

DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

Christ: 'my onely musick'.
The spirituality of George Herbert

ISAAC WALTON tells this story of Herbert at Bemerton during the last years of his life: on his way into Salisbury for the choral service at the cathedral and private music-making with friends:

He saw a poor man, with a poorer horse, that was fall'n under his load; they were both in distress, and needed present help; which Mr *Herbert* perceiving, put off his canonical coat, and help'd the poor man to unload, and after, to load his horse: the poor man blest him for it: and he blest the poor man; and was so like the *good Samaritan*, that he gave him money to refresh both himself and his horse; and told him, 'that if he loved himself, he should be merciful to his beast'.

Herbert's late arrival, 'so soyl'd and discompos'd', caused comment. But he replied:

That the thought of what he had done would prove Musick to him at Midnight; and that the omission of it, would have upbraided and made discord in his Conscience . . . for if I be bound to pray for all that be in distress, I am sure that I am bound, so far as it is in my power to practise what I pray for. And though I do not wish for the like occasion every day, yet let me tell you, I would not willingly pass one day of my life without comforting a sad soul, or showing mercy; and I praise God for this occasion. And now let's tune our instruments.¹

Here we see the received picture of Herbert in the making: the model parish priest, simple and practical in piety, set up as an example to the Restoration clergy; the 'lovable and naïve Laudian' and quaint minor poet in the suspect *genre* of religious poetry. It is a picture which has made him appear to be of limited interest and relevance to later generations. Herbert has been ill served by many of his anglican admirers. Thus in Walton's story the parallel to the parable of the Good Samaritan is too obvious and, knowing the author's capacity for creating incident, our suspicions are aroused. Yet we need not doubt its plausibility. The country parson 'in journey', Herbert wrote, 'leaveth not his ministry behind him; but is

himself wherever he is' (250-51).² And that self he viewed in musician's terms as an instrument to be tuned to praise in every part of life in harmony with Christ, 'my onely musick'.

It was indeed an active spirituality, a priestly ministry both practical and exemplary, as we can see in the ideal set down in the *Country Parson*. But the poetry of *The Temple* reveals something more — a personal discipline of rigour and depth within which he faced, without evasion, his failures and frustrations, his anger with God and himself, his despair no less than the joy and peace of the life of faith. Those who dismiss Herbert as 'the representative lyrist of a mild and tepid church' miss the authenticity and intensity of the experience to which he gave poetic form. A glimpse of this is given in Walton's account of his induction to the cure of souls in Bemerton church:

being left there alone to Toll the Bell (as the Law requires him), he staid so much longer than an ordinary time, before he returned . . . that his friend, Mr *Woodnot*, look'd in at the Church window, and saw him lie prostrate on the ground before the Altar.³

The poetry, written over many years, and finally put in order during his short ministry at Bemerton before his death, is the key to the disciplined life of prayer which informed the active, public ministry.

Poetry was, for Herbert, essentially prayer, a practice of the presence of God: 'that which while I use/I am with thee' (*Quidditie*: 70). Poetic structure was, therefore, an expression of faith in a divine order within which the disorder of human experience could be contained. And if that experience seemed at times too overwhelming for words — 'Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise/For my rough sorrows' (*Grief*: 164) — it could, nevertheless, be the material of poetry. The ordered harmony of creation, shattered by the Fall, is now restored by Christ, 'my onely musick', and the poetry becomes the embodiment of that restoration in worship:

Man is out of order hurl'd
Parcel'd out to all the world.
Lord, thy broken consort raise
And the musick shall be praise (*Doomsday*: 187).

The symbolic poetic order and the exemplary ordering of the priestly life express this restoration of divine order. Both are gifts of grace alone and *The Temple* has this dedication:

Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee;
Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came,
And must return.

Thus the whole work has an order whose meaning may be read at several levels. The 'Temple', at first glance the church building itself, the English Church or the whole community of grace, is finally the temple 'not made with hands'. 'Blest be the Architect, whose art could build so strong in a weak heart' (*The Church-floore*: 67). It is built by Christ upon the rock of faith which that order reflects.

Joseph Summers has suggested that Herbert:

might be considered a 'mystic' of the *via positiva*, in something of the sense that most devout Christians are at times 'mystics'; valuing union with God, but expecting it fully only with death; expressing joy for the moments of the presence of God and lamentations for the days of his absence; believing that the proper service of God consists in works as well as acts of devotion; conscious of sin but striving to conform to the will of God; seeing in the world and human life images which show God's creation and his love.⁴

Herbert's achievement was to take this common Christian experience and by his discipline and skill reveal it to the reader as being both more profound and much richer in meaning than he could have imagined. In this is to be found the secret of his appeal to Christians of other times and diverse traditions.

Poetry and spirituality are united in *The Temple*. Thus, Herbert could only envisage publication after his death if the expression of his 'many spiritual conflicts' might 'turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul'.⁵ Those modern readers who see in the poetry only the artificial conceits of 'metaphysical' wit have, therefore, missed the point. His language appears difficult and his imagery occasionally bizarre to the modern reader only because a radical change of sensibility divides our time from his.

Underlying all of his writing is an unselfconscious apprehension of life and experience in metaphorical and symbolic terms which links this Protestant with medieval Catholicism.

He reads the spirit in the letter. Not *into* but *in*; he writes in symbols because he thus sees the world, both outside and inside himself; he sees it as a web of significance. . . . He writes not of events and facts but of meanings and values, and he uncovers rather than creates these meanings. He 'reads' them in the universe of which he is a humble but undetachable part.⁶

The typological elaboration of biblical image and narrative which was characteristic of the Sarum Liturgy, the Breviary, the Primers and the popular religious verse and iconography of English religion before the Reformation, is at the root of his apprehension and expression of the

christian faith. The long poem, 'The Sacrifice', is a striking example of this. The Christ who speaks here is the Christ of the liturgy of Holy Week:

*Oh, all ye, who passe by, whose eyes and minde
To worldly things are sharp, but to me blinde;
To me, who took eyes that I might you finde;
Was ever grief like mine?
The Princes of my people make a head
Against their Maker: they do wish me dead,
Who cannot wish, except I give them bread:
Was ever grief like mine? (26).*

J. A. W. Bennett is only among the most recent to point out that in this poem are to be found, 'all the figural features that from the time of Prudentius till the printings of the so-called *Biblia Pauperum* in the fifteenth century had come to cluster round the theme of the Passion'.⁷ The sequence for matins on Maunday Thursday, *O vos omnis qui transitis*, and the Good Friday *Adoratio Crucis* are the most obvious sources.

Nevertheless, the poem in both structure and content is Herbert's own. Rosemond Tuve has drawn attention to the hardness and bitter irony of the Christ as he faces the pride and ingratitude of the Jews:

*They buffet him, and box him as they list,
Who grasps the earth and heaven with his fist,
And never yet, whom he would punish miss'd:
Was ever grief like mine? (30).⁸*

Throughout, the sureness of justice to come sounds 'as clear and awful as the *Dies Irae*' for those who 'in me denie themselves all pitie'. And Herbert does not shrink from the terrible paradoxes which are so starkly posed by his Calvinism: 'they do wish me dead,/Who cannot wish, except I give them bread'.

The sacrifice of Calvary, penally conceived, is at the heart of the spirituality of the country parson who 'knows nothing but the Crosse of Christe, his minde being defixed on it with those nailes wherewith his Master was' (267). Late-medieval franciscan devotion and Calvinism combine in the faith of this anglican poet. 'The Sacrifice' reveals one more strand of influence: 'It is a new style . . . a meditation upon the liturgy developing the events of Passion Week according to the intricate methods of the seventeenth century: visualization, intellectual analysis, profit drawn from the dual and simultaneous vision of God made man'. Louis Martz discerns, both here and elsewhere, the influence of counter-reformation spirituality; most characteristically the devout humanism of the salesian tradition. Certainly, the *Introduction to the devout life* was valued by the community at

Little Gidding founded by Herbert's friend, Nicholas Ferrar. And Herbert would not have been alone among Anglicans in using contemporary catholic writings. Their influence, as much as distinctively protestant forms of self examination, helped to shape that spiritual discipline to which the poetry bears witness as it presents 'with quivering intensity, the very act of analysis'.⁹ Something of its character, too, is revealed in Barnabas Oley's memoir when he writes of Herbert's 'eminent temperance and frugality . . . his private fastings, his mortification of the body, his extemporary exercises thereof, at the sight or visit of a charnel house. . . . Besides his careful (not scrupulous) observation of appointed Fasts, Lents and Embers'.¹⁰ These were the hidden counterparts of the exemplary and didactic behaviour of the parson and were at one with its purposes. Thus 'The Parson's Library' is his holy life to be used for his parishioners' care and edification: 'So that the parson having studied, and mastered all his lusts and affections within, and the whole Army of Temptations without, hath ever so many sermons ready penn'd, as he hath victories' (279).

Herbert's ministry at Bemerton was short — less than three years — and the final illness which brought him to his death a month before his fortieth birthday in March 1633, was only the last of a series. And he had hesitated long before taking holy orders. It is pertinent to ask what led this man of good family and prospects to a rural parish with, what John Aubrey called, its 'pitifull little chapell'. The young Fellow of Trinity and Cambridge University Orator, the Member of Parliament, might have had greater expectations. Illness, frustration of secular ambitions, disillusionment with public life, the influence of his mother, all have been suggested as reasons. Whatever the cause, it was no hasty decision. And even after he had been made deacon at the age of thirty-one in November 1624, he delayed for nearly six years more as he struggled against ill health — until after his marriage and presentation to the Crown living of Fugglestone with Bemerton — before being ordained priest in September 1630. Nevertheless, the final commitment to the priestly vocation was complete and the *Country Parson* reveals its character: 'A Pastor is the Deputy of Christ for the reducing of Man to the Obedience of God', who, like St Paul, 'fills up that which is behinde of the afflictions of Christ in his flesh, for his Bodie's sake, which is the Church'. Herein is:

the complete definition of a Minister . . . both the Dignity thereof, and the Duty: the Dignity, in that a priest may do that which Christ did, and by his auctority, and as his Vicegerent. The Duty, in that a Priest is to do that which Christ did, and after his manner, both for Doctrine and Life (225).

This high valuation of his calling informs the whole work. He is, therefore, 'truly touched and amazed', at divine service, 'with the Majesty of

God, before whom he presents himself; yet not as himself alone, but as presenting with himself the whole Congregation, whose sins he then bears, and brings with his own to the heavenly altar to be bathed, and washed in the sacred Laver of Christ's blood' (231). He is aware 'that none goes out of Church as he came in, but either better or worse' (233). The responsibility is awesome and extends to every part of his life. The parson then is 'in God's stead to his Parish, and dischargeth God what he can of his promises' (254). Nothing escapes his eye because the visible Church, the national Church by law established is both the whole civil community and the community of grace, the Body of Christ, the temple itself. The right ordering of his life is for the promotion of the right ordering of all human life under God.

The same concern informs the 'special care of his Church, that all things there be decent and befitting his name by which it is called'. Structure, decoration and furnishings receive his attention,

not as out of necessity, or as putting a holiness in the things, but as desiring to keep the middle way between superstition, and slovenliness, and as following the Apostles two great admirable Rules in things of this nature: the first whereof is, *Let all things be done decently, and in order*: the second, *Let all things be done to edification*, 1 Cor 14. For these two rules comprise and include the double object of our duty, God, and our neighbour; the first being for the honour of God; the second for the benefit of our neighbour (246).

The order is that, too, of the Canons and the Book of Common Prayer: 'the prayers of my Mother, the Church of England; no other Prayers are equal to them'.¹¹ It is the liturgical order of the Church's year with the anglican emphasis upon psalmody and the bible as a whole. For Herbert the Protestant, the all-sufficiency of scripture is never in doubt:

Not a word or look
I affect to own,
But by book,
And thy book alone (*Discipline*: 178).

But for the High Churchman the sacraments, the two 'ordained of Christ our Lord in the gospel, that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord' (Article XXV), are the heart of the matter: 'The Countrey Parson being to administer the Sacraments, is at a stand with himself, how or what behaviour to assume for so holy things. Especially at Communion times he is in a great confusion, as being not only to receive God, but to break, and administer him'. He celebrates, 'if not duly once a month, yet at least five or six time in the year' (257;259). The infrequency does not imply a low

doctrine of the eucharist. Its importance and Herbert's sense of unworthiness in relation to it are clear in 'The Priesthood' (written, Amy Charles suggests, as he drew near to ordination):¹²

But th'holy men of God such vessels are,
 As serve him up, who all the world commands:
 When God vouchsafeth to become our fare,
 Their hands convey him, who conveys their hands.
 O what pure things, most pure must those things be
 Who bring my God to me (161).

Eucharistic imagery pervades *The Temple*. It is central to Herbert's spirituality and the focus is always on the directness of the relationship between atoning sacrifice and sacrament:

Who knows not Love, let him assay
 And taste that juice, which on the crosse a pike
 Did set again abroach; then let him say
 if ever he did taste the like.
 Love is that liquour sweet and most divine,
 Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine (*The Agonie*: 37).

The reality of the communication of grace here is the guarantee that 'the unworthiness of the Ministers . . . hinders not the effect of the Sacrament' (Article XXVI) and Herbert was aware of the grace no less than of his unworthiness.

Holiness on the head,
 Light and perfections on the breast,
 Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
 To leade them unto life and rest:
 Thus are true Aarons drest.

Profaneness in my head,
 Defects and darknesse in my breast,
 A noise of passions ringing me for dead
 Unto a place where is no rest:
 Poore priest thus am I drest.

Onely another head
 I have, another heart and breast,
 Another musick, making live not dead,
 Without whom I could have no rest:
 In him I am well drest.

Christ is my onely head,
 My alone onely heart and breast,
 My onely musick, striking me e'en dead;
 That to the old man I may rest,
 And be in him new drest.

So holy in my head,
 Perfect and light in my deare breast,
 My doctrine tun'd by Christ (who is not dead,
 But lives in me while I do rest),
 Come people; Aaron's drest (*Aaron*: 174).

In this poem (an excellent example of the use of typology) the same words are to be found in all five stanzas. Those which 'express Herbert's dejection in regard to himself are used to express the hope that comes of putting on Christ'. Thus the form of the poem expresses the sacramental transfiguration of man's 'noise of passions' into divine harmony by Christ's presence ('my onely musick'). And Herbert's two vocations, to the priesthood and to poetry, are both conceived sacramentally — 'each a means of realizing the presence of God and imparting that presence to others'.¹³

A wreathed garland of deserved praise,
 Of praise deserved, unto thee I give,
 I give to thee, who knowest all my wayes,
 My crooked winding wayes, wherein I live,
 Wherein I die not live: for life is straight,
 Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,
 To thee, who are more farre above deceit,
 Than deceit seems above simplicitie.
 Give me simplicitie, that I may live,
 So live and like, that I may know thy wayes,
 Know them and practise them: then shall I give
 For this poore wreath, give thee a crown of praise (*The Wreath*: 185).

Herbert, as a sixteen-year-old undergraduate had written to his mother enclosing two sonnets, 'to declare my resolution to be, that my poore Abilities in *Poetry*, shall be all, and ever consecrated to God's glory' (363). The poetry of *The Temple*, written nearly twenty years before being given the final form in which it was sent from his death-bed to his friend Nicholas Ferrar, reveals his devotion to this vocation.

The poetic achievement must not be underestimated. Herbert was a master of prosody: 'It is scarcely credible that anyone could attribute to him more subtlety than he possessed'.¹⁴ But the overriding aim was a humble simplicity, as the mature poem, 'The Wreath', reveals: 'Give me simplicitie, that I may live'. There is a profound contradiction in the struggle to achieve

simplicity through the mastery of poetic form, and the use of the latter as the vehicle for spiritual insight, which has been missed by his anglican hagiographers. 'Thus Walton', writes C. A. Patrides, 'elected to observe in Herbert the self-abnegation of the pious individual, not the agony of a poet for whom humility was unobtainable precisely because he was a great poet'.¹⁵ The poetry is precisely 'a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master'.¹⁶ The insight and the vehicle are one. It was not, as the young man had so confidently asserted, simply a matter of dedicating his art to God's service. The poetic mastery was achieved as the realization, the articulation of the profundity of his spirituality. Nevertheless, the contradiction, sharpened by Herbert's Calvinism, remained. How could the poetic mastery be achieved without distraction from God to the self? Man's will, corrupted by sin, vitiates the very attempt to subdue the will which is the motive for writing. Perhaps the simple answer was to hand:

As flames do work and winde, when they ascend,
 So did I weave myself into the sense.
 But while I bustled, I might heare a friend
 Whisper, *How wide is all this long pretence!*
There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:
Copie out onely that, and save expense (*Jordan II: 103*).

But the quiet voice of Christ in this and other poems only deepens the problem. We know that the words are Herbert's own. Perhaps he is renouncing poetry. But he is doing it in a poem. There is no simple resolution of the difficulty. The poem is the necessary vehicle of his insight and yet it must, in a sense, be renounced and no credit can be claimed for its achievement. The poem embodies with great clarity the common experience of any Christian who would offer a 'crown of praise'.

If all his poetry moves towards the hymn of praise, nevertheless, Grief, Sinne, Vanitie, Self-Condernation must all find expression. Above all he had to face suffering. Herbert wrote to his mother in her own sickness in May 1622: 'I alwaies fear'd sickness more than death because sickness hath made me unable to perform those Offices for which I came into the world, and must yet be kept in it' (373). At times it seemed to him that God had called him to the priesthood only to frustrate the very purpose of his calling: . . . when after much delay,

Much wrastling, many a combate, this deare end,
 So much desir'd, is giv'n, to take away
 My power to serve thee; to unbend
 All my abilities, my designes confound,
 And lay my threatnings bleeding on the ground. . . .

To have my aim, and yet to be
 Further from it than when I bent my bow;
 To make my hopes my torture, and the fee
 Of all my woes another wo,
 Is in the midst of delicates to need,
 And ev'n in Paradise to be a weed.

He never glosses over the frustration or the complaint (and we are reminded of the importance of the psalms in anglican spirituality). Here, as in other poems, Herbert twists and turns in a struggle which can only end with submission:

And yet since these thy contradictions
 Are properly a crosse felt by thy Sonne,
 With but foure words, my words, *Thy will be done*

(*The Crosse*: 164-65).

Such inner conflict is exacerbated for the Calvinist for whom the love of God in election is utterly beyond man's understanding. There is nothing in man, 'thy wretch so full of stains', deserving of any love. The pastor may reassure his despairing parishioner that there are pledges of God's love 'which way soever he turnes' (283). But he himself, knowing the inscrutable character of election did not escape the terrible doubt that his sense of assurance might be illusory. 'Perseverance' most movingly expresses the horror of this doubt and the dread possibility that his very words reveal him to be condemned:

My God, the poore expressions of my Love
 Which warm these lines and serve them up to thee
 Are so, as for the present I did move,
 Or rather as thou movedst mee.

But what shall issue, whither these my words
 Shal help another, but my judgment bee,
 As a burst fouling-peece doth save the birds
 But kill the man, is seald with thee.

ffor who can tell, though thou has dyde to winn
 And wedd my soule in glorious paradise,
 Whither my many crimes and use of sinn
 May yet forbid the banes and bliss?

Onely my soule hangs on thy promisses
 With face and hands clinging unto thy brest,
 Clinging and crying, crying without cease,
 Thou art my rock, thou are my rest (204-05).

Characteristically, this poem was not included in *The Temple* —presumably because it was unlikely to ‘turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul’. And in the poem, ‘Assurance’, the ‘rank poyson’ of doubt is rejected for confidence in the covenant of grace. Because nothing depends upon Herbert but all on Christ, it cannot fail:

Thou art not only to perform thy part,
 But also mine: as when the league was made
 Thou didst at once thy self indite
 And hold my hand, while I did write (156).

Herbert does not evade either the frustration and doubt or the anger and resentment which he also felt. It is expressed in prayer which may, at times, be, ‘Engine against th’Almightie, sinners towre,/Reversed thunder’. But it is also a ‘Christ-side-piercing spear. . . . Exalted manna . . . the souls blood’. And finally, although this can only be spoken of within the poem itself, it is ‘something understood’ (*Prayer 1: 51*).

But above all, for Herbert, Christ remains, ‘my onely musick’, the saviour who not only teaches men to sound the divine harmony of praise but who, in his cross and passion, is himself both instrument and melody:

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
 Without delayes,
 Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
 With him mayst rise:
 That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
 His life may make thee gold, and much more, just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
 With all thy art.
 The crosse taught all wood to resound his name,
 Who bore the same.
 His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
 Is best to celebrate this most high day.

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 (*Easter: 41-42*).

Keith L. Yates.

NOTES

- ¹ Walton, Izaak: *The life of Mr George Herbert* (London, 1927), p 305.
- ² All page references given for Herbert's letters, for poems from *The Temple* and for *The Country Parson* are to *The Works of George Herbert*, F. E. Hutchinson (ed.), (Oxford, 1941).
- ³ Walton, Izaak: *op. cit.*, p 289.
- ⁴ Summers, Joseph: *George Herbert: his religion and art* (London, 1954).
- ⁵ Walton, Izaak: *op. cit.*, p 314.
- ⁶ Tuve, Rosemond: *A reading of George Herbert* (London, 1952), pp 104-05.
- ⁷ Bennett, J.A.W.: *Poetry of the Passion: studies in twelve centuries of english verse* (Oxford, 1982), p 153.
- ⁸ Tuve, Rosemond: *op. cit.*, p 74.
- ⁹ Martz, Louis: *The poetry of meditations: A study in english religious literature of the seventeenth century* (Yale University Press, 1954), pp 92, 207.
- ¹⁰ *The works of George Herbert*, vol 1 (London, 1841), CX.
- ¹¹ Walton, Izaak: *op. cit.*, p 308.
- ¹² Charles, Amy: *A life of George Herbert* (Ithaca, 1977), pp 140-41.
- ¹³ Shaw, Robert B.: *The call of God: the theme of vocation in the poetry of Donne and Herbert* (Cambridge, 1981), pp 95-96.
- ¹⁴ Vendler, Helen: *The poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, 1975), p 5.
- ¹⁵ *The english poems of George Herbert* (London, 1974), p 6.
- ¹⁶ Walton, Izaak: *op. cit.*, p 314.