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GEORGE HERBERT: 'SOMETHING UNDERSTOOD'[1]

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When George Herbert, sometime Orator to the University of Cambridge, preached his first sermon to his parishioners in the little country church at Bemerton, we are told that he delivered it 'after a most florid manner, both with great learning and eloquence.'[2] Perhaps they would have been disappointed by anything less than a virtuoso performance from the new parson; but Herbert was the last man to be dazzled by his own eloquence—that 'flaring thing'[3] in his own phrase—and he could shrewdly gauge the needs and limitations of his audience (or any audience). In one of his poems, 'Miserie', there is a wry comment on our natural human resistance to being preached at or making a mental effort -

These Preachers make
His head to shoot and ake.

If there were any headaches in his congregation as a result of that brilliant inaugural sermon, Herbert soon soothed them away by reassuring his flock *'that for their sakes, his language and his expressions should be more plain and practical in his future Sermons.'* Maybe the reassurance was unnecessary. From the modern point of view it sometimes seems as though seventeenth-century audiences could only exist in a preacher's or lecturer's dream.There is a story told by Thomas Fuller in his *History of the Worthies of England* (1662) about Lawrence Chaderton, first Master of Emmanuel College at Herbert's own university, who once 'concluded his Sermon which was of two hours continuance at least, with words to this effect. *That he would no longer trespasse upon their Patience.* Whereupon all the Auditory cryed out . . . *for God Sake Sir Go on, go on.'* So he carried on impromptu, 'to their *contentment* and his *commendation.*' It is the kind of story that can encourage a certain nostalgia for the seventeenth century as an age of devotion, an age in which, as T.S. Eliot wrote of Little Gidding, 'prayer has been valid' and generally felt to be so. But in spite of an element of truth in this belief, such an attitude may sentimentalise faith in a way that Herbert himself, for instance, was never guilty of.

I chose to begin with Izaak Walton's account of a Herbert sermon rather than with a poem because it brings out so clearly Herbert's concern with making something understood. It shows his realism, his common sense; his acute awareness of the problematic gift of eloquence (throughout his poems you can see the tension, the pull between the 'florid manner' and 'more plain and practical' language); and, above all, his sense of priorities, for the reason he gives for toning down his future sermons is not the congregation's convenience but their salvation. *'Since'* he says *'Almighty God does not intend to lead men to heaven by hard Questions, he* [Herbert] *would not therefore fill their heads with unnecessary Notions'.* But if *'hard Questions'* so beloved of academics are set aside as unimportant, what does matter to Herbert? Again this first sermon gives us a clue in the choice of text. Proverbs, chapter 4, verse 23, 'Keep thy heart with all diligence'.

The injunction to scrutinize and guard the inmost self is one which Herbert the poet takes

as seriously as Herbert the priest. Poetry is a way of keeping the record straight between himself and God. Later in the same century Milton would set out to justify the ways of God to men on an epic scale in *Paradise Lost*: Herbert sets out more humbly perhaps to understand the ways of God with George Herbert, and ends up building a temple of lyric poems as full of music and soaring line as a great cathedral, but also as intimate as a country church. Herbert could hardly have failed to respond to the glory of cathedrals: for the last years of his life he lived within a few miles of one of the most beautiful in England, Salisbury Cathedral, where as he writes of Solomon's Temple 'All show'd the builders, crav'd the seers care.' But the title he gave to his poems refers as much to the human heart as to the church, visible or invisible. And this temple too showed the builder's—God's—care and craved the seer's. We have to learn to see if we are to understand.

Eloquence is a means to this end: his marvellous sonnet on prayer swoops from metaphor to metaphor like some bird of paradise in full display until it finally alights on the firm security of the simple phrase 'something understood'. But what exactly is understood? How can man's understanding meet with God's? In fact, in Herbert's poetry understanding is as often the product of intellectual resistance as of co-operation. George Herbert, as it happens, belonged to a family of considerable military distinction (appropriately the surname Herbert means bright host or army); in a metaphoric sense, he could be said to carry on the family tradition. When in his last illness he asked for his *'little Book'* to be given to his old friend Nicholas Ferrar of Little Gidding he described it in words which have become well-known:

> *. . . tell him, he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul, before I could subject mine to the will of* Jesus my Master: *in whose service I have now found perfect freedom.*[4]

Here conflict takes the traditional form of a conflict of wills, man's self-will embattled against the divine will, the individual's struggling to be free without really knowing what freedom is. A number of Herbert's poems dramatize this kind of rebellion. But there are other more subtle forms of conflict in the poems which have a bearing on the struggle to understand. For instance, there are conflicting ways of seeing the same situation: in the face of the divine, human beings cling to their point of view as stubbornly as to their self-will, and in some ways it is more difficult to change something believed to be understood, than to change something willed. We use the phrase loosely, 'changing one's mind'. Part of the fascination of reading Herbert's poetry is watching him change his mind through the exercise of imagining things in different ways, even to the extent of imagining how he, George Herbert, looks from God's angle. At times he is a crumb of dust, a thing forgot—

> A wonder tortur'd in the space
> Betwixt this world and that of grace.
> ('Affliction IV')

At other times he is a flower, or a musical instrument awaiting a divine performance. What matters most is that he should count for something, that his life should make sense in the scheme of things. His greatest affliction is the absence, or apparent absence, of God from him, as though the artist had simply flung aside a lump of stone, its potential form unrealized, or left his lute in a corner, 'untun'd, unstrung'. Herbert, himself an artist, cannot bear wasted potential in any mode of being, especially the human. In the discipline of writing a poem, he constantly works upon the material in order to draw out meaning, to bring his own understanding into alignment with the divine point of view so far as is humanly and artistically possible.

The first 'Affliction' poem—there are five altogether scattered through *The Temple*—attempts to make 'something understood' of his personal experience by putting it in retrospect. From the outside, it is easy to glamorize Herbert's life as a textbook case of religious vocation. 'Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee'. Augustine's words fit Herbert exactly, and they might serve as epigraph to that beautifully pointed brief lyric, 'The Pulley', which ends

> If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
> May tosse him to my breast.

Herbert knew about all kinds of weariness. However attractive his life story may seem to us, with its contrast between the glittering prizes open to a man of Herbert's birth and talents—prizes which eluded him—and his ultimate vocation as country priest in pastoral Wiltshire, to Herbert himself the pattern was by no means so pleasing, or clear-cut. The version of his autobiography that he presents in 'Affliction (I)' is painfully enigmatic. It is not a straightforward conflict between God's claim and the claims of the 'world'. Nothing is what it seems: not the ecstasy and freshness of spiritual initiation, nor the admittedly more ambiguous reward of 'Academick praise'. God, in this account, traps, frustrates, and deprives his servant in a manner which passes Herbert's understanding:

When first thou didst entice to thee my heart,
I thought the service brave:
So many joyes I writ down for my part,
Besides what I might have
Out of my stock of naturall delights,
Augmented with thy gracious benefits.

. . .

At first thou gav'st me milk and sweetnesses;
I had my wish and way:
My dayes were straw'd with flow'rs and
happinesse;
There was no moneth but May.
But with my yeares sorrow did twist and grow,
And made a partie unawares for wo.

. . .

Whereas my birth and spirit rather took
The way that takes the town;
Thou didst betray me to a lingring book,
And wrap me in a gown.
I was entangled in the world of strife,
Before I had the power to change my life.

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.

Yet lest perchance I should too happie be
In my unhappinesse,
Turning my purge to food, thou throwest me
Into more sicknesses.
Thus doth thy power crosse-bias me, not
making
Thine own gift good, yet me from my wayes
taking.

Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me
None of my books will show:
I reade, and sigh, and wish I were a tree;
For sure then I should grow
To fruit or shade: at least some bird would
trust
Her houshold to me, and I should be just.

Yet, though thou troublest me, I must be
meek;
In weaknesse must be stout.
Well, I will change the service, and go seek
Some other master out.
Ah, my deare God! though I am clean forgot,
Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.

'Let me not love thee, if I love thee not'—becomes more puzzling the more you look at it: how can it represent 'something understood'? Perhaps it is a spiritual victory won out of intellectual defeat. It is not comprehension but love which is the absolute necessity for Herbert. Throughout 'Affliction (I)' he has been struggling to understand a God who entices, betrays, entangles him in a life which mocks him with continual breakdowns in purpose and direction: 'I could not go away, not persevere.' Far from being perfect freedom, this service is a kind of slavery; worse still, a useless slavery. Yet, on the edge of throwing it over, Herbert is arrested by a sudden revelation; if things are as desperate as that, if he cannot love God, then he had better pray that God will not let him love Him. What looks at first glance like a vicious circle turns out to be a blessed one, for in the very framing of the prayer Herbert shows that it is love and not the failure of love that impels him. 'Ah my deare God!'

I find it fascinating to compare Herbert's subtle investigation of spiritual dilemmas in 'Affliction (I)' and other poems with some modern equivalent, such as a scene from an Iris

Murdoch novel. Take, for example, this conversation from *Henry and Cato*, in which Brendan addresses his friend and fellow-priest, Cato, who entered the priesthood after an initiatory experience of joy very like the one Herbert describes and who is now undergoing a crisis of faith:

> The spiritual life is a long strange business and you've got to be quiet and docile enough to go on learning. You're doing the strong man wrestling act, you're still at the heroic stage, you want to do everything yourself. And now that you've got an inkling of what's really involved you're appalled, or the ego in you is appalled. It's like a death sentence. It is a death sentence. Not pain, not mortification, but death. That's what chills you. That's what you experience when you say there is no one there. Up till now you have seen Christ as a reflection of yourself. It has been a comfortable arrangement . . .
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> . . .
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> . . . Ordinary human consciousness is a tissue of illusion. Our chief illusion is our conception of ourselves, of our importance which must not be violated, our dignity which must not be mocked. All our resentment flows from this illusion, all our desire to do violence, to avenge insults, to assert ourselves. We are all mocked, Christ was mocked, nothing can be more important than that.[5]

Although form and language change with the centuries, Herbert's assessment of the problem is no less probing than the modern novelist's. He, as it were, plays out both character roles in himself, is both analyst and subject. His fears and resentments arise from personal feelings which, as so often in artistic and religious temperaments, combine a sense of superiority with a sense of inadequacy. And he understands himself all too well. In 'Employment (II)' he returns to the same kind of difficulties as in 'Affliction (I)'. The poem begins with a gesture of self-assertion—

> He that is weary, let him sit.
> My soul would stirre
> And trade in courtesies and wit,
> Quitting the furre
> To cold complexions needing it—

but ends bleakly on the recognition of squandered opportunities, and human mortality:

> But we are still too young or old;
> The man is gone,
> Before we do our wares unfold.
> So we freeze on,
> Untill the grave increase our cold.

One recent writer on Herbert has remarked with insight that he 'was a person meant to be happy, one who never doubted that unhappiness is a deeply unnatural state.'[6] His unhappy poems are a way of coping with this unnatural state, sometimes by explaining it, sometimes by expressing it, making something out of it, always by understanding it. The therapy works not just for himself but for his readers, as he wanted it to.

Not surprisingly, he is quite often compared to the finest composers of classical chamber music, a Mozart or a Schubert. But unlike a musical composer Herbert has to work with language, which sets up its own kinds of deceptions and distortions. He was very conscious of this, as a number of lyrics on the inadequacy of 'poetic' language testify

> For, Thou art still my God, is all that ye
> Perhaps with more embellishment can say.
> (The Forerunners')

Inadequacy in one sense. but looked at from another angle the language of poetry might be said to be *over*-adequate, distractingly so. The aesthetic problem reflects the psychological one. it is possible to overcompensate for feelings of inadequacy by parading these feelings, and we find Herbert doing this deliberately to make a point. In the early poems of *The Temple*, his human capacities cannot cope with the Passion of Christ.

> Then for thy passion—I will do for that—
> Alas, my God, I know not what.
> ('The Thanksgiving')

> I have consider'd it, and finde
> There is no dealing with thy mighty passion.
> ('The Reprisall')

Perfect understanding and the perfect response

are delayed until the last poem in *The Temple*, 'Love (III)', which is, supremely, a happy poem, although or because it deals with the recurrent spiritual tensions which have built up throughout the work. Here again the speaker begins by emphasizing his inadequacy from his own point of view, but by the end of the poem it is the divine viewpoint of Love that prevails in this 'trade in courtesies and wit':

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.

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?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

The final image we have of God and Herbert is that of host and guest, 'something understood', the universal language of caring hospitality. *'In whose service I have now found perfect freedom'* said the dying poet; but in the end, in spite of the soul's willing offer of service, it is Love who takes upon Himself the form of servant as well as host at His own feast. No other poem by Herbert leaves us with a stronger sense of 'something understood' coexisting with a sense of something that passeth all understanding.

NOTES

1. This paper is based on a talk given in the series arranged by the Joint Christian Council of King's College in the Lent Term, 1979.
2. Izaak Walton, 'The Life of Mr George Herbert', *Lives*, World's Classics edn., repr. 1956, p.295.
3. 'The Windows'. All quotations from Herbert's poetry are taken from *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C.A. Patrides, Everyman's University Library, 1974.
4. Walton, op.cit., p.314.
5. Iris Murdoch, *Henry and Cato*, Triad/Panther Books, 1977, pp.153-4.
6. Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert*, Harvard University Press, 1975, p.259. My approach to Herbert in this paper is generally indebted to this fine critical study.