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The Poet's Role in Rhetoric: Herbert in the Service of the Lord

Hal Hellwig

George Herbert's "Providence" seems far removed from any world Wallace Stevens may have imagined. "Providence," after all, is a hymn of praise to God's work; it reflects a confidence in the orderliness of the universe. Stevens' universe remains in the language he uses as a poet in order to define what the world may be or become:

> This endlessly elaborating poem
> Displays the theory of poetry,
> As the life of poetry. A more severe,
>
> More harassing master would extemporize
> Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
> Of poetry is the theory of life.
>
> As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
> In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,
> The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands.
>
> Wallace Stevens, from
> "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"

Stevens' poem suggests the activity Stanley Fish claims in *Self-Consuming Artifacts*. The poet becomes his poem, loses his identity, and merges into God's presence: "we cannot tell apart / The idea and the bearer being of the idea."[1] For Stevens the poem is "the cry of its occasion," not something that captures reality or even defines it, but is reality, is the experience that we, as ineffable poets / readers, seek to "trope" as "pure reality." "The poet speaks the poem as it is/Not as it was." Whenever one reads one creates reality, just as the poet makes a poem work as reality, for "said words of the world are the life the / World." For Herbert, indeed, the "theory" of poetry becomes the "theory of life," although his words reflect the sublime (and almost hidden) words of God and seem to hide the poet's voice in that mirror. Herbert's work represents the continual work of a Stevens

poet, but Herbert does not lose his identity within a poem as Fish might suggest, but transcends human language in order to express the sublime nature of his Lord, who is not necessarily a master of Herbert's power to use language. Herbert reserves for himself the power of classical rhetoric, at the same time that he uses classical rhetoric to help define the inexpressible.

Professor Eucalyptus, the blind Urizenic figure in "An Ordinary Evening," looks for reality within a deadened universe, made deadened by his own solipsism, for he can only look outward at things rather than find them within his own expression. Eucalyptus searches "for an interior made exterior," looking as a philosopher, a mind looking at itself and its own abstractions as if words could point outward at things. The poet, the counterpart of Eucalyptus, reverses the search by internalizing experience, paradoxically by expressing experience. In fact, the poet creates experience/reality by his incessant recreation of language. It is a continual, "daily sense" of reality being made anew through language. Stevens uses the word "search" to indicate the necessity of discovery in order to create reality as a constant process: "To re-create, to use / The cold and earliness and bright origin / Is to search." Herbert's "Providence," indeed, represents that search for a way to express the nature of reality with traditional, classical rhetorical forms. Herbert's achievement lies in his mastery of those forms while in the process of discovering the majesty and the sublimity of nature.

But, while Stevens would retain for the poet the ultimate power of making language anew for each poem the reader reads, Fish would remove from George Herbert that power of language. Herbert's poems, according to Fish, "become the vehicles of their own abandonment."[2] Fish insists that the poems Herbert creates for us as we read vanish, that they "undermine our reliance on discursive forms of thought," indeed, that they create the need to discard thought, urging the reader "to rest in the immediate apprehension of God's all-effective omnipresence" (158). Herbert, according to Fish, realizes that as a poet he can claim only what God gives him as metaphors for poetry: "the moment of highest artfulness always coincides with the identification of the true source of that art; the wit and ingenuity are referred to that source rather than to the poet, who in losing title to his poem also loses (happily) the presumption of its invention, and is known for what he always was, a discoverer, one who copies out" (203).

But Herbert clearly insists on the power of art to make man God's voice, a surrogate voice. Herbert recognizes that God gave man the power to use language in order to praise Him. Language, for Herbert, does not disappear once it is used. Herbert will use "art" deliberately as a paradox; God as an idea, as reality in Stevens' terms, becomes transparent—present in the "search"—and opaque—absent before the poem—for the reader. The poet gives the poem's artifice an expressible reality while accepting the poet's responsibility for the rhetorical surface. The poet, for Herbert, is both a maker of the poem and also God's expressive voice. Herbert's artifice clearly becomes his voice, a human voice defining the relationship between himself and God. The poet does not disappear.

Fish analyzes "The Altar" as if Herbert absents himself from the construction of the poem. Fish says of these lines—"That, If I chance to hold my peace, / These stones to praise thee may not cease"—that "I am aware that these two lines are usually read differently, as a hedge against mortality: if I should die, these stones (words, lines, poem) would continue to praise thee in my name. . . If these lines have any value, it is because eternity, in the form of God's active presence, has (literally) graced them. . . He trusts not in his art, but in the appropriation of that art by God, to whom he relinquishes all the rights of authorship, to the extent even of declaring that the poem is perfectly capable of completing itself without him" (214).

"These stones" are not in reference to artfulness, to "words, lines, poem," but to the clear sign of God's created Word, the poet given speech by His physical presence. In short, "stones" are the words of the poet, in part, but also they exist as the natural forms in the world, as human beings living lives given over or dedicated to God. Only the poet can really complete the poem for God, since God can exist only with the poet's praise, with the poet's continual re-creation of His reality through human language. Readers of Herbert's poetry must always double back in order to understand what Herbert does and has done. A sequential reading would miss the point. "Stones" can only speak when the poet makes them metaphors for human lives; Herbert's rhetoric exists as a re-creation of God's presence only while in the process of being read again.

In "Providence" Herbert contradicts Fish's appraisal of him: "Man is the worlds high Priest: he doth present / The sacrifice for all" (lines 13-14).[3] Herbert sings for God what the beasts and rocks of the created world cannot. In "Providence" Herbert uses art to show God's diversity while being, paradoxically, one Being. Man alone God made "Secretarie of thy praise" (8), for the world itself announces (and participates in) God's presence. In His multiple selves, qualities, and forms, God becomes one central ineffable presence. Only man, here Herbert, can speak for God. The poem suggests God's voice by the poet's absence from the poem, by the absence of directed art from the artist, for even man cannot really fathom God's final artistry, His true extended Being: "If we could heare / Thy skill and art, what musick would it be!" (39-40). If Herbert could hear, he would be able to express the "music." As it is, the reader is left to imagine the ineffable:

> O Sacred Providence, who from end to end
> Strongly and sweetly movest, shall I write,
> And not of thee, through whom my fingers bend
> To hold my quill? shall they not do thee right?

Herbert begins the poem ambiguously, asking the reader (as Fish might insist) to perceive the poet in a particular quandary: should he write about nature and not about God? To re-read these lines is to change the question: shall he write at all

if not about God? It is not an easily conceived double-edged question. One question dissolves if the other is asked. But both make sense by themselves. The pronoun "Thee" is not that quickly understood to be the persona "Providence"; rather, the pronoun seems to refer to someone (or some thing) animate and individual, not the ubiquitous presence given in the first line. The poet considers himself to be the "thee" as well, since Herbert is part of Providence anyway. Shall not the poet "do thee right"? Shall not the poet give voice to God's presence? These lines also suggest that the poet could find it impossible to write at all. If the poet does write, he can only write about nature, about God, not something generated about and from the poet's mind. The opposite also holds true: if the poet does write, it can only be about himself, because he co-exists with Providence, though separate from it.

Thus I find Joseph Summers' analysis of the line from the hieroglyph poem "The Altar," "No workmans tool hath touch'd the same," more appropriate than Fish's claim that this poem writes itself. The poet can formulate God's presence with human words and make that ability of language apparent as God's gift to man. The "heart" of man comes from God a whole creation, but, cracked and "broken" through sin and a lack of faith, man must "cement" the brittle faith with "teares" of regret and praise. And man can only praise—re-build the broken faith—with the use of language, the ability given by God. As Summers shows, Herbert's poem about "stones" and language comes from a long tradition:

> The Mosaic sacrifices were considered types of the one true Sacrifice, in which Christ had shed blood for the remission of sins once for all time. To man were left the "sacrifices" of praise, good works, and "communication"(Heb. xiii.15-16). The Hebrew altar which was built of unhewn stones was a type of the heart of man, hewn not by man's efforts but by God alone. The engraving on those stones with which "all the words of this Law" were written "very plainely" (Deut. xxvii.8) was a type of the "Epistle of Christ," the message of salvation engraved on the Christian heart (2 Cor. iii.3). Herbert's conceptions that the broken and purged heart is the proper basis for the sacrifice of praise and that even stones may participate in and continue that praise were firmly biblical. In his psalm of repentance (Ps. li) David had stated that the true sacrifices of God are a "broken and a contrite heart"; Christ had promised that 'the stones' would cry out to testify to Him (Luke xix.40); and Paul had stated that "Ye also as lively stones, are built up a spirituall house . . . to offer up spirituall sacrifice" (1 Pet. ii.5).[4]

If we accept both Summers and Fish to be accurate in the assumption that Herbert's references to "unhewn stones" do derive from Exodus 20:25 and Deuteronomy 27:2-5 (see Fish, 211), then we can accept the stones not as artfully contrived

words, cemented in place, line by line, but as the surface of the human mind, from which the description of God's presence can proceed. For God speaks through us, as Herbert claims. As an analogy, these verses from the Bible show God's directive "law," his ordering presence, as He gives his people hope for an eternal future:

> And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone; for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.
>
> And it shall be on the day when ye shall pass over Jordan unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.
>
> . . . And thou shalt write upon them all the words of this law, when thou art passed over. . .

Herbert willingly offers up his mind to the Divine engraver's tool, language. The land given to the believer becomes a sign of His presence, just as the altar erected from unhewn stones—to indicate God's creative powers over things and man—must serve, with language given to man to use, as an altar of praise for God's mercy and forgiveness as He delivers the Israelites from Egypt. The new laws guide man correctly even as man uses the inscribed words as a remembrance of God's ultimate control over his destiny. Summers points out the Protestant's, and here Herbert's, shift from Catholicism; belief becomes an internalized, daily act of language, as contrasted to externalized services of the Mass:

> For the craftsman and poet, construction of a work of art resulted in that continual sacrifice and introduced the concept of the altar; the poem is a construction upon which others may offer their sacrifices; it is a "speaking" altar which continually offers up its own sacrifice of praise. The shape of Herbert's poem was intended to hieroglyph the relevance of the old altar to the new Christian altar within the heart. It was fittingly, therefore, a modification of the traditional shapeof a classic altar rather than of what Herbert knew as the Communion Table. (142)

Herbert's control over words makes him, in a sense, God's new prophet.

Herbert's "Providence" thus grants the reader a progressive re-reading of God's message. Herbert uses classical rhetoric effectively, showing the traditional ways words had been used by the Classical rhetoricians. But because Herbert had dedicated himself to an Augustinian ideal, these words are not merely secular tools of persuasion.[5] They have become "stones" engraved with God's tangible nature. God finally could not exist without man to praise Him. And it is a daily task for Herbert as each reader reads any of his poems. Herbert vivifies, makes new, God's presence; he lends his rhetorical skills to God but still masters them.

In "Providence," Herbert returns again and again to his purpose: "Thou art in all things one, in each thing many: / For thou art infinite in one and all" (43-44).

Everything in nature points back to God, is God in His infinite compass.[6] Hence the poem continually offers examples and re-statements of God's surrounding presence. Herbert addresses his reader directly as if to chastise those who would not praise God's omnipresent beneficence: "The tongue is yours to eat, but mine to praise" (22). Herbert turns from the subject only to amplify the universality of God's presence; that is, the poet Herbert includes (in this chastisement) the reader, becomes a surrogate for him, within the developing logic of the poem. The lines "I here present / For me and all my fellows praise to thee" (25-26) are repeated in later lines (*commoratio*): "We all acknowledge both thy power and love" (29). Here the pronoun shift becomes all-inclusive as the poet's voice merges into "ours" as we read the poem (until, at least, the end of the poem).

Expolitio, as a figure of thought, similarly shows examples of the "many and the one" pattern by allowing the same thought different expressions. Herbert uses various changing figures, often syllogisms (*conclusio*), which repeat the same thought, often mirroring the thought by its form. There are many syllogisms (at least twenty-four stanzas), all of which revolve around opposed qualities. One example:

> The sea, which seems to stop the traveller,
> Is by a ship the speedier passage made.
> The winds, who think they rule the mariner,
> Are rul'd by him, and taught to serve his trade. (89-92)

Here, as part of a larger *chria*, the argument from the contrary is substantiated by the argument from an example. The linguistic form replicates the assumed limitations of nature: from the hesitant conditional tenses "seems," and "think" to the active tenses "is . . . made" and "are ruled." Man, through God's beneficence, can control nature.

The first two stanzas of "Providence" introduce the framework needed for the semi-pantheistic center, the notion of man, and more important, of his language, as a verbalizer of God's omnipresent power. The last three stanzas complete the structure (*enumeratio*, by the division of praise into three modes of actively communicating praise) as well as the "one and many" contraction/expansion of God's power and presence. The last two stanzas, especially, work as a figure of thought, *expolitio*, repeating the same ideas in different forms:

> All things that are, though they have sev'ral wayes,
> Yet in their being joyn with one advise
> To honour thee: and so I give thee praise
> In all my other hymnes, but in this twice.

Each thing that is, although in use and name
It go for one, hath many wayes in store
To honour thee: and so each hymne thy fame
Extolleth many wayes, yet this one more. (145-152)

The use of *aporia*, asking rhetorical questions that he answers, shows the consistent attempt to involve the reader in the poem. The first stanza, a series of questions, urges the main two points to the poem, poetic release and God's presence, and makes the reader aware of the act of praise as a doubtful, hesitant act. The poet's initial doubt from the first stanza, if ironic (because Herbert does not doubt at all), moves to acceptance, attempting to persuade the reader through *expolitio*, *commoratio*, and *conclusio*, summing up as required, *enumeratio*, in the last stanzas.

Similarly, *rogatio* ties together the last three stanzas: "But who hath praise enough? nay who hath any?" (141). In that stanza only God can praise himself enough for His works. But clearly, as the "world's high Priest," the poet can come close to being "he that knows them" (142). Praise, as well as other things of nature—as many of the stanzas have shown—comes best from the poet. For only the poet can express the ways God's presence can be formulated into paradoxes and examples. And also, by seeming to consult with himself by the use of *rogatio* in the first stanza and in the third-from-last stanza, Herbert can, as a poet, speak literally to "Providence" and to his fellow men, allowing both into his deliberative poem, allowing them to construct the poem with praise and paradox. Herbert even makes inanimate objects/beings speak throughout the poem (*conformatio*, *prosopopoeia*, or personification)—"Beasts fain would sing" (9)—as he helps to create his reader's perception of God's world and how to praise Him best.

Herbert thus delivers a description (*notatio* or even *ethopoeia*) of both God and the poet's domain and purpose. What stands clearly expressed, however, is the character delineation of the poet's prerogative rather than the poet's character. The poet must, just as his reader must, stand and praise God's created world. Providence could not express itself without the voice of the poet, for finally it is a "hymn" that one sings as a written poem of praise, that makes the word of God speak. Man's language creates (or recreates for Him) God's Word.

But Herbert has not "relinquished" all control over his art to God. Herbert as a poet wishes to remove human vanity from human language in order to find solace in God's presence. Paradoxically, however, Herbert's purpose—not just to absent himself into God's Word—clearly makes the reader see the artifice of language as the sublime expression of God's presence. For finally Herbert wants to have his audience admitted into His presence. Language exists not for itself, but exists in order to make God's Word finitely audible. Rhetoric, though artificial, makes things real. Wallace Stevens would later use *commoratio* and *expolitio* in the service of the modern god, language. Herbert's trust in his art is strong despite his

disavowal of selfhood, for language, at least for Herbert, remains man's invention in its use, while his soul belongs to God. Wallace Stevens later makes man's language a self-generating and self-decaying human god, an act of *similitudo*—"intricate evasions of as"—while Herbert's remains an act of metaphor, a literal transference of human language into the realm of sublime significance: "Onely to Man thou hast made known thy wayes, / And put the penne alone into his hand,/ And made him Secretarie of thy praise" (6-8).

Idaho State University

Notes

[1] From *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, Holly Stevens, ed. (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 332.

[2] Stanley E. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 158. Hereafter cited as "Fish" with parenthetical page numbers.

[3] George Herbert, *The Works of George Herbert*, F. E. Hutchinson, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), 116-21. References will be to the lines of this poem.

[4] Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 141-42.

[5] See Mark Taylor, *The Soul in Paraphrase: George Herbert's Poetics* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1974), 1-9.

[6] See Virginia R. Mollenkott, "The Many and the One in George Herbert's 'Providence,'" *CLAJ*, 10:34-41.