significant that he thought it important enough to explore at this length in a poem. Ritual, to Herbert, was one of those concrete things that help bring people to religious truth. This belief on his part would explain the great care that he took in interpreting "the origins and purposes of Anglican ritual" to his parishioners (Kelliher 29). Ritual played a necessary and practical part in religious observance.

That this was Herbert's approach is reinforced by his attitude, as revealed in his poetry, toward Roman Catholicism on the one hand and Puritanism on the other. Stanley Stewart points out the curious fact that Herbert "saves his best shots for the Puritans" (32). He does attack the Roman Catholic Church as well, but here "He invariably condemned the arrogance of papal claims but seldom, if ever, mentioned the differences between the roman and the Anglican rites or ceremonies" (32). This attitude is succinctly stated in the epigram "Papæ Titulus, Nec Deus, Nec Homo" ("The Pope's Title [Not God or Man]" from *Lucus*:

Quisnam Antichristus cessemus quærere; Papa
  Nec Deus est nec Homo: Christus uterque fuit.

Let us not continue asking
Who is the Antichrist. The Pope is not
God or man: Christ was both.

Herbert's attack on Puritanism is more substantive. His poem "De Rituum Usu" ("On the Use of Rites") from *Musæ Responsoriæ* is, as the title indicates, a defense of ritual in general. Here he says:

  Non alio Cathari modo
Dum sponsam Domini piis
Orbam ritibus expetunt,
Atque ad barbariem patrum
Vellent omnia regredi,
Illam tegminis insciam
Prorsus Dæmoni et hostibus
Exponunt superabilem.

And so the Puritans,
While they are covetous of a
Lord's bride bare of sacred rites,
And while they wish

All things regressed to their fathers' barbaric state,
Lay her, entirely
Ignorant of clothing, bare to conquest
By Satan and her enemies.

As in "The British Church," the Puritans are depicted as "undressing" the Church, and here Herbert makes an overt connection between metaphorical "clothes" and religious ritual. Given the tenacity with which Herbert defends ritual, one suspects he means something more than that the Church of England offers "an aesthetically and politically pleasing form of worship" (Stewart 27). After all, he concludes "The British Church" with:

Blessed be God, whose love it was
To double-moat thee with his grace,
And none but thee.

Herbert's use of clothing involves more than aesthetics. If we recall the scriptural significance of clothing (as Herbert invites us to do in "De Rituum Usu"), we will remember that clothing became necessary only after the fall from grace. It is an outward sign of that fallen state which separates us from angels. In attempting to do away with religious ritual, the Puritans are aspiring to an angelic state of understanding and failing to take into account our human limitations. They are therefore creating a barrier to true understanding. The Roman Catholics, who suffer from too much kissing of shrines, have stopped looking beyond the concrete to the spiritual. This, however, is a human error: they have not eradicated the *means* of achieving understanding.

Herbert addresses this same failing in the Puritans, using different imagery, in "De Labe Maculīsque" ("Of Spots and Stains") from *Musæ Responsoriæ*:

Labeculus maculāsque nobis obiicis:
Quid? Hoccine est mirum? Viatores sumus.
Quō sanguis est Christi, nisi ut maculas lavet,
Quas spargit animæ corporis propius latum?
Vos ergo Puri!

You reproach us for
Imperfections, stains.
Why? Is it so
Strange? We are
Travelers. What
Is Christ's blood for, save
To wash stains off,
Which the body's clay, too intimate,
Sprinkles on the spirit?
You are therefore pure!

Here again the Puritans are depicted as fighting against the inevitable human condition, denying the imperfections of the flesh and, in the process, missing much of the point of religion.

There is ample reason to believe that Herbert saw his devotional poetry as fulfilling a function parallel to that of church ritual. He was undoubtedly familiar with Ignatian meditation (Stewart 58), which overtly uses contemplation of a visual image as a point of departure for a more spiritual destination. In addition, as Charles A. Huttar demonstrates, he was strongly influenced by the tradition of emblematic poetry, which was, by definition, centered on a particular scene or image. The effect of "The Church," and *Passio Discerpta*[4] as well, is that of a collection of static moments and images, each explored separately but together creating one overall picture in mosaic. Many of the poems describe one scene, with the "title as a surrogate for the missing picture" (Huttar 73). "The Windows" is an example. Other of Herbert's poems, unlike standard emblematic poems (Huttar 79), do not focus on one image, but include several while still presenting them in an emblematic way. Often these images exist in paradoxical combinations, and over the course of an individual poem, or

a collection, we are compelled to compare and contrast the competing images. The result, says Huttar, is "an example of process, not of perfection" (84).

Herbert himself speaks of these poems in terms of such a process. When he sent the manuscript of *The Temple* to Nicholas Ferrar, he wrote that Ferrar would find in it

> a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul . . . ; desire him to read it: and then, if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor Soul, let it be made publick; if not, let him burn it. (Walton 314, italics reversed)

L. C. Knights is correct when he concludes that "it does not, like some religious poetry, simply *express* conflict; it is consciously and steadily directed toward resolution and integration" (243). It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that writing the poetry was simply a way for Herbert to work out his own conflicts; Herbert also saw the poetry as a means to help readers work our their spiritual conflicts. As with church ritual, however much Herbert might have appreciated the aesthetic worth of poetry, he valued it for its functional qualities.

There is a natural tendency for modern readers to appreciate most fully those qualities in an earlier author that seem most familiar. If all we read of Herbert's work is *The Temple*, and particularly that portion called "The Church," we may believe that we have found an author whose primary interest is in expressing his inner feelings, the way one expects from a modern author. When we look at Herbert's work as a whole, however, including his non-devotional (and non-English) poems, our understanding of the author is changed. To Herbert, poetry was less an end in itself than a means to an end: bringing both author and reader into a closer communion with God.

Notes:

[1]What he calls the "aesthetic ecumenism" of this poem has been described by Miller (190-92); see also the more recent work of Summers and Pebworth.

[2]Miller, somewhat perversely, argues that even this work circumvents controversialism (168-83).

[3]This and subsequent Latin texts and translations are from McCloskey and Murphy, the Latin spelling and capitalization slightly normalized.

[4]For an appreciation of the architectonics of this work see Miller (201-08); Dowling makes a similar architectonic analysis of *Memoriæ Matris Sacrum*.

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