

POETRY AND PRAYER BEYOND WORDS

Graeme Watson

THERE IS A GROWING INTEREST in forms of prayer which take us beyond words into the prayer of silent stillness. This may be variously called 'Centring Prayer', or 'Christian Meditation',¹ or, more generally, 'prayer of the heart' or 'contemplative prayer'. The discovery of such forms of prayer comes as a relief for some people who have been struggling for years to find the appropriate words for spoken or mental prayer. Others have sought such a way of prayer in Eastern religions, and later discovered that there is a rich but little-known vein of silent prayer within the mine of Christian tradition. Others who have had little previous serious experience of Christian prayer find that this is the most natural form of prayer for them. For some, going through a prolonged period of spiritual dryness, the discovery has brought about almost a rebirth.

One priest tells how, when faced with a serious crisis of faith, he found that all attempts to return to the kind of prayers that he had been using throughout his ministerial life brought no experience of renewal. Recognising that he needed to find a new way of praying, he dared to give up what was once so satisfying. Seeking a greater simplicity and depth of prayer, he found it in Christian Meditation.² This is a way of poverty of spirit, in which we do not seek to think about God, but to be with God, to experience Him as the ground of our being.

Apophatic Prayer

One way of describing these silent forms of prayer is to call them apophatic. In popular terms apophatic spirituality is sometimes

¹ See such websites as www.centeringprayer.com or www.wcm.org.

² *The Prayer of the Priest*, edited by William F. Eckert (Tucson: Medio Media, 2005).

described as emptying the mind of all mundane matters in order to open it up to spiritual realities.³ But it is better to start not with the individual's religious and psychological experience, but at a different place.

The Christian traditions of silent or apophatic prayer offer us not just a method of realising a spiritual dimension to life, but a healthy recognition that all truly theistic prayer breaks down at the last resort, simply because of the limitations of human language. Christian apophatic prayer focuses on the One to whom we pray, recognising that God's greatness is such that even the most exalted language ultimately fails. We know God because the heavens declare God's glory, and every part of the universe reflects aspects of God. As readers of the Christian Scriptures and inheritors of Christian tradition, we also know God through God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ and in the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet we are simultaneously aware that God transcends everything in the creation, and no human language can define or describe the essential being of God. '*We cannot know God in his nature, since this is unknowable and is beyond the reach of mind or reason*' writes the fifth-century theologian Denys the Areopagite. It was he who first coined the term 'apophatic' as contrasted with 'cataphatic'. What does he mean by these two words?

This is how Denys continues:

We know Him (God) from the arrangement of everything, because everything is, in a sense, projected out from Him, and this order possesses certain images and resemblances of His divine paradigms. We therefore approach that which is beyond all as far as our capacities allow us, and we pass by way of the denial and the transcendence of all things and by way of the cause of all things. God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing This is the sort of language we must use about God The most divine knowledge of God, that which comes from unknowing, is achieved in a union far beyond mind, when mind turns away from all things, even from itself, and when it is made one with the dazzling rays,

³ See, for example, www.apophaticmysticism.com.

being then and there enlightened by the inscrutable depths of Wisdom.⁴

By ‘cataphatic’, he means that which can be said affirmatively of God, while ‘apophatic’ means that which must in turn be denied. All theology, according to Denys, must end in silence, not the silence of an empty and meaningless void, but the silence of ‘embrace, unity with God who unspeakably comes forth from divine life in order to draw what is not divine into divinity’.⁵

It is important to be clear what Denys is saying and what he is not saying. When he argues that God is infinitely greater than anything we can see or understand, he is not rejecting intellectual knowledge, but he is saying that the only way in which we can attain to union with God is through a spiritual participation surpassing the boundaries of what can be known by the human intellect. Nor again is he suggesting that we can reach God through darkness and negation rather than through light and affirmation. He is saying that God is infinitely beyond all images,



Denys the Areopagite

concepts and human formulations. This means that we find God not in ‘nothingness’, but in mystery. As Denys Turner⁶ puts it, commenting on his fifth-century namesake, ‘it is the failure of what we must say about God’. Talk about God is defective. This is not because we have nothing to say about God, but because, however much we may pile up our words and images about God, ultimately we know, as all the great Church Fathers did, that words fail to represent God adequately. In the end words and images can only point us beyond all human formulations.

⁴ *The Divine Names*, 7.3—for texts of Denys, see Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist, 1987).

⁵ Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 55.

⁶ Denys Turner, *Silence and the Word*, edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 18, note 14.

The Poets

This is where, I want to argue, poetry can inform us. Obviously, the only resources a poet has are his words, images and metaphors. But the particular gift of certain kinds of religious poetry is that they point the reader beyond those words, images and metaphors towards an experience of the holy, of God, where all human language fails. This is especially true of the so-called English Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, such as Donne, Herbert, Vaughan and Traherne, and also of T. S. Eliot and R. S. Thomas, for example, in the twentieth.

The particular poet whose work we are going to explore here is the Anglican priest George Herbert (1593-1633). Unlike his older contemporary John Donne, George Herbert wrote only religious verse. Yet Herbert is far from being a poet of 'simple pieties', as has sometimes been suggested. Like Donne he uses extraordinary words and images drawn from ordinary life in order to convey spiritual truth. To name but a few titles of his poems, we find 'Artillery', 'The Bag' (that is, the post-bag), 'The Pulley', 'Man's Medley', 'The Bunch of Grapes', 'The Size' (that is, status), 'The Method'. The variety of voices that we meet in Herbert's poems indicates a sophisticated complexity of poetic strategy.⁷ Of all the poets of that period Herbert seems to have captured and retained the broadest appeal in his own century among Christians of the widest diversity, but in later centuries he also appealed to people outside the communities of faith. Looking back to the period before he became a Christian, for example, C. S. Lewis observed: 'Here was a man who seemed to me to excel all the authors I had ever read in conveying the quality of life as we actually live it from moment to moment'. In a recent book, in which some twenty or so prominent Christians were asked to name the poet who had most inspired them, George Herbert came out top of the list. And one of his best-known poems, 'Love bade me welcome', was their first choice.⁸

My argument is that much of Herbert's poetry, full of bold and cataphatic images, leads us into apophatic silent contemplation. But before we look more closely at some of his most successful poems, we need to take account of the context in which Herbert wrote. It was a

⁷ From the editorial introduction in George Herbert, *The Country Parson and the Temple*, edited by John Nelson Wall (New York: Paulist, 1981), 26.

⁸ *Five Gold Rings*, edited by Anna Jeffery (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003).

time when the English lyric poem was undergoing an explosive development.⁹ The lyric poem is particularly well suited to spiritual themes because it typically celebrates human love, and human love is intimately related, and profoundly comparable, to the reciprocal love of God for human beings, and the love of human beings for God. Human earthly love is not directly accessible to observation. It can only be observed through the evidence of the senses, and it can only be communicated by analogies. So, too, with the language of divine love and its human response. Moreover, the language of love is frequently the language of excess, movement, change and life. It cannot remain static and achieve its goal. It is the very exuberance of the language of love which compels the poets to acknowledge, either implicitly or explicitly, that all language fails sooner or later when it comes to speaking of the relationship between human beings and God. Paradoxically, it is their use of exciting and bold images which leads them in only one possible direction—to the holy ground where the only appropriate response is silence and contemplation. On this holy ground, all images, concepts and human formulations vanish.

The lyric poem celebrates human love

This silence into which George Herbert's poems lead the reader is not yet a well rehearsed theme, but it is one which is by no means new. One distinguished commentator has drawn attention to it in a close study of a sequence of some of Herbert's most significant poems.¹⁰ He observes that the central implicit issue in Herbert's poem 'The Thanksgiving'—the necessity of Christ's sacrifice on the cross—is based not on doctrine so much as on human experience. Universal human self-centredness demands it. He writes:

... the important gesture here is not the poem of praise, with all its art, but the acknowledgement of inadequacy—the collapse into silence, when language and the mind meet a stumbling block they cannot master.

⁹ See William Countryman, *The Poetic Imagination: An Anglican Spiritual Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), 35-36, to which I am indebted for the themes of this paragraph.

¹⁰ James Boyd White, 'This Book of Starres': *Learning to Read George Herbert* (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan P., 1994). See especially Chapter 3, 'Sequences'.



© National Portrait Gallery, London

George Herbert, by Robert White, 1674

So this substantial poem simply ends with the words: 'Alas, my God, I know not what'.

The paradoxical truth is that Herbert's success as a poet often (perhaps nearly always) lies in such an acknowledgement of failure. The poetical project is doomed not simply because of human sin, or even because of human finitude, but because it inevitably reveals the limits of human language in describing our relationship to the divine. Ultimately we cannot reach God with our intellects or even in our imaginations, but only in our hearts by God's grace and in response to God's love.

Similarly, in 'The Agony', Herbert finds himself turning from doctrine about sin and love to the experiential discovery of what sin and love mean, and this can only be expressed in a heartfelt response to picturing Christ's Passion in all its messy bloodiness. The poem can only work in language, yet it leads us beyond language to the experience of life within the community of faith in which the Word is heard and the Sacrament is received. The bold cataphatic images give way to apophatic silence.

Again, in 'The Sinner', the poet recognises that sin is not a matter of accounting (how many times have you sinned?) but of identity ('Where are you?', as God asks of Adam and Eve when they hide themselves, or, as a spiritual director today might well ask a directee, 'Where is God in what you have told me?'). Like the good teacher, Herbert begins with a common but mistaken assumption: in this case that one can somehow counterbalance the weight of sin in the divine scales by collecting positive points on the other side. He then skilfully turns the reader to a position that is close to the prayer of contemplation, in which the only adequate human response is a bare groan:

Lord, restore thine image, hear my call:
And though my hard heart scarce to thee can groan,
Remember that thou once didst write in stone.

The same writer comments that, although Herbert wrote only on religious subjects, what he wrote is not so much like a series of prayers, but rather poems 'exploring the impossibility of prayer'.¹¹

Herbert's whole upbringing, his experience of higher education, his expertise in rhetoric and poetry, and his knowledge of the world, led him to give the highest value to the human intellect and the ability to articulate language with persuasive skill. But, as someone trying first and foremost to work out a relationship with God, he came to recognise, and incidentally, to help others realise that the intellect by itself would never bring one to God. The whole self could only be engaged by the heart.

There are some poems which express a wholehearted ease and intimacy with God. Of particular interest to us is one entitled 'Clasping of Hands'. It begins with the language of love—'Lord, thou art mine, and I am thine'—then moves on towards the thought of a union with God that transcends 'I' and 'Thou'. The climax in the second stanza leads us into contemplating the moment of Christ's death:

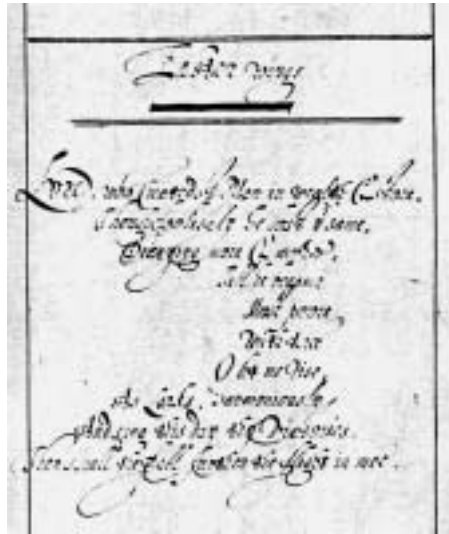
Since thou in death wast none of thine
Yet then as mine didst me restore.
Oh be mine still! Still make me thine!
Or rather make no Thine and Mine!

¹¹ Compare Romans 8:26: 'for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words'.

Here Herbert seems to be comparing two related self-offerings, which involve both a *loss* of identity and, at the same time, an awareness of *true* identity. He is alluding first to the cry of dereliction on the cross, when Christ having offered himself to the Father, appears to lose his sense of identity in the cry: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Yet, also, as the words of the psalm from which Jesus quoted indicate (Psalm 22), by continuing to trust in God, he is ultimately vindicated by God and takes his place as Lord and Saviour. But Herbert is also alluding to the paradox that, as the Christian believer 'loses' his identity in voluntarily offering his life to God, so he becomes newly aware of his true identity 'in Christ'. The self-negating way of the cross is none other than the royal road towards the ultimate vision of God. In such a vision the human soul is so caught up into the life of the Trinity that there is for that soul no longer any sense of self as apart from God. But this is not absorption or assimilation of the soul into God, but integration—the union of the Lover with the Beloved. There is only one human language which can bear this weight—the erotic language of human love, in which there is no really fruitful life without the death of the false, self-centred person. We are being drawn by the poet into that apophatic 'space' that takes us beyond all images, concepts and human formulations, even beyond the image of Lover and Beloved, towards nothing less than the beatific vision of God.

It is precisely this movement from images to silence, I suggest, that we find in Herbert's well-known sonnet 'Prayer I':

Prayer the Church's banquet, Angels' age,
 God's 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' Almighty, sinners' tower,
 Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
 The six-days world transposing in an hour,
 A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
 Softness and peace and joy, and love and bliss,
 Exalted Manna, gladness of the best,
 Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,
 The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
 Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
 The land of spices; something understood.



A Manuscript of Herbert's 'Easter Wings'

Herbert boldly juxtaposes what seems at first sight to be a series of unrelated words and images, in order to excite our imaginations about the limitless scope of prayer. As we respond to the images, we reflect that to pray is to enter into the life of heaven ('angels' age'). It is God's breath and grace stirring in us, enlarging our soul as we travel as pilgrims through this life towards heaven. As the poem builds up, the images become more earthy, vivid and bold—the builder's 'plumb line' that directly connects earth and heaven; the 'engine' (battering-ram) by which we 'assault' God in times of desperation; the '[siege-]tower' by which we sinners dare to approach and climb over the walls of heaven; 'thunder' that does not, in this case, come down from the sky but goes up with a clap from the earth; the soldier's 'spear' that pierces a hole in Christ's side, providing a receptacle close to his sacred heart for our petitions.¹² Each image draws us further and deeper into the infinite range and extent of the business of prayer.

¹² See Herbert's poem 'The Bag' (p.276) where he develops this powerful image of communicating with Christ's heart through his wounded side.

Then, fascinatingly, in the final line, comes 'the land of spices'. This phrase surely picks up the last verse of the biblical Song of Solomon: 'Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices!' (Song of Songs 8:14) Throughout the medieval period this book had been widely and popularly interpreted as an allegory of the yearning love of God for each human soul. Ultimately the goal of such love is the consummation of mystical union with God. Although there is not likely to be a direct influence, it is interesting to note that such a reading had become known in northern Europe within Herbert's lifetime, in the *Spiritual Canticle* of St John of the Cross (1542-1591), published in Brussels at least as early as 1627. So the final image of prayer with which Herbert completes the poem points us, like St Paul in his hymn to Love, beyond our present condition of knowing God only in part to that ultimate one: 'then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). Such knowledge is not, of course, intellectual knowledge, but the intimate knowledge of the heart, in which all previous images and concepts disappear in the actual moment of being carried into the divine presence. As the last two words of this poem surely hint, this is 'something understood' by the heart rather than by the mind.

Let us now see how this approach works out in Herbert's culminating and most famous poem in 'The Temple' collection, 'Love III':

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back
 Guilty of dust and sin
 But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lack'd anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here.
 Love said, you shall be he.
 I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them, let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
 And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
 My dear, then I will serve.
 You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat.
 So I did sit and eat.

The widespread appeal of this exquisite poem has many aspects. One of the foremost is the use of the universal images of host and guest, lover and beloved. The occasion is a meal. The invited guest has his reasons for not accepting, but in the end finds that all his reasons are excuses. The dialogue between host and guest opens up the nature of the broken relationship between them. So the poet explores the nature of the struggle, of which he is himself painfully aware, between Love, that is, in Christian terms, Christ (or God), and the resistant human soul. Christ yearns for us, but when he offers us his hand, it is spurned for reasons which seem good enough to the human heart in its stubborn pride. But Love refuses to take 'no' for an answer, and comes back smiling, gentle and firm. Love exposes the false ego, which presumes to tell his host that 'I am not worthy of his hospitality ('I the unkind, ungrateful'), and reminds me who my Creator is. The ego is now ready to accept God's love, but, like Peter refusing to have his feet washed, still makes a false move, now wanting to assert its false pride in the guise of humility ('I will serve'). But Love defeats this last stratagem of the ego by firmly telling the soul to 'sit down', and simply receive what is offered.

***Love refuses
to take 'no'
for an answer***

In other words, God makes the first move, by offering us an invitation. Naturally we are interested but feel anxious and hesitant to accept. Questions and answers follow that enable us to grow painfully, step by step, into a greater self-knowledge. As we come nearer to accepting, our final defences are knocked over by the steady insistence of Love. The false ego is exposed to the true self, which now knows itself as God knows it, and in the process has come at last to know God as Unconditional Love. 'So I did sit and eat.' Christ and I are at last united.

At this point, not only is the poem complete, but 'poetry is over' as a contemporary teacher of Christian Meditation points out.¹³ No language on earth, not even poetry, can take us beyond this stage. The poet and his readers are now left only with the reality of the divine presence to contemplate in silence, beyond all human imagery. So, in the poem, we see how the contemplated reality of God comes not so much from a deliberate attempt to 'empty' the mind, but rather grows out of entering into the lively imagery of the poet. The images lead us

¹³ See Laurence Freeman's contribution to *Five Gold Rings*, 52.

towards the presence of God, and then fall away as Herbert leaves us at that point of encounter with the divine.

Poetry and the Mystical

In her book on the subject of poetry and mystical experience the poet Elizabeth Jennings states that poets can only use concrete images, and yet it is they who often come nearest to a full expression of 'mystical' experience.¹⁴ Poets do not deal in concepts, they use pictures, and in so doing they sometimes point to a place which is dark with excessive light. Henry Vaughan, another seventeenth-century poet, and a great admirer of Herbert, echoes the language of Denys the Areopagite, describing this as nothing less than the 'deep but dazzling darkness' with which God is surrounded.¹⁵ It is also famously described as 'the cloud of unknowing' which can only be pierced by 'the dart of longing love'. Language about God becomes a 'broken language' in which 'the silence which falls in the embarrassment of prolixity is transformed into awe'.¹⁶

It would be as well to explain here what we mean by the word 'mystical', for in modern usage the term is a difficult one to use precisely. Elizabeth Jennings adopted the definition of the mystical given by the Benedictine Abbot Christopher Butler. This may be paraphrased as the experiential perception of God's presence, and especially 'union with God', a union that is not merely psychological, in conforming the will to God's will, but a 'real' union of the soul with God, spirit with Spirit. This union is described by Christian mystics as a momentary foretaste of heaven. If we take the example of Herbert's poem 'Love bade me welcome', it could be read as telling of an actual momentary experience of being transported beyond this earth to be at one with God as a guest at the heavenly banquet promised to all believers.

However, such a reading would be highly problematic, for it is by no means clear that Herbert could be described as a mystic in this sense.¹⁷ We are on safer ground if we pursue an interpretation of him as a poet who speaks the truth about the human condition and about

¹⁴ Elizabeth Jennings, *Every Changing Shape* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1961), 17.

¹⁵ Henry Vaughan, 'The Night'.

¹⁶ Denys Turner, 'Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason', 18.

¹⁷ Graeme Watson, 'Was George Herbert a Mystic?', *Theology* (forthcoming).

God, from a profound knowledge of, and unity of spirit with, both God and humanity. Like the psalmist, he dares to assume the voice of God in dialogue with human beings. It is the rich abundance of his imagery which leads the reader so often towards the awed silence of apophatic prayer.

Silence and Spiritual Formation

As spiritual directors will readily acknowledge, communication happens at many different levels between people, and between people and God. However wise and learned he or she may be, a director's words of counsel, questions or affirmations, may sometimes be the least helpful form of response to the directee's story. When a director has the courage to be silent, simply waiting for the movement of the Holy Spirit, in tune with the directee's 'sighs and groans', it is often the case that the directee will experience a moment of what can best be described as a divine disclosure, to which they can only respond 'Amen!'. So the spiritual director who has the wisdom and the patience to wait for that moment may be the most effective.

However, assuming that there is no such moment of disclosure, the next step in the work of a spiritual director may simply be to ask what may be called the redemptive questions, such as 'Where is God in all this?' or simply 'Where are you?' This is exactly, we remember, the question that was thrown up by Herbert's poem 'The Sinner'. This question is sometimes best answered not by words, but by making a drawing, a painting, or a paper sculpture, or by writing a poem to express what the directee is feeling about his or her relationship with God.

For some directees, the bold imagery of the poems of George Herbert could provide a lively and encouraging model of the spiritual journey and its ultimate goal, describing, as Herbert himself acknowledged, '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',¹⁸. And for the reasons I have suggested, his poetry may, by its beauty and power, also attract many people to explore the possibility of practising prayer beyond words: the prayer of

¹⁸ Quoted in Izaak Walton, *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert and Robert Sanderson*, edited by George Sainsbury (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973 [1927]), 314.

silent contemplation. Here the essentials are faithfulness and perseverance, for the aim of such prayer is not to pursue mystical insights, but to discover in the silence of contemplation the reality of oneself and the reality of God. So the desired outcome is to be found primarily in the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

In his own, often brutally honest but always subtle, exploration of how God relates to the human condition, Herbert expresses both the depths and the heights of Christian experience. In this process of exploration, cataphatic and apophatic are not opposites but complements. One leads to the other, and then back to the first again.

Despite the obvious cultural and linguistic gap between us and Herbert, we who speak and live in the English-speaking world live in the same faith (but by no means necessarily Anglican) tradition as Herbert. So we share the same faith too that Love, which has bidden us welcome to the Eucharistic feast, may at last overcome all our natural fears, doubts and hesitations, and draw us one day into that heavenly banquet where our times of contemplative silence will give way to sublime music, and the momentary awareness of God's glance¹⁹ to the eternal actuality of God's presence:

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
Pleasant and long:
Or since all music is but three parts vied²⁰
And multiplied;
Oh let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
And make up our defects with his sweet art.²¹

Graeme Watson was born in London in 1935. He was ordained an Anglican priest in 1962, and has worked as a parish priest and theological teacher in Tanzania, in the Midlands, and in the west of England. He is married and now lives in Hackney, North London, where he co-leads an ecumenical Christian Meditation group. He is also engaged in local church-based social action.

¹⁹ George Herbert's poem 'The Glance'.

²⁰ 'Vied' – increased in number by addition or repetition (Wall edition, 156n).

²¹ George Herbert, 'Easter (I)'.