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Donne and Herbert: Vehement Grief and Silent Tears

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"Vehement grief" and "silent tears": I want to explore these two phrases in order to reinforce some essential differences between Donne and Herbert—differences that are in some danger of becoming lost in the flood of excellent books and essays on Herbert that we have seen in the last fifteen or twenty years.

Perhaps I can illustrate what I mean by citing a curious episode in a novel of 1973 by Martin Amis (*The Rachel Papers*), where the 19-year-old hero (if we can call him that) is nervously preparing the scene for what he hopes may be a seduction. He puts on the coffee table three books that he thinks may help the rite: an illustrated Blake, Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, and a book entitled *The Poetry of Meditation*, which, he explains, is "in fact a scholarly American work on the Metaphysicals, although from the cover it could have been a collection of beatnik verse." The intended young woman doesn't show up, but another does, a British beatnik dressed in a cowboy costume; she kneels on the floor and starts reading an essay on Herbert in *The Poetry of Meditation*. "'Herbert Who?' she must have wanted to ask," thinks the hero. But she is a lot smarter than she looks, for a little later she says "in an indignant monotone": "It bugs me when these guys start trying to hang on 'The Temple' this kind of *structuralized* didactic trip when it's all the hang-ups and anxieties that make it so . . . integrated."[1]

Such a stress upon Herbert's hang-ups and anxieties inevitably tends to obscure the differences between Donne and Herbert. I hope to recover these differences by concentrating on their common theme of sighs and tears.

Consider first Donne's Holy Sonnet 3:

> O might those sighes and teares returne againe
> Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent,
> That I might in this holy discontent

> Mourne with some fruit, as I have mourn'd in vaine;
> In mine Idolatry what showrs of raine
> Mine eyes did waste? what griefs my heart did rent?
> That sufferance was my sinne, now I repent;[2]
> 'Cause I did suffer I must suffer paine.

The lines of course recall the whole vast range of Donne's love poetry: the sharp satirical defense of his love in "The Canonization":

> Alas, alas, who's injur'd by my love?
> What merchants ships have my sighs drown'd?
> Who saies my teares have overflow'd his ground?

or the sad and brooding meditation on the elusive All in "Lovers infinitenesse":

> If yet I have not all thy love,
> Deare, I shall never have it all,
> I cannot breath one other sigh, to move;
> Nor can intreat one other teare to fall.

We think of the effort to forbid those "teare-floods" and "sigh-tempests" in the one "Valediction" and the flood of tears that threatens to drown the lovers in the "Valediction: of weeping." We think of the agonized retreat of the lover to Twicknam Garden, "Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with teares." And we think too of the years of suffering remembered in the "Nocturnall"—surely a poem memorializing his love for his dead wife—"Oft a flood / Have wee two wept, and so / Drown'd the whole world, us two."

The third Holy Sonnet thus reminds us of a whole range of human experience that Herbert does not touch, and gives the evidence for Donne's deep sense of sinfulness—remorse not simply for youthful lust, but for what Donne now feels, or wants to feel, has been and perhaps still is a sinful over-valuing of erotic love, even the love that led to his marriage—a vehement, passionate love that he calls "Idolatry." "That sufferance was my sinne"—suffering, allowing that excessive valuation to prevail has created his present suffering, as he now repents, or tries to repent, that sin. And he goes on to explain that it was no ordinary sin: not gluttony, not envy of his neighbor's goods, not lechery, not pride—for such sins there would have been at least a momentary satisfaction to remember:

Th' hydroptique drunkard, and night-scouting thiefe,
The itchy Lecher, and selfe tickling proud
Have the remembrance of past joyes, for reliefe
Of comming ills. To (poore) me is allow'd
No ease; for, long, yet vehement griefe hath beene
Th' effect and cause, the punishment and sinne.

(I like the 1635 parenthesis around "poore": it gives just the right touch of conscious self-pity or stagy self-depreciation; this sinner is trying hard to repent!)

In the next sonnet he attempts to comfort his "blacke Soule" with the traditional thought: "Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke." So the Old Church believed, but now, in the New Church, Donne must ask the strange and overwhelming question: "But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?" No one is there to administer the sacrament of Confession: it is no longer a sacrament. How then does one repent? It is as though this speaker stands in an immense empty space. The true Calvinist would know that all depends upon the Will of God and that he must await the motions of that Will. But it is this very Will that Donne has feared in the second Holy Sonnet, where he runs through all the "many titles" that, in traditional belief, ought to make him God's own property, and finds no comfort in any of these ancient claims. Instead, in the sestet he tries to find a desperate hope in a Calvinist posture:

Except thou rise and for thine owne worke fight,
Oh I shall soone despaire, when I doe see
That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not chuse me,
And Satan hates mee, yet is loth to lose mee.

In such a condition of theological uncertainty, with the old modes of reassurance corroded by Calvinist anxiety, Donne seems in the sestet of Sonnet 4 to say, first, that repentance must begin with the decision of the self: *he* must make the effort, *he* must put the process into action by his own free will, or—an alternative that could perhaps be operating at the same time—he could trust the blood of Christ to perform its miracle of redemption:

Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke,
And red with blushing, as thou art with sinne;
Or wash thee in Christs blood, which hath this might
That being red, it dyes red soules to white.

Note the positive reliance upon the self: "make thy selfe," "Or wash thee." A present grace is there to be accepted by the human will: the grace flowing from the Cross. And who, Donne asks in "The Crosse," "Who can blot out the Crosse, which th' instrument / Of God, dew'd on mee in the Sacrament?" "Instrument" here has a special strength if taken in the legal sense of a "document whereby a right is created or confirmed" (*OED*).

Donne is here wrestling with theological issues that lie at the heart of the Reformation. The Holy Sonnets arise from dual causes of vehement grief—a profound personal sense of sin and a deeply troubled theological outlook that finds it difficult to resolve that vehement grief; and yet it is resolved, tentatively, optatively, in the intricate legal metaphors of the sixteenth Holy Sonnet, the last of the sequence proper:

> This Lambe, whose death, with life the world hath blest,
> Was from the worlds beginning slaine, and he
> Hath made two Wills, which with the Legacie
> Of his and thy kingdome, doe thy Sonnes invest.
> Yet such are thy laws, that men argue yet
> Whether a man those statutes can fulfill;
> None doth; but all-healing grace and spirit
> Revive againe what law and letter kill.

Some texts read "thy all-healing," with metrical regularity, but the irregularity, supported by major manuscripts, seems functional, placing significant stress upon *all*. In any case, the words "all-healing" carry a rich ambiguity; God's grace can heal all sins and perhaps too is capable of healing the sins of all, including the sins of this particular sorry sinner, John Donne, who concludes by throwing his hope upon the gospel of love revealed by St. John:

> Thy lawes abridgement, and thy last command
> Is all but love; Oh let that last Will stand![3]

The phrase "Thy lawes abridgement" refers to the Ten Commandments in a double way: the new commandment, "love one another," given by St. John (13:34) is an abridgement in accord with the legal language here: a condensation, an abstract of the old law; but it is also an abridgement in the sense that it curtails and supersedes the old law with the larger law of love. And so this sinner cries: "Oh let that last Will stand!" hoping for mercy rather than justice. He begs God not to change his Will of

love—the sort of thought not likely to occur to one of strict Calvinist leaning, who holds to the stern concept of God's immutable predetermining Will.

Here, then, is another vast area of human experience that Herbert does not explore, though he is well aware of the issues and deals with them in his own way in such poems as "The Holdfast" or "The Method." Here is the method:

> Poore heart, lament.
> For since thy God refuseth still,
> There is some rub, some discontent,
> Which cools his will.

This is a God of mutable Will, a God whose Will is affected by what human beings do:

> Thy Father could
> Quickly effect, what thou dost move;
> For he is *Power*: and sure he would;
> For he is *Love*.

How easily Herbert deals with the paradox of God's Omnipotence and God's Charity; the Power that, logically pursued, led to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination; the Love that, demonstrated in Christ's sacrifice, led to the varying measures of free will allowed by other doctrines. But here the trouble does not involve doctrinal issues: the trouble comes from something that the individual has done to cool God's good will toward men:

> Go search this thing,
> Tumble thy breast, and turn thy book.
> If thou hadst lost a glove or ring,
> Wouldst thou not look?

Herbert's familiar imagery removes all terror from the inquest, and indeed, as it turns out, the sins in this case are not heinous:

> What do I see
> Written above there? *Yesterday*
> *I did behave me carelesly,*
> *When I did pray.*

And should Gods eare
To such indifferents chained be,
Who do not their own motions heare?
Is God lesse free?

And so the conclusion is optimistic, asking no hard questions:

Then once more pray:
Down with thy knees, up with thy voice.
Seek pardon first, and God will say,
Glad heart rejoyce.[4]

You may object that Herbert's greater poems, "The Flower," "Affliction I," "The Crosse," "The Pearl," and many others of rich and complex texture, reveal more serious sins and do not admit such easy solutions; but I would answer that "The Method" represents Herbert's religious world in an abstract or paradigm. As the title implies, here is his *method* of dealing with grief. And the method works, in all his poems, because he knows the answer of "The Quip": "thou shalt answer, Lord, for me." The word *grief* that spreads its unifying filiation throughout "The Church" relies upon the redeeming words of Christ spoken over and over again, some sixty times, in the refrain of "The Sacrifice": "Was ever grief like mine?"

The method also works because the sense of sin in Herbert's "Church" is quite different from the anguished fear of damnation, that "sin of fear" that runs throughout Donne's Divine Poems. Like Herbert's domestic imagery ("And in this love, more then in bed, I rest"), Herbert's sense of sin is domesticated, household, everyday; when he talks of his sins they seem rather misdemeanors than felonies. Usually they occur in complaints over the frustrations arising from his bad health: afflictions that arise from his sense that his weak body is unfairly preventing him from fulfilling his aim to serve God worthily. Or, in "The Collar," there is the cry of worldly ambition frustrated—a sin related to his other complaint, since Herbert had every reason to hope that he would, with his distinguished family and patronage and talents, rise to high office in the church. Something of this worldly ambition is also revealed in "The Pearl": "I know the wayes of Learning . . . Yet I love thee." "I know the wayes of Honour . . . Yet I love thee." "I know the wayes of Pleasure . . . Yet I love thee." But these are ordinary, household sins, manageable by Herbert's method. Thus hell is barely mentioned in his poetry, and his four Last Things are not Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven, but Death,

Judgment, Heaven, and Love—Love which suffuses his entire "Church" and holds its body from disintegration.

But with Donne, in the first Holy Sonnet:

> Despaire behind, and death before doth cast
> Such terrour, and my feeble flesh doth waste
> By sinne in it, which it t'wards hell doth weigh . . . .

By the eighth Holy Sonnet Donne has reached a point of recovery where he can hope that his father's soul in heaven can see "That valiantly I hels wide mouth o'rstride." But that heroic, histrionic image in itself marks the immense difference between the worlds of grief that these two poets inhabit.

We can see, in "The Familie," how Herbert struggles to avoid such histrionic gestures, both in himself, and in the larger family of the Christian community:

> What doth this noise of thoughts within my heart,
> As if they had a part?
> What do these loud complaints and puling fears,
> As if there were no rule or eares?
>
> But, Lord, the house and familie are thine,
> Though some of them repine.
> Turn out these wranglers, which defile thy seat:
> For where thou dwellest all is neat.

—*neat* in the older sense: "free from dirt or impurities"; "clear, bright"; and "characterized by elegance of form or arrangement" (*OED*).

> First Peace and Silence all disputes controll,
> Then Order plaies the soul;
> And giving all things their set forms and houres,
> Makes of wilde woods sweet walks and bowres.
> * * * * *
> Joyes oft are there, and griefs as oft as joyes;
> But griefs without a noise:
> Yet speak they louder then distemper'd fears.
> What is so shrill as silent tears?

The phrase "silent tears" suggests a basic concept of expressive control that lies at the center of Herbert's poetic—and, no doubt, at the center of his conception of the Christian life. It includes the "Collar" that controls the choler of impulsive anger in the child of God, a collar of irregular, but persistent rhyme that leads to a perfect stanza at the close. It leads also toward the perfect rhyme that closes the final line of "Deniall" after the unrhymed lines of the five preceding stanzas. It leads toward the whip-lash endings of "Affliction I" ("Let me not love thee, if I love thee not") or "The Crosse" ("With but foure words, my words, *Thy will be done*"). It leads toward the taut, understated final line of the last poem in "The Church": "So I did sit and eat," with its potent echo of Luke 12:37.

In "Sighs and Grones," Herbert's most explicit assertion of his sins, the short, rhyming, first and last lines of each stanza encapsulate the misery within:

> O do not use me
> After my sinnes! look not on my desert,
> But on thy glorie! Then thou wilt reform
> And not refuse me: for thou onely art
> The mightie God, but I a sillie worm;
> Oh do not bruise me!

The opening lines contain the implicit consolation of Psalm 103:10: "He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities." Nor will he do so now, in this case: the cry of grief at the close will surely be answered:

> But O reprieve me!
> For thou hast life and death at thy command;
> Thou art both *Judge* and *Saviour, feast* and *rod,*
> *Cordiall* and *Corrosive*: put not thy hand
> Into the bitter box; but O my God,
> My God, relieve me!

Of course he suffers; I do not mean to underrate his suffering; but even in his most bitter, grievous moments, the promise is assured and fulfilled, either within the poem, or in the next poem, as here, in "The World," where "Love built a stately house" that is destroyed by Sin and Death,

But *Love* and *Grace* took *Glorie* by the hand,
And Built a braver Palace then before.

Similarly, the rending cries of "Affliction IV" ("Broken in pieces all asunder, / Lord, hunt me not"), are held within the firm confines of the poems immediately before and after: "The Pearl" and "Man."

We lose an important key to the enjoyment of Herbert's art if we allow an emphasis upon his frequent sighs and tears and groans to obscure our sense of his basic, achieved security. For it is this security (despite his hang-ups) that allows him to pursue his playful art—his jokes, his quips, his quiddities, his tricks, his sly reversals, his wings, his altar, his stanzaic letter-bag, his subtle variations upon the word "sweet."

"See how thy beggar works on thee / By art," Herbert cries in "Gratefulnesse," using "art" in the broadest sense of the word, while in "Easter" he focuses the meaning on his artistry as poet and musician:

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
With all thy art.
* * * * *
Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
Pleasant and long:
Or, since all musick is but three parts vied
And multiplied,
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part
And make up our defects with his sweet art.

— *sweet*, in the senses of melodious, harmonious, delightful, beloved, pure—and can we quite avoid the echo of "sweetheart"?

The love of *art* throughout Herbert's "Church" is a dominant quality: visual art in the typographical poems, poetical art in virtually all the forms of the short poem known to the Renaissance, and musical art in the way nearly all the poems could be (and many have been) set to music—some by Herbert himself, according to Isaak Walton:

> His chiefest recreation was Musick, in which heavenly Art he was a most excellent Master, and did himself compose many *divine Hymns* and *Anthems*, which he set and sung to his *Lute* or *Viol*; and, though he was a lover of retiredness, yet his love to *Musick* was such, that he went usually twice every week on certain appointed

> days, to the *Cathedral Church* in *Salisbury*; and at his return would say, *That his time spent in Prayer, and Cathedral Musick, elevated his Soul, and was his Heaven upon Earth*: But before his return thence to *Bemerton*, he would usually sing and play his part, at an appointed private Musick-meeting; and, to justifie his practice, he would often say, *Religion does not banish mirth, but only moderates, and sets rules to it.*[5]

It is here, perhaps, that we come upon what Herbert in his sonnet "Sinne" calls the "One cunning bosome-sinne" that can blow away all defenses: the temptation of pride in showing his cleverness as an artist. Hence the poems in which Herbert tries to say that art is not essential, not even important: the two "Jordan" poems, "The Quidditie," "The Forerunners," "A true Hymne." These are efforts to exorcise that constantly besetting temptation—to show off his brilliant power as an artist. It is a temptation as unruly as Donne's sexual appetite—and as serious a threat to the soul. Thus every poem must be written in modest terms, must not be allowed to flare out, but must remember the thrifty advice of his divine Friend:

> *There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:*
> *Copie out onely that, and save expense.*

Every poem must be written with vigilant restraint, avoiding the long and highly individual stanzaic forms created in Donne's love poetry, and choosing instead to play subtle variations of rhyme and line-length within short and common stanza forms. Control of wit and grief will work together, to each other's benefit, as in the poem entitled "Grief," where the pain does overflow into the brief concluding cry, "Alas, my God!" Yet Herbert slyly keeps the measure and the music and a final rhyming couplet, even though he says he cannot do so:

> Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise
> For my rough sorrows: cease, be dumbe and mute,
> Give up your feet and running to mine eyes,
> And keep your measures for some lovers lute,
> Whose grief allows him musick and a ryme:
> For mine excludes both measure, tune, and time.
> Alas, my God!

"Music" is a word that one does not easily associate with Donne. Benjamin Britten's effort to set Donne's Holy Sonnets to music results in one of that composer's least successful efforts; but Vaughan Williams' settings for five of Herbert's poems are among that composer's most majestic and moving pieces. Music is an art with which Donne shows comparatively little acquaintance, though a few of his poems are, according to some manuscripts, "Songs which were made to certaine Aires which were made before,"[6] that is, written for music already existing, while a few of his other poems were successfully set by contemporary composers, such as "The Expiration," set to fine music by Ferrabosco. These are Donne's simpler pieces, but even to hear these few poems set and sung brings only greater grief to the librettist, if we may believe Donne's words in "The triple Foole":

> I thought, if I could draw my paines,
> Through Rimes vexation, I should them allay,
> Griefe brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,
> For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse.
>
> But when I have done so,
> Some man, his art and voice to show,
> Doth Set and sing my paine,
> And, by delighting many, frees againe
> Griefe, which verse did restraine.

It is true: even in those simpler poems Donne's vehement grief reveals a depth of sexual entanglement that tends to defy, and almost does defy the fetters of musical measure:

> So, so breake off this last lamenting kisse,
> Which sucks two soules, and vapors Both away,
> Turne thou ghost that way, and let mee turne this,
> And let our selves benight our happiest day,
> We ask'd none leave to love; nor will we owe
> Any, so cheape a death, as saying, Goe;
>
> Goe; and if that word have not quite kil'd thee,
> Ease mee with death, by bidding mee goe too.

As always in Donne, death is the bitter antagonist, the fearful ghost that haunts his happiest day.

With Herbert this is never so. To see Herbert following a stern implacable creed, to value Herbert's poems as expressions of anxiety—such views seem to diminish the music, the joy, the play of Herbert's achievement, which I think may be described in a passage by William Carlos Williams, a poet of a similar resilient optimism. It comes at the end of Williams' book *Spring and All*, a book that seems deliberately designed as an answer and antidote to Eliot's *Waste Land*, which had appeared a year earlier. It would not, I think, be wrong to feel the difference between Donne and Herbert as essentially akin to the difference between Eliot and Williams. In any case, here is the passage:

> . . . the imagination is wrongly understood when it is supposed to be a removal from reality in the sense of John of Gaunt's speech in Richard the Second: to imagine possession of that which is lost. It is rightly understood when John of Gaunt's words are [taken] . . . as a dance over the body of his condition accurately accompanying it. By this means of the understanding, the play written to be understood as a play, the author and reader are liberated to pirouette with the words which have sprung from the old facts of history, reunited in present passion.
>
> To understand the words as so liberated is to understand poetry. That they move independently when set free is the mark of their value.[7]

The mark of Herbert's value, I believe, as distinguished from Donne's value, lies in the way Herbert's poems dance and pirouette above the theological issues, dance above the old facts of history, liberate themselves, more than any other religious writing of the time (except for Shakespeare's plays) from the stern and warring doctrines of the time. The simplest of Christian truths are adequate, as Herbert says in "Divinitie," to understand the heart of his poetry, its delight in artful phrasing, modestly deployed, its pleasure in recording the music of silent tears:

> Could not that Wisdome, which first broacht the wine,
> Have thicken'd it with definitions?
> And jagg'd his seamlesse coat, had that been fine,
> With curious questions and divisions?

But all the doctrine, which he taught and gave,
Was cleare as heav'n, from whence it came.
At least those beams of truth, which onely save,
Surpasse in brightnesse any flame.

Love God, and love your neighbour. Watch and pray.
Do as ye would be done unto.
O dark instructions; ev'n as dark as day!
Who can these Gordian knots undo?

But with Donne the case seems quite the opposite. In his deep anxiety to find the one true Spouse of Christ, he has devoured the entire universe of controverted divinity. His poetry conquers by vehement attack upon the Gordian knot, by violent grasping of the terrible problems of the age and of the self. He wins by calling upon his God to ravish him, thus merging the worlds of flesh and spirit in the only way possible to his erotic self:

Divorce mee, 'untie, or breake that knot againe,
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you 'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.

A final point might emerge from this discussion of difference: the relation of each poet to European schools of spirituality. As my remarks have no doubt indicated, I have no enthusiasm for recent efforts to limit Herbert, and to some extent, Donne, within a particular range of Protestantism defined as Calvinist. The power of Calvinism was in fact waning rapidly in England during the years when Herbert was writing, especially after the accession of Charles in 1625. I recommend to everyone the reading of a recent book by Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, 1590-1640*: a book that shows how, during Herbert's maturity and Donne's later years, the forces of free will and sacramentalism were breaking down the dominance of Calvinism that had existed, precariously, and always with strong opposition, within the ranks of the Elizabethan clergy. The poetic of Protestant writers such as Donne and Herbert was broad enough to include many different religious impulses generated on the Continent: Lutheran, Calvinist, Arminian, and Roman Catholic, the last displaying new vitality under the impact of the Renaissance and Counter-Reformation in Spain and France and Italy. Donne seems to show a

special affinity with Spain—with the vehement grief of its bleeding statues and the strenuous, anxious art of El Greco, attempting to stride and stretch from earth to heaven. Herbert was able to absorb the gentler lessons of devout humanism in France and Italy, the lessons of tranquility and silent tears. It seems important that we should feel all these Continental forces working within the poetry of Donne and Herbert, because it is, I believe, from the difficult and subtle blending of these varied currents within the peculiar psyche of each poet that the greatness of Donne and the greatness of Herbert arises.

I speak of greatness, because I honor both poets. I am not eager to say that one is better, one is greater, than the other. My point has been that they are different, vastly different, and that we do each of them injustice when we blur the distinction between them. Yet if, 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.

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Notes

[1] See the third chapter, "Quarter to eight: the Costa Brava."

[2] In quoting the Holy Sonnets I use the Grierson numbering and usually follow his text; but in line 7 here I have rejected his editorial semi-colon after "sinne," and have adopted the reading of Gardner and Shawcross. For quotations from Donne's other poems I also follow Grierson.

[3] In line 14 here I have followed the reading "that" in the texts of Gardner and Shawcross.

[4] Quotations from Herbert are taken from *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941).

[5] Izaak Walton, *Lives*, World's Classics edn. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1927), p. 303.

[6] See Helen Gardner's edition, *John Donne: The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. lxxi and Appendix B, "Musical Settings of Donne's Poems."

[7] *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I, 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986), p. 234.

This essay is a revision of a lecture given at the meeting of The John Donne Society at the Gulfpark Campus of the University of Southern Mississippi in February, 1988.