"The Soul in Paraphrase": The Devotional Poetry of George Herbert and His Contemporaries

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> There is commonly by most people in the world a very small portion of our life time alowed for the practise of private devotion, and yet out of that small time, how apt are we to steal some part of it to trifle away in unesesary vaine employments, such as... reading of romances for too many houer's at a time, practissing of play's, long unprofitable conversations with young people and such like foly's.
>
> (Delaval 98)

Thus wrote Elizabeth Delaval in the 1650s in her autobiographical *Meditations,* with a wry commentary which sets the scene for our consideration of English devotional poetry from the mid-seventeenth century. As Delaval's remarks –and those of hundreds of her contemporaries– reveal, the practice of private devotion remained a high priority in the lives of seventeenth-century English people; however, this religious duty was not always an easy obligation to fulfil. The so-called 'unesesary vaine imployments' with which Delaval managed to 'trifle away' the time she should have been spending in devotion are (perhaps) comfortingly familiar; they include social encounters and pleasurable, even light, reading. The nature of these tempting digressions is of particular interest to us since they seem to suggest an implicit opposition between religious prayer or meditation on the one hand, and literary or linguistic pleasures on the other. The 'practise of private devotion' is contrasted by Delaval with reading, acting in drama and engaging in conversation. These text-based or spoken activities are, however, all vital features of the devotional verse of the period, poetry which is distinguished by its conscious textuality, dynamic dramatisation and animated dialogues with the divine.

Delaval's anxious personal experience gives us a brief glimpse of a prevailing dilemma of seventeenth-century devotional writing: how to manage, overcome or even eradicate the distance between God and humankind, betwe-

en serious ness and pleasure, piety a nd wit, silence and words. This seri es of oppositions was especially intense in the time of the post-Reformation debates concerni ng the expression of spirit ual experiences, whether bibli cal, li turgical or personal, in the vernacular. Devotional poetry by its very nature ari ses from a tension between heavenly aims and worldly means; writers in the seventeenth century were all too aware that it is no si mple matter to create in verse a 'picture of the many spirit ual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul' (Walton 74). These alleged words of George Herbert about his own lyrics remind us that in addition to the fundamental conflicts between earthly and heavenly perspectives which have already been mentioned –and were encapsulated for Herbert in the relati onship of the individual soul to God– the religious poet faces the further challenge of expressing 'spirit ual' matters in a verbal 'picture' accessible to human readers. This was straining the ideal of 'ut pictura poesis' to the extreme; could the art of poetry capture in appropriate or adequate words the elusive experi ence of religious ecstasy or despair?

On the one hand, some writ ers and theologians upheld the eloquence of human language, stressing the absolute necessity and naturalness of words for the depiction of spirit uality. This position was powerfull y summed up by John Donne: 'the soul of man,' he asserted, 'is incorporate in his words' (Donne 1957 00). Only through language, Donne argues, is the soul rendered 'corporate', or given substance as of a body. With complex echoes of the incarna tion ('the Word was made flesh' –John 1.14), Donne here suggests that the soul is 'made flesh' in words. Religious matters thus need the substance of language for their expression. As Donne memorably wrote in a more secular context in 'The Extasie', the 'mysteries' w ithin souls can only be read in the 'booke' of the 'body' (Donne 1985 102). In the case of devotional poetry, that 'body' which expresses the inexpre ssible mysteri es is language.

On the other side of the argument, however, was a serious mistrust of verbal eloquence when it came to spiri tual things. This was summed up by Ri chard Hooker in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1597) when he wrote, with striking simpl icity, 'our safest eloquence concerning God is our sil ence' (Hooker 00). Since language is imperfect and is used by fall en humankind, 'eloquence' is never to be trus ted; the only safe way to speak about God and our experi ence of the divine is, Hooker paradoxically suggests, not to speak at all. The impli cation is perhaps that, in our silence, God himself can speak with a greater and holier eloquence. But in the meantime, the making of devotional poetry is ruled out by this pri nciple; or, if the poet risks writing about God, what results is an unsafe, unstable eloquence.

Is any compromise possible, in devotional terms, between these two positions? Can the embodiment of language and the dangers of eloquence ever

be reconciled? How can expression and silence co-exist? It seems to me that the space between the dynamic of language and the stillness of devotion is that which is filled by prayer, the activity vividly described by Herbert as 'the soul in paraphrase' (Herbert 70). This expression is itself a compromise between the two philosophies. The 'soul' and words here cannot quite be equivalents, as in Donne's vision, since a 'paraphrase' is something other, 'an expression in other words, usually fuller and clearer' (*OED* 1a). However, a 'paraphrase' is by definition not an abandonment to silence, as Hooker advised, since there is still an attempt to use words to express the meaning of the 'soul'. In Herbert's summary of prayer, therefore, we may have found a way of understanding how English devotional poets of the mid-seventeenth century attempted to write about the soul in its experience of God. This 'via media' between human expression and heavenly contemplation implies some kind of renunciation by the poet –for prayer is a process of listening as well as speaking, a two-way communication– but also suggests that a creative use of language can give expression to devotion. I will examine this contention by means of a reading of four mid-seventeenth century English devotional poems.

Where better to begin than with a lyric by George Herbert, the leading figure in English post-Reformation devotional poetry and source of the guiding phrase of our discussion, 'the soul in paraphrase'? The issue of the religious poet's dilemma is a prominent one in Herbert's posthumous sequence, *The Temple* (1633), and nowhere more so than in 'Jordan' (II), a text which scrutinises the methods and intentions of the eager devotional poet responding to his vocation:

When first my lines of heav'nly joyes made mention,
Such was their lustre, they did so excell,
That I sought out quaint words, and trim invention;
My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,
Curling with metaphors a plain intention,
Decking the sense, as if it were to sell.

Thousands of notions in my brain did runne,
Off'ring their service, if I were not sped:
I often blotted what I had begunne;
This was not quick enough, and that was dead.
Nothing could seem too rich to clothe the sunne,
Much less those joyes which trample on his head.

As flames do work and winde, when they ascend,
So did I weave my self 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.
                    (Herbert 116-17)

The original title of the poem was 'Invention', and that was, of course, its first subject: the poet's own 'trim invention', his delight in seeking out words whose 'lustre' and excellence matched those of the 'heav'nly joyes' they were describing. Unfortunately, as the poem reveals, the speaker's linguistic inventiveness was uncontrollable, taking on a life of its own, beginning to 'burnish, sprout, and swell' like a fast-growing plant, and 'swelling', too, in pride in its own ingenuity. The second stanza moves beyond the over-abundance of the first (with its suitable market-place metaphors of 'decking' and 'selling') to a paralysing uncertainty as to how to proceed with the task, which is itself impossible. How can a poet's words 'clothe the sunne'? Whether that means the high but hopeless honour of trying to find the right linguistic dress for the Son of God, or the futile attempt to cover up the sun, in either case the project is doomed, and the very attempt can begin to block out the life-giving light of the Son/sun. Here indeed is the danger of not remaining silent, as Hooker warned; eloquence can be dangerous and counter-productive.

The 'incorporation' of one's own religious experience can be an obstacle to devotional writing, too; the poet is shocked to find that he has woven his own self 'into the sense' of a poem supposedly dedicated to the 'joyes' that are above. How can he escape this trap of human 'bustling' around God? The change of title, which occurred during Herbert's own revision of the poem, hints at the possibility of a resolution of the poet's difficulty. From a focus on the poet's own skill or 'invention', the new title signals a shift to an external force, 'Jordan', the river which symbolises the crossing into the promised land (in the Old Testament) and the baptism of repentant sinners (in the New). The poem 'Jordan' (II) concerns the crossing of a boundary –into effective devotional writing– by means of a baptism, a washing clean of the old methods of writing in favour of a new devotional mode.

The incorporation of experience into language is not abandoned, nor is the attempt at eloquence concerning God; the difference is that the embodiment and the eloquence come from outside the poet rather than from inside. A 'friend' –almost certainly Christ, though there are echoes of Sir Philip Sidney's intervening Muse as well– whispers the advice to 'copie out' the pre-existing texts of divine love. Whether this means the Bible, or the 'Word made flesh', or the living acts of Christian love, is unclear, and the poet's problems are not resolved, simply redirected from the search for words to the search for love. Meanwhile, the poem has found its own resolution in these whispered lines, a device which is again a middle way between the

essentiali ty of words and the eloquence of silence. The speaker has indeed been rendered silent by this closing trick of Herbert's; a new voice has apparently entered, replaced him and concluded the poem. However, the effect on the reader is not that of silence but of 'sweet' words, which themselves speak of a divine text 'readie penn'd'. For a poem which seeks to let its own voice go silent, in the interests of purer devotional writing washed clean in a poetic Jordan, its conclusion is remarkably practical. It is still focused on poetic success: the true 'invention' involves the discovery and incorporation of God's texts. This poetic method, the outside voice suggests, is not only less prone to the human weakness of pride, but will even 'save expense', an ironic recollection of the first stanza's concern with the market.

Herbert's 'Jordan' (II) is a fascinatingly overt exploration of the dilemma with which he and his contemporaries were wrestling, and its witty device –to conclude with words which at the same time suggest the poet's silence– is an ingenious, if temporary, solution. Elizabeth Major, writing two decades later, took another route to the paraphrase of the soul in verse in her devotional collection *Honey on the Rod* (1656). Her poem entitled 'The Author's Prayer' builds her personal prayer and her own name into the structure of a sonnet:

O	Gracious God, inhabiting	*Eternity*
My	Blest redeemr, that hast	*Lovingly*
Bless'd	me with hope, a kingdom to	*Inherit,*
Lord	of thy mercy give an humble	*Spirit,*
And	grant I pray, I may my life	*Amend:*
Savior	tis thou that canst my soul	*Befriend.*
Jesus	with grace my guilty soul	*Endue*
Christ	promis'd grace, & thou, O Lord, art	
True;		
Have	care of me, deal out with thine own	
Hand		
Mercy	to my poor soul, thou canst com-	
Mand		
On	me a shower of grace, sin to	*Avoid,*
Thy	praise to sing, my tongue shall be	
Imploy'd:		
Poor,	Lord I am, with fera and care	*Opress'd,*
Handmaid	to thee I am, in thee I'le	*Rest.*
		(Major, 191)

How should we read this poem? If we pay attention to the title, then we might be tempted first to follow the italicised text down the left- hand mar-

gin of the sonnet, which is a brief prayer seeking contact with her lord and asking for mercy from him. The acrostic down the right- hand side of the poem, spelling out the author's name cumulatively in the first letter of the final word of each line, might be seen to complete this short prayer and thus encircle the main body of the poem: 'O my blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, have mercy on thy poor handmaid, Elisabeth Maior'. The poem as a whole, into which these two marginal glosses are interwoven, also has a double structure even when read in the conventional way. It is both a sonnet (though with a simplified couplet rhyme scheme) and a prayer, following very clearly the syntactical structure of the 'collects' (prayers for the day) in the *Book of Common Prayer.* There is indeed enormous 'invention' here, combining literary and liturgical eloquence, attending to the visual as well as aural or cerebral impact of the verse, and allowing a two-way movement of the eye in reading, suggesting the dialogue of prayer itself.

The tensions within Major's poem are also suggested in its title; the purpose is 'prayer', but the focus is just as much on the 'author', name and all. Unlike Herbert, who was troubled by his tendency to 'weave' his own self 'into the sense', Major deliberately embodies herself, in the form of her name, in the text. A woman's good name was, of course, a symbol of her sexual and spiritual integrity in the early modern period. We might rephrase Donne's comment in Major's case, 'the soul of woman is incorporate in her name'. Is the acrostic, then, a sign of that eloquence which Hooker feared, which threatens to overwhelm the author's original devotional instinct? In fact it would seem that the two go hand in hand: the inscribing of the author's name in the text is as much a self-offering –a devotional sacrifice– as a self-assertion. While Herbert sought to 'copie out' the 'sweetness' of 'love', Major chose to 'copie out' her own name as an expression of her love of God. As the last line states, the author is 'handmaid' to God and seeks 'rest' only in him, a relationship and a purpose emphasised in the repeated 'thee' in the central portion of the line. It is this devotional commitment to the abandonment of her self 'in' God which simultaneously completes the acrostic of Major's name; to rest in God is thus to find (literally) self- fulfilment.

The dilemma over invention and creativity, then, finds expression in contrasting devotional forms and modes in the seventeenth century; eloquence and silence, prayer and self-definition, intermingle in the struggle to paraphrase the relationship of God and the human soul. It would be wrong to regard the context of these struggles as entirely personal; in the great age of religious controversy, biblical translation and public preaching, neither the soul nor the language in which it might be paraphrased was free from tradition and associations. Poetry and devotion were located intertextually, their words existing in a web of interconnections with other texts both lite-

rary and spiritual. Henry Vaughan's devotional poetry, for example, would be impossible to interpret without an awarenes of his indebtedness to Herbert's lyrics on the one hand, and the Bible on the other. One of his most enthusiastic religious poems, 'Holy Scriptures' (from *Silex Scintillans,* 1650), asserts explicitly and implicitly his sources of inspiration:

> Welcome dear book, soul's joy, and food! The feast
> Of spirits, heaven extracted lies in thee;
> Thou art life's charter, the Dove's spotless nest
> Where souls are hatched unto Eternity.
>
> In thee the hidden stone, the *manna* lies,
> Thou art the great *elixir,* rare, and choice;
> The key that opens to all mysteries,
> The *Word* in characters, God in the *voice.*
>
> O that I had deep cut in my hard heart
> Each line in thee! Then would I plead in groans
> Of my Lord's penning, and by sweetest art
> Return upon himself the *Law,* and *Stones.*
> Read here, my faults are thine. This Book, and I
> Will tell thee so; *Sweet Saviour thou didst die!*
>
> (Vaughan 197-8)

The subject of the poem is the Word (the divine 'logos') as found in the words of the bible; it is a celebration of God's own doubly powerful eloquence, which according to Vaughan can heal and reveal all. But these holy words are praised in words and eloquence derived from Vaughan's own human imagination in conjunction with his reading of Herbert's *Temple,* whose lyrics are richly echoed in the vocabulary and manner of Vaughan's sonnet. Human and divine intertextuality combine to give the poem its dynamism and resonance. Here, then, is another sort of 'copying' endorsed by the needs of the devotional poet; while Herbert invented what purports to be a divine voice in 'Jordan'(II) advising the poet to 'copie out' the pre-inscribed 'sweetnesse' of 'love', and Major copied out in prayerful offering the letters of the name given to her, Vaughan asserts his dependence on pre-existing texts. The sweetness which Vaughan seeks to copy is that of the scriptures themselves –they are his 'food', a heavenly 'feast' whose effects are comparable to the nourishment given by *'manna'* in the wilderness– and their authorship is clear to him: 'my Lord's penning'.

The most intriguing line in Vaughan's poem, at least in the context of our consideration of devotional language, is the last of the second quatrain, where the bible is described as 'The *Word* in characters, God in the *voice'.* The punning use of 'characters', meaning both letters and persons, refers to the lively written narratives of the bible, in which personalities are conveyed

by, and themselves convey, the word of God. Divine eloquence is upheld in this phrase; the characters of a word (its constituent parts), or of a story, can express the holy creative principle of 'the *Word*'. Does this therefore also sanction the 'characters', in both senses, of human 'penning'? If the words of the bible inspire the devotional poet, does that justify an earthly wit and eloquence? The second half of the line seems to offer a positive answer, for if the scriptures represent 'God in the *voice',* then the human organ of speech is capable of acting as a channel for God's wisdom. The '*voice'* is none other than the poet's, inspired by and echoing the scriptures in his own words. If he had taken the bible to heart, he asserts, 'Then would I plead in groans / Of my Lord's penning'. The devotional poet is more than a glorified ventriloquist's dummy here, since the inspiration of God is heard in the 'groans' of a human voice, not in a silence. Despite the suggestion of very vocal physicality, there is still an element of otherness in this arrangement: the suffering Christian is acting as a mouthpiece for the divine, whose eloquence is of a different order and register altogether. Once again, Donne's statement might be rephrased, to reflect Vaughan's position: 'the soul of man is incorporate in God's words'.

The personal longing of the speaker in the sestet of Vaughan's 'Holy Scriptures' further highlights the issue of the presence of the self in devotional eloquence. While Herbert's 'self' needed to be unravelled from his 'sense', and Major's was embodied and then relinquished in her acrostic sonnet, Vaughan desires his own hard heart to become the tablet of stone on which the scriptures are written. The individual thus becomes the material on which the divine 'characters' are engraved. In this process of sacrificial or passive eloquence, the speaking voice of the poem and the words of God's 'Book' are to merge: 'This Book, and I / Will tell thee so'. This is indeed a 'safe eloquence', to recall Hooker's phrase; the poem is allied to a recognised and authoritative text, the bible itself, so that the poet's creation itself may be seen as a paraphrase of the original 'word'.

Although the seventeenth-century poets found that 'heaven' lay 'extracted' in the bible –and consequently in their own texts– they, like other believers, still had their ordinary lives to lead on earth. As Elizabeth Delaval commented in the passage with which this essay began, for most people devotion was contained within 'a very small portion' of their lives, and even then it was imperfectly observed. The tension between heavenly and earthly callings –between, for example, Delaval's obligation to divine meditation and the attraction of 'reading of romances'– was expressed not only in terms of different uses of eloquence but also in the form of obedience to an external authority or to oneself. This clash of allegiances was especially difficult for women, who were enjoined to accept human males as representative of divine authority– a situation famously summed up by Milton in the

line 'Hee for God only, shee for God in him' (Milton IV 299). What was for men a relatively straightforward (though always difficult) tussle between divine and human values became for women a potentially three-way battle involving God, man and the self. This is particularly clearly demonstrated in the work of an anonymous mid-seventeenth century woman poet known only as Eliza because of the title of her collection of poems, *Eliza's Babes* (1652). In the tradition of biblical rhetoric she addresses Christ as her 'lover', a metaphor normally reserved for the meeting of the feminised soul and the redeemer, but here put under strain because an earthly husband arrives to complete the triangle. The eloquence of the Bible comes into direct tension in the lyric 'The Gift' with the need for the woman to accept an earthly male authority:

> My Lord, hast thou given me away?
> Did I on earth for a gift stay?
> Hath he by prayer of thee gain'd me,
> Who was so strictly knit to thee?
>
> To thee I onely gave my heart,
> Wouldst thou my Lord from that gift part?
> I know thou wouldst deliver me
> To none, but one belov'd by thee.
>
> But Lord my heart thou dost not give,
> Though here on earth, while I doe live
> My body here he may retain,
> My heart in heaven, with thee must reigne.
>
> Then as thy gift let him thinke me,
> Sith I a donage am from thee.
> And let him know thou hast my heart,
> He onely hath my earthly part.
>
> It was my glory I was free,
> And subject here to none but thee,
> And still that glory I shall hold
> If thou my Spirit dost enfold.
>
> It is my blisse, I here serve thee,
> Tis my great joy; thou lovest mee.
>
> ('Eliza', 42-3)

As the poem opens, the reader is struck by the vehemence of the speaker's questions, which are prompted by a powerful sense of betrayal: has God really given her away to a human lover, when she is already betrothed to her divine lover? The title term, 'gift', begins to take on multiple meanings: she

has given her 'heart' to her saviour as a gift, but he has now 'given' her 'away' as though she had remained on earth simply as a gift for Christ to pass on to someone else. The tone is hurt and surprised, and a sense of rivalry enters the devotional conversation; are this man's prayers more powerful, she wonders, than her years of loving loyalty and spiritual betrothal to Christ? As the poem proceeds, 'Eliza' becomes more careful and specific about the gift which she will allow Christ to give to her husband: since her heart has already been donated, it is 'onely' her 'earthly part', her body, which the unnamed human male can receive. The devotional self represented in this poem, then, is a divided one, with a heart in heaven and only its fleshly dress inhabiting the earth.

In 'The Gift' we discern another mode of the 'soul in paraphrase', in contrast to the external voice of Herbert's resolution, the prayerful manner of Major's acrostic, or the hymn of praise penned by Vaughan. 'Eliza' conducts a conversation with her Lord, interactive, questioning and even bargaining with God. The consequences for her earthly life are quite striking: while she longs to remain 'subject' to the Lord to whom she gave her heart, a saviour whose 'service is perfect freedom' (Common Prayer 59), she glories in her freedom in the meantime, as a woman. Her reluctance to agree to marriage is expressed in the radical terms of one who will lose her freedom - apparently a social and personal freedom, as well as the liberty to be totally 'enfolded' in God. The poem ends with a reassertion of the 'joy' and 'blisse' of her relationship with God, perhaps a bond which can only be so total within the confines of the poem. By 'paraphrasing' her soul in this poetic dialogue, the speaker gives her heart the opportunity to be 'enfolded' by her divine lover in the words of the text, even if her body is to be 'enfolded' by a human husband. The 'incorporation' which devotional language enables here is a sort of escape, even of reassurance; the non-bodily elements of devotion are given substance in the rhetoric of the poem and its statement of the speaker's renewed 'gift' of her heart to God.

These four poems, demonstrating the triumphs and the uncertainties of the expression of spiritual experience in English verse of the mid-seventeenth century, have given us a glimpse of the range of poetic traditions, beliefs, gender positions, styles and moods to be found in the devotional poetry of this period. We have seen some of the many ways in which poets attempted to resolve the clash of eloquence and silence, of self and God, in their texts. We have discovered the poets' spiritual selves and experiences encapsulated in the devices of a voice, a name, a biblical text or an anxious debate, devices which are the poets' means of making the 'soul unto the lines accord', as Herbert defined 'A True Hymn' (Herbert 174). What is perhaps most important is that all these poems may be seen as versions of prayer, that mysterious exercise which Herbert described as 'the soul in pa-

raphrase'. His poem 'Jordan' (II) takes the form of a confessional prayer, and Major's poem, which even calls itself 'The Author's Prayer', contains the text of a prayer and is also a collect of self-offering. Vaughan's 'Holy Scriptures' is a biblical-style prayer of praise and celebration, and 'The Gift' embodies the voice of 'Eliza' pleading with her God.

When Herbert attempted to define prayer in his poem 'Prayer' (I) from which the title quotation of this essay is taken, he came up with a dazzling range of further 'paraphrases' for the word prayer, including several which would also illuminate our reading of the devotional verse of Herbert's contemporaries. The description of prayer as, for example, 'Gods breath in man returning to his birth' (Herbert 70) suggests not only the 'breath' of life itself being offered back gratefully to its author, but also hints at the ambivalence of the 'breath' which is speech or language being used to address the God who is himself the Word. However, what is most significant about Herbert's 'Prayer' (I) is its closing phrase, in which the attempt to define prayer by means of descriptive phrases and metaphors is abandoned; prayer is, he concludes, 'something understood'. This suggests that prayer is not a static or fixed process but, like the poems we have read, it is varied, fluid, always active and interactive. In prayer, and in these lyrics, what is it that is 'understood'? The answer is not singular but multiple: it is God, of course, but also the self, the soul given embodiment in words, prayer, poetry, even language itself, as the poets struggle towards the ultimate eloquence of silence.

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