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Submission and Assertion: The "Double Motion" of Herbert's "Dedication"

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It is altogether appropriate that Herbert's "Dedication" has received little close critical attention; the poem's ostensible purpose is to deflect attention from itself and its earthly maker in order to reveal God's acts of authorship. Yet the manner in which this deflection is performed is itself worthy of critical attention. For "Dedication" also displays very subtly the verbal abilities of its human maker, and so calls attention to itself as a carefully crafted object. "Dedication" purports, even aspires, to be "self-consuming," to undo itself as a human creation for the greater glory of God;[1] but at the same time the poem is deeply involved in a kind of self-display which re-establishes the claims of authorship apparently surrendered. Despite the disarming nature of its initial gesture of surrender, "Dedication" reveals upon close inspection a self which is demanding, assertive, even aggressive towards the God to Whom it attempts to submit. In this "double motion"[2] of self-abnegation and self-assertion, "Dedication" depicts both the goal of Herbert's poetic project—submission of the self and its creations to God—and the inherent difficulties of achieving that goal through an act of human creation. For "Dedication" demonstrates how such an act, even one declaring profound devotion and submission, may itself be subversive of the authority to which it submits. When examined in the context of the discourse its governing metaphor invokes—the deferential but subtly suasive language with which a poet addresses his patron—"Dedication" emerges as a paradigm of Herbert's recurring concern with the problems of making art of his intercourse with God.

"Dedication" begins with the conventional language of a poet offering his work to a patron: "Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee." God is figured as a potential patron to whom the

poet is suing for grace and protection. The poems which follow are thus rendered as the gifts that the poet would devote to his patron in the hope either of binding him to act beneficently, or of returning to him thanks for favors already granted. Yet in the second and third lines of this poem, it would seem that Herbert, in surrendering his role in the creation of his poems, also surrenders this patron-client model for his relationship with God: "Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came, / And must return." The speaker declares that those poems which he would present to his Lord are the products of that Lord's action. A recognition of God's transcendence appears to supplant the metaphor of clientage with which the poet in the first line structures the relationship among himself, his poems, and his God.

However, this very action of surrendering the proprietary rights of authorship and of crediting the patron with the actual composition of the poetry is itself a part of the conventional discourse between a poet and his patron. The claim that an act of patronage actually produces the artifact is part of the elaborate strategy of praise and supplication commonly employed in dedications.[3] Shakespeare's dedication of *The Rape of Lucrece* to the Earl of Southampton proclaims "what I have done is yours, what I have to do is yours, being part in all I have, devoted yours."[4] The writer's statement that the credit belongs to the patron becomes a deferential action which deflects all praise of the work itself away from the writer to the patron. Like his disavowal of the claims of authorship, Herbert's renunciation of proprietary rights can thus be read within the patron-poet metaphor as a tactic intended to ingratiate the poet with his patron.

Yet these acts of renunciation also have a theological corollary—by surrendering all credit for the creation of his poems to God, Herbert aligns his own poetic practice with Protestant attitudes towards the ability of man to produce good works. Herbert here takes a sterner view of man's abilities than the Church of England, whose Twelfth Article of Religion states:

> Albeit that Good Works, which are the Fruits of Faith, . . . cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith; insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.

Herbert, by contrast, views his works not as evidence of "a true and lively Faith" within him but as the actual product of God's operations upon him. As a result, the presumption of presenting these works as a gift to God is replaced by a somewhat reluctant recognition of the obligation to return to God what is already His ("for from thee they came, / And must return"). The illusion of human agency is supplanted by an overwhelming sense of God's omnipotence. As Barbara Lewalski remarks, "Herbert wrestles constantly with the paradox of his responsibility to create poems of praise, yet his inability to do so unless God will enable him and participate with him in those praises."[5] Herbert's assertion and subsequent renunciation of his own creative action depicts this paradox dramatically.

The "onelie begetter" topos of secular dedications thus provides Herbert with a language able to convey a theological account of the production of his poems. The greatness of his own poetic creations (despite his disclaimers to the contrary) lies partially in his ability to manipulate a language which resonates with both social and sacred meaning. The phrase "first fruits" works in just this manner. It is, as Eleanor Rosenberg tells us, "a commonplace of dedications," regardless of the age of the writer.[6] It serves to demean the work, and so functions as a strategy by which a writer attempts to defuse charges of presumption for thrusting his work upon the world, and himself upon his patron. It suggests that if the work is accepted, other more substantial labor will follow. However, the phrase also possesses theological and biblical meaning. As the quotation from the Twelfth Article of Religion suggests, "fruit" is commonly used in theological contexts to describe the works of man.[7] But the phrase "first fruits" also alludes to the Old Testament injunctions of God to the Israelites. There, God commands: "The first of the fruits of thy land thou shalt bring into the house of the Lord thy God."[8] These "first fruits" are an offering to God, a sacrifice of devotion and a sign of gratefulness. They denote the best, not the worst, of a devotee's product. As Herbert observes in "The Forerunners," "My God must have my best, ev'n all I had." By using this phrase in dedicating his poems to God, Herbert typologically identifies his own votive act with the sacrifices of the Israelites. This typological connection is rendered even more explicit when the reader encounters the first two poems of "The Church"—"The Altar" and "The Sacrifice."

Even in the remainder of "Dedication," which appears to discard the social metaphor of the first two-and-a-half lines in favor

of direct address to God, the social relationship of patronage informs Herbert's language:

> Accept of them [my first fruits] and me,
> And make us strive, who shall sing best thy name,
> Turn their eyes hither, who shall make a gain:
> Theirs, who shall hurt themselves or me, refrain.

He is asking God to accept his works, and by this act of acceptance to control their reception. This would seem to be an act of which only God is capable. Yet Eleanor Rosenberg reminds us that patrons, by accepting the dedication of a work of literature to them, "guaranteed licence for printing and protection against carping critics."[9] Herbert, in asking God to control the reception of his work, is only employing another aspect of the patron-poet metaphor with which he began. God's acceptance of Herbert's "fruits" will be an admission of Herbert into His service ("Accept of them and me"); such acceptance will also involve the formation of a proper audience for Herbert's poetry.

By dedicating his poetry to his Lord, Herbert submits both the act of authorship and the control of his work's reception to God. However, the tension between the social implications and religious echoes of the phrase "first fruits," between a deferential depreciation of the poet's work and an exaltation of the work's primacy, suggests the difficulty of this submission. It is a simultaneously humiliating and elevating experience. In order to be seen as an appropriate gift for the Lord of Lords, the poetry must be valued highly; yet in order that the act of creation not be allowed to presume upon divine power, the work must be denigrated, while its value is revealed to be a product of that Lord's action. This tension is manifested in the first two words of the poem: "Lord, my." The address to superior power is followed immediately by a word expressing the integrity and assertiveness of the poet's self. Paradoxically, the act of submission requires the very dialectic between self and other which it attempts, unsuccessfully, to eradicate.

This tension between self-assertion and submission is also implicit in the subtle craft and wit the poem displays. The phrase "make a gain" suggests not only the spiritual profit which Herbert's readers may acquire by reading, but also the way in which the poetry may allow them to be re-born, made again, and as a result to go on to "make again" the kind of poetry which Herbert has engaged in here (a claim which Harvey, Crashaw, and Vaughan made true[10]). This

matrix of meanings is related to the plays on "turn" and "return," which suggest that conversion (a "turning with" or "towards," as in "The Church-porch" and "The Elixir") of readers will be the "return" promised in the dedication. Yet the remunerative language—"gain," "present," and "return"—suggests the primary motive for dedicating a work to a superior: financial and/or political gain.

This is an almost imperceptible wit, yet one which by its very subtlety displays the craft of the poet even as he disclaims any part in the production of his poems. By deploying words such as "sing," "turn" (Latin, *verso*) and "refrain" which suggest the creation or partition of poems, Herbert's "Dedication" declares itself, and the poems that follow, to be the products of a master craftsman. Quite significantly, the word "make" is used twice in this short poem ostensibly surrendering the act of making to God. The word recalls both man's creative abilities (Sidney's sense of the poet as maker) and, of course, God's (the "author of this great frame" in "Love [I]"). But it also invokes God's coercive powers, suggesting that He not only "makes [Herbert and his fruits]" but also "makes [them] strive," forces them to do something. The two meanings of "make" operative here imply that the one kind of making is related to and enables the other, that the power of coercion is a product of the act of creation. God's ability to control man, to force him to behave in a particular way, is thus seen as a necessary adjunct to his prior act of creation.

On the other hand, the speaker's act of making—the product of which is a poem disclaiming any part in the creative process—suggests the coercive potential of the rhetoric of social submission. By submitting himself and his poems to God, and revealing both to be a product of God's creative action, Herbert makes God responsible for him, his poems, and their reception. He binds God to him both by the ingratiating acknowledgement of God's power, and by his subtle reminders of the "present," "return," and "gain" which this act of poetic devotion invites. Even the revelation of God's coercive power is stated as an imperative—"Make us strive" —demonstrating the blurring of the distinction between supplication and command. In the act of showing how God makes him and his poems, Herbert also tries to "make" God behave in a particular way towards him.

Herbert's "Dedication" performs an act of pure submission, rendering to God the praise for his poetic fruits by surrendering to God his own part in the making, but the very language of his

submission discloses a radically assertive self, which displays its creative powers and demands recognition and remuneration for them. In "Dedication," we see Herbert engaged in precisely the process which he censures in "Jordan (II)"—weaving the self into the sense. Like an off-color thread in a seemingly uniform fabric, Herbert's repeated references to the ability and integrity of the self are apparent only on close inspection of the language of his submission. The very subtlety of these references, however, enhances rather than diminishes the authority of the self, as Castiglione's Sir Frederick describes:

> if the words that the writer useth bring with them a little . . . covered subtilitie, and not so open, as such as be ordinarily spoken, they give a certaine authority to writing, and make the reader more heedfull to pause at it, and to ponder it better, and he taketh a delyte in the wittinesse and learning of him that wryteth.[11]

Paradoxically, then, the degree to which the references to the self and its abilities are submerged becomes a measure of the covert claims for authority being made by the self. In a poem ostensibly deflecting praise for the act of making from the poet to God runs a counter-current demanding admiration for "the wittinesse and learning of him that wryteth." In the act of submitting to superior authority, Herbert regains for himself a "certaine authority" through the "covered subtilitie" with which he states his own demands. The disguise which the demands of the self assume in deference to superior power grants an authority to those claims.

In "Dedication" Herbert displays a sophisticated understanding of the language of secular submission and devotion. He demonstrates that he was the kind of man he portrays in "The Pearl. Matth. 13"—one who knew

> the wayes of honour, what maintains
> The quick *returns* of courtesie and wit.
> In vies of favours whether partie *gains*. . . .
> (italics mine)

By exploiting this language of "returns" and "gains" in a poem ostensibly concerned with submission, Herbert manifests his own ability to engage in the delicate verbal subterfuges required in the disingenuous world of the court. For as Puttenham reminds us, the dissembling and disguising of one's own acquisitive motives was a

prime requirement of courtly discourse; "the profession of a very Courtier," he observes, "is cunningly to be able to dissemble."[12] In a social world idealized as static but energized by merit and ambition, the ability to dissemble one's own assertions and demands, to insinuate them into one's proffers of submission, was psychologically as well as strategically imperative. In "Dedication," the language of social submission both covers and discovers Herbert's assertions of his own integrity and ability, while perhaps allowing Herbert to submerge some of the aggression and resentment towards God which emerges quite blatantly in other poems.[13] The insinuation of such latent aggression into a poem advertising itself as an act of submission parallels Herbert's attempted insinuation of himself into his Lord's favor through a declaration of devotion. In both activities, an apparently self-demeaning stance enables Herbert to engage in covert advancement of the self.

It is as if Herbert is at pains to show, even in the reader's "first entrance" into *The Temple*, the paradox around which his poetic devotions to God perpetually revolve—how the very authority which writing inevitably involves subverts the submissive goals of his writing. The humble re-writing of the first two-and-a-half lines is disarming in its apparently self-deprecatory surrender of proprietary rights (as, indeed, dedications were intended to be). It creates the illusion of ease in the act of submission to God. "Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came, / And must return," declares the speaker, as if he has now gotten it right, as if the process of submission only required the admission of God's benevolence and the speaker's own impotence. But as we have seen, the language of Herbert's submission yields on close scrutiny a very bold and demanding self.[14] Herbert's humble statements of his inability to "present" to God his poetic "fruits" (because they are already His) work to disable the charges of presumption which his asking God to be his patron could invoke;[15] they also enable Herbert to engage in covert forms of self-assertion and demand which could not be tolerated in more explicit manifestations.

In the way the ostensible syntactic message of the poem is belied by the combined connotative power of the words themselves, "Dedication" resembles "Coloss. 3.3. Our life is hid with Christ in God." Both poems depict a "double motion"—"one issuing from the self . . . the other issuing from Him who 'Is on high.'"[16] However, in "Coloss. 3.3," the experience of "Dedication" is reversed: it is not the self but God's word which is woven

artfully into the sense of the poem. Stanley Fish observes of "Coloss. 3.3," "The very act of assertion is transformed into an act of self-abnegation."[17] In "Dedication," however, the language of self-abnegation yields an undercurrent of radical assertion. And rather than a pattern within the poem rendered so obvious by the use of italics that it almost belies the concealment denoted by the word "hid," the double motion of "Dedication" is much more subtle, much less perceptible. In "Dedication," the claims of the self are so fully embedded in the discourse of submission to superior power that they surface only as connotative traces within this discourse, not as an italicized syntactic counter-message.

In "The Church-porch," a homiletic collection of maxims on conduct placed between "Dedication" and the lyrics of "The Church," Herbert advises a mode of oxymoronic behavior towards superiors:

> Towards great persons use respective boldnesse:
> That temper gives them theirs, and yet doth take
> Nothing from thine. (253-55)

Herbert's "Dedication" works in precisely this way, fusing respect and boldness in a single utterance, submerging the demands of the self in a discourse declaring obeisance to superior power. Yet in doing so, "Dedication" reveals the difficulty of maintaining a posture of pure respect. In "Dedication" we come to realize that respect can be a form of boldness, deference a kind of coercion, and self-deprecation a thinly disguised mode of self-assertion. As Francis Bacon, Herbert's good friend, explains, "excusations, cessions, modesty itself well governed are but arts of ostentation."[18]

Herbert's poetry continually confronts this paradoxical combination of boldness and respect present in "Dedication," and implicit in all attempts to write to God. In "Prayer (I)" Herbert calls prayer an "Engine against th'Almightie, sinners towre, / Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing-spear," suggesting the potential violence involved in the act of petitioning God. In "The Reprisall" and "Artillerie" Herbert employs the imagery of warfare to portray the aggressive aspects of his own dealing with God (and of God's dealings with him). Even a poem like "Gratefulnesse" brags quite proudly about the strategic "art" which God's "beggar" employs in praising God's bounty to "make thy gifts occasion more."

Herbert's "Dedication," like the dedications of secular authors, performs a complicated and delicate social maneuver which encompasses both respect and boldness, supplication and coercion, submission and aggression. Dedications are the occasions on which a Renaissance writer formally thrusts himself and his text upon the world; yet dedications also comprise a submission of self and text to that world. Dedications provide opportunities for self-display; but one of the talents most often displayed is the ability to engage in self-depreciation. In his "Dedication," Herbert takes these paradoxes inherent in the literature of clientage, and makes of them a succinct but extremely complex account of the goals and obstacles of his own poetic project.

"Supplication of man to man may diffuse itself through many topics of persuasion," remarks Samuel Johnson in his famous critique of devotional poetry, "but supplication to God can only cry for mercy."[19] "Dedication" demonstrates Herbert's brilliant solution to this very real dilemma confronting the religious poet. By continually employing the language of supplication between men in his lyric supplications to God, Herbert manages to expand the limited range of expression which Dr. Johnson found to be the principal shortcoming of the devotional lyric. Rather than the simple cry for mercy posited by Dr. Johnson, Herbert's devotional lyrics depict both his own fervent desire to submit to God, and the obstacles to submission which the self inevitably generates. Herbert's extended use of the metaphor of a poet addressing his patron in his dedication of his poems to God provides him with a supple language able to register the extremes of self-assertion and self-abnegation, aggression and submission. The poem directs our attention as readers not only to Herbert's faith, but also to his faithfulness to the difficulty of human submission to God.

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NOTES

1 In *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), p. 157, Stanley Fish quotes the first two-and-a-half lines of "Dedication" as an example of the characteristic process of "letting go" in Herbert's poetry.

2 The phrase is from Herbert's poem, "Coloss. 3.3. Our life is hid with Christ in God." *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941), p. 84. All citations of Herbert are to this edition.

3 Eleanor Rosenberg reminds us that in the Renaissance dedications were intimately connected to questions of literary property:

> a dedication, even if it had not appeared in print, gave the patron not merely the right to possess the manuscript but in fact some measure of proprietary right in the text of the work addressed to him.

Leicester: Patron of Letters (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1955), pp. 92-93.

4 *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 1722. Shakespeare's dedication works very much like Herbert's. The accomplishments of the self are asserted ("what I have done") and then surrendered ("is yours"), while the plays on "I" and "you," "part" and "all," suggest the tension inherent in the literature of clientage between self-advertisement and praise, conditional giving and complete surrender.

5 Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), p. 302.

6 Rosenberg, pp. 33-34n.

7 For example, the opening of "A Sermone of Good Workes annexed unto Faith" employs "fruit" and "work" interchangeably. See *Certaine Sermones or Homilies 1547-1571 (1623 Edition)*, ed. Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968), I, 30. In "Good Friday" (l. 11), "Employment (II)" (l. 25), "Love Unknown" (ll. 6, 12), and "Paradise" (ll. 3, 5), Herbert uses the term to suggest the accomplishments of man.

8 Exodus 23:19. See also Exodus 22:29, 34:26; Leviticus 23:10, 17; Deuteronomy 14:22.

9 Rosenberg, p. 6. In a brilliant essay on the patronage network surrounding Ralegh's *History of the World*, Leonard Tennenhouse observes that "It was not the efficacy of the author's language, then, so much as the social realities of the patronage system that governed both the production and the reception of Ralegh's literary work." See "Sir Walter Ralegh and the Literature of Clientage," *Patronage in the Renaissance*, ed. Guy Fitch Lytle and Stephen Orgel (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), p. 258.

10 Christopher Harvey's *The Synagogue* (1640) is a rather slavish and inferior imitation of *The Temple*; it was nevertheless bound with *The Temple* as a kind of companion-piece from 1650 to 1850. Richard Crashaw entitled his first volume of poems *Steps to the Temple* in deference to Herbert, despite their very different religious and poetic sensibilities. Of Henry Vaughan's debt to Herbert, F. E. Hutchinson observes: "There is no example in English literature of one poet adopting another poet's words so extensively" (*Works*, p. xlii). Vaughan's preface to the second edition of *Silex Scintillans* (1655) acknowledges "Mr. George Herbert, whose holy life and verse gained many pious converts, (of whom I am the least)," and his poem "The Match" answers Herbert's invitation in "Obedience" to "some kinde man" to "thrust his heart / Into these lines." See *Henry Vaughan: The Complete Poems*, ed. Alan Rudrum (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 142, 191.

11 Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Thomas Hoby (London: J. M. Dent, 1928), p. 51.

12 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1936), p. 299.

13 Louis Montrose makes a similar point about one of Sidney's entertainments for Elizabeth, *The Triumph of the Fortress of Perfect Beauty*:

> Offerings of devoted submission may be functionally ambiguous. They may allow an oblique and limited expression of the aggression or independence that is being denied, and a purgation of the resentment that the submission entails.

"Celebration and Insinuation: Sir Philip Sidney and the Motives of Elizabethan Courtship," *Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 7 (1977), 28-29.

14 Frank Whigham comments on the skepticism with which Renaissance readers were apt to respond to such deferential expressions:

> Self-deprecation and humility had come to suggest self-praise and pride, or at least a sense of one's worth. This vocabulary loses the capacity to distinguish between representations of humility and of smugness.

"The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters," *PMLA*, 96 (1981), 874.

15 Phoebe Sheavyn, for example, describes James I's dedication to God of his *Answer to the work of Conrad Vorstius on the Nature and Attributes of God* (1616) as "irreverent and bombastic" in her *The Literary Profesion in the Elizabethan Age* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1909), p. 34.

16 Fish, p. 203.

17 Fish, p. 205.

18 Francis Bacon, *A Selection of His Works*, ed. Sidney Warhaft (New York: Odyssey, 1965), p. 181.

19 Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets* (London: J. M. Dent, 1925), I, 174.