John Donne Journal
Vol. 21 (2002)

The Vision of God in the Sonnets of John Donne and George Herbert

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In his essay on "Donne and Herbert: Vehement Grief and Silent Tears," Louis Martz called attention to some of the essential differences between the two poets.[1] In seeking to honor them both, he would not wish to claim one greater or better than the other. "Yet if," Martz concludes, "approaching a desert island upon a sinking ship, one were driven to make a choice, I would, like the poet Camoens, rescuing his manuscript from shipwreck, hold my volume of Donne above the waves."[2]

Martz's difficult decision, based on a thoughtful analysis of the poetry, seemed to me to provide a good but very difficult examination topic in my undergraduate course on the age of Donne. If forced to choose, I asked, would you save the poetry of Donne or of Herbert from a sinking ship? Donne, said one student, because, like me, he bravely tries without much success to resolve his spiritual crises; Herbert, said another, because he comforts me by confidently addressing religious problems, almost always ending with serenity and renewed belief, echoing Thomas's cry, "My Lord and my God" with "My God and King." Together with Martz, my own hope is that we may never need to choose one poet over the other, for both inform us of that life—our continuing life—hidden in Love, and both provide us in their devotional poetry with a vision of God.

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[1]This essay is a revised and expanded version of a paper given at the Katholische Universität Eichstätt, Germany, on 28 June 1999. I am grateful to the faculty and students of Eichstätt for their helpful comments.

[2]See Martz, in *John Donne Journal* 7 (1988): 21–34. The quotation is on p. 34.

With Martz as model, I wish to continue a comparison of these poets by demonstrating how each one develops a particular doctrinal aspect or devotional concern in four pairs of sonnets. These sonnets describe attitudes toward Vocation, the Atonement, Prayer, and Repentance. They display differing sensibilities and "visions" of the self and of the self's relationship with God, and they explore and broadly define the work both of Donne and Herbert.

Herbert's sonnets, numbering fifteen, are scattered throughout *The Temple*; they do not appear in any kind of sequence or in groups as Donne's nineteen sonnets, which critics have arranged in a variety of ways.[3] But the sonnet form itself offers a useful means of comparison, one which Michael Spiller has broadly outlined in *The Development of the Sonnet*: "The passionate, struggling or expostulating self, the Christian sinner, was always in Herbert's poetry subject to a preaching and teaching self—a conjunction which the sonnet, containing both lyrical and dialectic elements, is well suited to handle. Donne . . . reversed the domination of one self by the other, and by accentuation, eclipsis and hyperbaton created a dominant passionate /I/ barely restrained by the reason of Christian dogma."[4] *Eclipsis*, or the omission of necessary words (or ones quite useful for the sense), and *hyperbaton*, the distortion of normal word order, are common features in Donne's poetry, often in violent and extreme forms. Such devices provide in

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[3]I exclude the two sonnets that Herbert addressed to his mother, which appear in F. E. Hutchinson's edition of *The Works of George Herbert* (1941; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 206–7. Nor do I refer to Donne's *La Corona*, his sequence of seven sonnets, in John T. Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 334–37. All quotations from Herbert are from Hutchinson's edition, and Donne is quoted from Shawcross's edition.

[4]See Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 181–82. These unusual rhetorical terms are described by George Puttenham (1589): "Eclipsis or the figure of default: if but one word or some little portion of speach be wanting, it may be supplied by ordinary understanding and vertue of [this] figure." Puttenham describes hyperbaton as "the trespasser" because of the disorder that its various species may commit. See *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936, rept. 1970), 163, 168.

part the anxiety and troubled sense we commonly feel in his poetry, and their general absence the serenity that frequently characterizes Herbert's verse. I shall quote side-by-side four sonnet pairs—my selections from Herbert and Donne are not, of course, definitive; but I do think they provide excellent insight into the different ways in which these poets encounter faith and approach religion.

Let us see how Herbert treats his calling, or vocation in "The Sinner"[5]:

> Lord, how I am all ague, when I seek
> What I have treasur'd in my memorie!
> Since, if my soul make even with the week,
> Each seventh note by right is due to thee.
> I finde there quarries of pil'd vanities,
> But shreds of holinesse, that dare not venture
> To shew their face, since crosse to thy decrees:
> There the circumference earth is, heav'n the centre.
> In so much dregs the quintessence is small:
> The spirit and good extract of my heart
> Comes to about the many hundredth part.
> Yet Lord restore thine image, heare my call:
> And though my hard heart scarce to thee can grone,
> Remember that thou once didst write in stone. (p. 38)

Herbert focuses on making himself "right" and in accordance with the Divine plan. His hard and stony heart is ready to receive the incision of God's commands. The seventh, or sabbath day is offered to God, completing or containing the week; and similarly, the seventh note of the musical scale completes an octave. In both cases, the poet means that he is ready to begin a new life and another scale. Herbert changes his imagery, invoking the "cross" that lies in the midst of the round world; and again, the poet declares the modesty and slightness of the quintessential extract offered by his unworthy heart. But he lifts his voice to "call"—and wishes indeed that he may hear God's "calling."

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[5]The theme of *vocation* is a persistent one in *The Temple*, illustrated also in such poems as "*Jordan* (I)" and "*Jordan* (II)," "*Aaron*," "*The Forerunners*," etc. See Robert B. Shaw, *The Call of God: The Theme of Vocation in the Poetry of Donne and Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1981). I am generally indebted to this excellent and sensitive study.

Herbert translates his inadequacy and humility into an outward action, one that depends upon reciprocity: looking inward, he awaits expectantly and confidently for a further vision of the God that will and does come to him.

Donne looks with anxious and constant concern toward himself and his feelings, in devotion that seems unanswered. Both poets tremble with "ague," but Donne lives with his fearful affliction, not as Herbert whose heart is ready for God's caring touch. Donne's concern in "Oh, to vex me, contraryes meete in one," is at first like Herbert's; but this sonnet, which could be styled "The Sinner" or "The Sinful One," is quite differently resolved:

> Oh, to vex me, contraryes meete in one:
> Inconstancy unnaturally hath begott
> A constant habit; that when I would not
> I change in vowes, and in devotione.
> As humorous is my contritione
> As my prophane Love, and as soone forgott:
> As ridlingly distemperd, cold and hott,
> As praying, as mute; as infinite, as none.
> I durst not view heaven yesterday; and to day
> In prayers, and flattering speaches I court God:
> To morrow'I quake with true feare of his rod.
> So my devout fitts come and go away
> Like a fantastique Ague: save that here
> Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare. (pp. 350–51)

The sonnet is built on a series of paradoxes and contrasts which define devotion through interruption and discord. One may know God best by not knowing Him at all, or at least in fearing His love. Donne looks at his own troubled feelings and at his wretched self. While he struggles to see God, he seems to fail as often as he succeeds; and every success is fraught with pain and shaking despair. There is little sense of "calling" in this sonnet; for we have moved from a heart that is prepared to receive God to one that feels "a fantastique Ague."

A second pair of sonnets addresses Atonement theology, appropriately through paradox. First, let us consider Herbert's well known "Redemption":

Having been tenant long to a rich Lord,
Not thriving, I resolved to be bold,
And make a suit unto him, to afford
A new small-rented lease, and cancell th'old.
In heaven at his manour I him sought:
They told me there, that he was lately gone
About some land, which he had dearly bought
Long since on earth, to take possession.
I straight return'd, and knowing his great birth,
Sought him accordingly in great resorts;
In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts:
At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
Of theeves and murderers: there I him espied,
Who straight, *Your suit is granted,* said, & died. (p. 40)

Herbert indirectly describes Christ's crucifixion in a parable that seems scriptural (but is not), or reminiscent of a story or scene that is touching for its apparent familiarity. The poet is bound to an absent landlord, but would wish a different kind of "lease" that might allow for greater return. This lord is "rich," and of "great birth"; but he cannot be found in "great resorts," in the very places where one should expect to discover him. The surprising couplet at the end of the sonnet expresses the terrible paradox that the lord is amongst thieves and murderers, who, it is obviously implied, are about to put him to death. But before he dies—or at the moment of his death—he grants the request and fulfills the legal action. The juridical sense of Christ's death that redeems this person, representative of all mankind, is described in terms that are intimate and shocking: a simple story becomes, as we know, world-changing. The effect of Herbert's poem leads one to reflect meditatively on the Passion and its significance, for that act has individual as well as universal application.

In his Body-Soul dialogue, Donne meditates also on the Passion, but in another way:

Wilt thou love God, as he thee! then digest,
My Soule, this wholsome meditation,
How God the Spirit, by Angels waited on
In heaven, doth make his Temple in thy brest,
The Father having begot a Sonne most blest,
And still begetting, (for he ne'r begonne)

> Hath deign'd to chuse thee by adoption,
> Coheire to'his glory,'and Sabbaths endlesse rest;
> And as a robb'd man, which by search doth finde
> His stolne stuffe sold, must lose or buy'it againe:
> The Sonne of glory came downe, and was slaine,
> Us whom he'had made, and Satan stolne, to'unbinde.
> 'Twas much, that man was made like God before,
> But, that God should be made like man, much more. (p. 345)

This is "a wholesome meditation," indeed, but one filled with anxious explanation. Donne searches for resolution and hope and reassurance, qualities which Herbert already has discovered in "Redemption." "Adoption," "coheire," the coming down of the Incarnate Son to make us one with God are traditional modes for expressing the atoning work of Christ. Here Donne, like Herbert, is deliberating on the economy of salvation, on which their great contemporary Lancelot Andrewes discoursed at length in many of his sermons. As one commentator truly writes, "the redemption of fallen man [is] always at the heart of the dogma of the Incarnation. . . . " And Andrewes invites his hearers to meditate on the meaning of the Incarnation in one's own life: "The implication is always the old patristic adage, which Andrewes forcefully reformulates for his own time: 'God has become man, that man might become God."[6] In the final two lines of his sonnet, Donne imparts this sentiment, recalling (or letting his readers remember) certain of the Comfortable Words that follow the General Confession in the order of Holy Communion in the *Book of Common Prayer:* "This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. *1 Tim. i.15.* . . . If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the Propitiation for our sins. *1 St. John ii. 1,2.*" These declarations are implied in Donne's sonnet, but their effect is much more remote than in Herbert's poem, more objective and defining. Donne explains while Herbert encounters the Redemption.

Now we come to a third pair of sonnets, both of them on prayer. Herbert's verbless expostulation attempts a description:

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[6]See Nicholas Lossky, *Lancelot Andrewes The Preacher (1555–1626): The Origins of the Mystical Theology of the Church of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 32–33.

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. (p. 51)

Donne considers prayer apocalyptically, again in a Body-Soul dialogue, and with abundant use both of eclipsis and hyperbaton:

What if this present were the worlds last night?
Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell,
The picture of Christ crucified, and tell
Whether that countenance can thee affright,
Teares in his eyes quench the amasing light,
Blood fills his frownes, which from his pierc'd head fell,
And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,
Which pray'd forgiveness for his foes fierce spight?
No, no; but as in my idolatrie
I said to all my profane mistresses,
Beauty, of pitty, foulnesse onely is
A signe of rigour: so I say to thee,
To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd,
This beauteous forme assures a pitious minde. (pp. 343–44)

Herbert's "*Prayer* (I)" has received much attention, many commentators regarding it as perhaps the finest of the lyrics in *The Temple*. Its images both define and mystify, clarify and obscure meaning. They are direct, even simple and earthbound, but they also are transcendent. The difficult expression, "Christ-side-piercing spear," near the center of the sonnet makes us realize, as Mario Di Cesare has acutely observed, "that the death of Christ creates the very possibility of prayer, a new creation that subsumes the first of 'Gods

breath in man'." The poem shows the essential reciprocity between man and God: "In prayer creation and redemption are united; the hour of prayer contains the two-way traffic between this world and that, the recurrent dualism of heaven and earth, God and man, type and fulfillment, the vertical imagery of ascent and descent, and the mysterious theme of return." The major theme of the poem is mutuality, the inevitable and necessary coming together of man and God through prayer: this is indeed "something undestood."[7]

While one may feel some disruption or doubtfulness over my placing Donne's "What if this present were the worlds last night?" next to Herbert's "*Prayer* (I)," Donne does explore in a tensely prayerful way a similar kind of connection of himself with God. Herbert has resolved that reciprocal link with his inferential understanding; Donne looks forward, or imagines the end of this world's time, but with the readiness of compassion and tenderness: beauty is to pity as foulness is to rigour. Christ looks at one with "teares in his eyes," and the penitent sinner or idolator needs to be prepared to look up and realize the comfort of the torn visage. Is this prayer? Surely it is a desperate and anxious attempt to claim Christ's sacrifice for one's own redemption, perhaps a wish that God might help him in his unbelief. The sonnet lacks the consolation and quiet comfort of Herbert's poem—it might perhaps have much in common with Herbert's "*The Sacrifice,*" with its steady lament of Christ from the Cross: "Was ever grief like mine?" Donne's vision of God affects his sense of prayer—that vision brings modest comfort. Donne is both more direct, more visually oriented in this poem than is Herbert in his

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[7]See Mario A. Di Cesare, "Herbert's *'Prayer* (I)' and the Gospel of John," in *"Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne": Essays on George Herbert*, edited by Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, 101–112 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980); I quote from pp. 108–9. The theme of reciprocity or mutuality is fundamental not only to Herbert's poem but also to John's Gospel. Both depend upon paradox, and "this very paradox is ... the perfection of proper prayer, grown no doubt out of the paradoxical mysteries of the Gospel and out of the cordial mystification that spiritual writers and iconographers so often delighted in" (109). Di Cesare expanded this essay in his "Image and Allusion in Herbert's 'Prayer (I),'" *ELR* 11 (1981): 304–28, in which he provides a detailed description of the poem's many scriptural and patristic allusions.

sonnet; yet the end of Donne's apocalyptic vision is quite different: readiness and ripeness is all, but a condition to be longed for and to be settled in advance of coming disaster.

Finally, Donne, in "At the round earths imagin'd corners," offers a further highly dramatic scene, one filled with personal effort and tribulation:

> 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 tast 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. (pp. 340–41)

Donne, or the poet-figure represented in these sonnets, is filled, in a way that we have come to see as typical, with anxiety, effort, a sinful and troubled spirit; he is eager to establish an appropriate or right disposition. The external scene of the Last Day (with the difficulties of souls finding their much dispersed bodies), and the striking use of asyndeton in the octave of the poem gives way in the sestet to the poet's special longing for a penitential heart, or the desire to have one. The envisaged drama of end times is resolved personally and internally. When the trumpets sound in celebration, the poet might worry over the lively work of the apocalypse—but no, he says, let such a time rest in the imagination while he learns of individual repentance and salvation.

Herbert offers a different and contrasting kind of celebration in the joyful verse of "*Antiphon* (I)." Here, too, is drama and sound, but the music is confident and sustained:

Cho. Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
My God and King.
Vers. The heav'ns are not too high,
His praise may thither flie:
The earth is not too low,
His praises there may grow.
Cho. Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
My God and King.
Vers. The church with psalms must shout,
No doore can keep them out:
But above all, the heart
Must bear the longest part.
Cho. Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
My God and King. (p. 53)

An antiphon is, as Herbert's editor quoting from the *OED*, notes, "a composition, in prose or verse, consisting of verses or passages sung alternately by two choirs in worship." Herbert certainly has something like this in mind, but specifically he is recalling a service hymn or anthem in "The Church" (the principal part of *The Temple*), with a chorus (or choir) speaking for the priest, deacon, or leader and the response (or versicle) offered by the congregation. The two "sides" speak or sing in "conversation," similar to the well-known versicles in the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer*:

Priest. O Lord, show thy mercy upon us;
People. And grant us thy salvation.
Priest. O Lord, save the Queen;
People. And mercifully hear us when we call upon thee.
Priest. Endue thy Ministers with righteousness;
People. And make thy chosen people joyful.
Priest. O Lord, save thy people;
People. And bless thine inheritance.
Priest. Give peace in our time, O Lord;
People. And evermore mightily defend us.
Priest. O God, make clean our hearts within us;
People. And take not thy Holy Spirit from us.

Herbert divides "*Antiphon* (I)" into three parts led by the choir, which are twice answered by the people. All four corners hear this thrice-

sung invitation, and the answer comes in two sets of four lines. That "the heart / Must bear the longest part" reminds us of "Each seventh note by right is due to thee" of "*The Sinner.*" The musical form of "*Antiphon* (I)" is clearly intended, and the poem is another example of Herbert's frequent use of musical imagery throughout *The Temple.*[8]

Perhaps Herbert stretches to contain this jubilant poem in the sonnet form, for it may seem to burst out of such constriction. Yet we might see the octave as the two four line responsorial sections, the sestet as the three two line invocations; and this trinity of invocations brings the poem together, so that the end speaks to the beginning—the whole being a unity in the Trinity that moves circumferentially and without end. There is no sign of repentance, or personal sorrow, of individual questioning or dismay in "*Antiphon* (I)," but only of firm confidence in that "joy super-invested in glory."[9] In spite of the various moods we have seen in these four sonnets of Herbert, these poems do incline toward an outward movement, one that requires an inner determination and inclination toward "Softenesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse" through which one may hear "Church-bels beyond the starres."

Louis Martz properly distinguished Donne from Herbert. Herbert, as we see in these sonnets, does indeed "dance and pirouette," with music and joy, while Donne tries to devour "the entire universe of

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[8]Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) set "*Antiphon* (I)" in his composition of 1911, *Five Mystical Songs.* Benjamin Britten (1913–58) composed musical settings for nine of Donne's *Holy Sonnets* (1945), including "Oh, to vex me, contraryes meete in one," "What if this present were the worlds last night?," and "At the round earths imagin'd corners." See Bryan N. S. Gooch, "Britten and Donne: *Holy Sonnets* Set to Music," in *Wrestling with God: Literature and Theology in the English Renaissance,* edited by Mary Ellen Henley and W. Speed Hill, 193–212 (Vancouver: Benwell-Atkins, 2001). Britten also set Herbert's "*Antiphon* (II)" (1956).

[9]The reference is to Donne's Second Prebend Sermon. See *The Sermons of John Donne,* ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), 7.71.

controverted divinity."[10] But both poets—both to be equally valued—seek a vision of God, not now as we may know Him, but face to face.[11]

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[10]Martz, 32–33.

[11]Donne preached on 1 Cor. 13.12: "For now we see through a glasse darkly, but then face to face. . . ["Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate; tunc autem facie ad faciem"]. *Sermons,* 8.219–36.