

Preface

Although I had known some of George Herbert's poems well for decades, I began reading his poetry systematically only a few years ago, while on sabbatical leave in Cambridge. The few poems I already knew were wonderful, yet perplexing and often impenetrable; they haunted my mind. I knew I did not fully understand them, let alone the others I occasionally tried to read, and here was an opportunity not to be missed. I made it my major project to read *The Temple*, at first through slowly, then at the rate of one poem a day, taking elaborate notes and committing many of the poems to memory. As I did this, the particular poems not surprisingly came to take on greatly increased life and meaning, partly through simple familiarity and partly because I began to read them in light of each other. Difficult as they were, and are, they gradually grew more natural to me: I found their obscurities somewhat clarified, their silences less troubling, and came, more generally, to regard them not as a sequence of discrete artworks but as the sustained expression of one mind reaching out to others. I began to learn the language in which they were composed.

This book is the record, and to some degree the enactment, of this engagement with the poetry of George Herbert. It has been a difficult, though highly pleasurable, book to write, for it has not been obvious to me how to talk about such a sustained and detailed experience as the reading of these poems has been. This kind of experience does not result in the acquisition of knowledge in the usual sense, after all, nor in the addition of new items of aesthetic appreciation, but in a change in one's own imagination.

It is perhaps closest to the experience of travel, which cannot be reduced to photographs or views or anecdotes, but works a shift in one's sense of the world and one's place within it. And like travel, it is hard to report on. The first venture into a new culture, of a day or a week say, is relatively easy, for one's experiences are still few enough to observe

and grasp from the outside, and one retains one's sense of the world left behind, and hence of a possible audience. But after months or years the particulars overwhelm the mind and shift their meaning. You are no longer observing, you are changing; and when you write a letter home, even in English, it is with a sense that you no longer speak the old language in the same way. You are now outside the world you left behind; when you do return to it you will feel like an outsider. As the strange becomes familiar, the familiar becomes strange. So too, in my experience, with reading of George Herbert: the result has been to shift the way I perceive and live in the world, a transformation of the self. This is in a sense no surprise—I had experienced much the same thing in living for years with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and to a lesser degree with other works as well—but it does present a central problem of thought and expression. How is one to think and talk about such an experience?

My own way of imagining it is to say that in working through these poems I began to learn the language in which they are composed. The account of reading Herbert presented in this book is largely shaped by this image: I try to show how Herbert creates a language in his poems, how this language can be learned, and something of what this learning can mean to the reader. In doing this I mean to make a more general suggestion as well, namely that it is helpful to think of the reading of any book of poetry, or prose too, as a kind of language-learning, and of writing as a kind of language-making.

By “language” I do not mean simply diction and grammar, but the ways in which a poet selects and transforms all the materials of meaning available to him or her. For poets do not simply use the words of their language as if each carried a certain determinate meaning, like freight in a freight car; they give active meaning to the particular words they use, in each poem and across their poems, and not to words only: to images, gestures, forms, voices, tones, attitudes towards the reader, allusions, in short to all the stuff out of which the poetry is made. In using his language the poet remakes it, and what he makes is in the end different from what anyone else makes: it is his version of a common inheritance.

Learning the work of a poet is not linear, one item at a time, first this, then that, but complex and simultaneous, just like learning a language in fact. You cannot really get part of it till you get the whole. In learning Greek, for example, the optative has meaning only against the indicative and subjunctive, the perfective against the aorist and

continuative, and the same is true in learning the vocabulary, gestures, and tones of voice of a particular poet as well: each item is part of a larger system of difference and analogy, from which it derives its meaning. This at least has been my own experience. For years I would take a small volume of Herbert's poems with me on vacation, turning to them with an eagerness based on the three or four I knew well, yet finding the rest of the poems intractably opaque. Not understanding the issues they addressed or the way they did so, not able to hear their voices with confidence, I was not able to make sense of them. Only after working through a great many poems did I begin to feel that I knew how to go to work on one that was not already familiar. It is this experience of gradual acculturation that I wish to capture here and make available to the reader. This means that the shape of this book is not linear either, but closer to a spiral, as I take a series of passes at Herbert's poetry, developing later what is at the beginning only sketched, seeing one movement or tone or image in terms of another, and so on.

If you imagined yourself asked to think and write about an experience of language-learning, a fundamental problem would quickly present itself: how much attention should you give to the particular way in which you yourself learned the language, how much to the language you learned? One danger is that you would focus exclusively on the language as an external object, erasing your own experience, and in doing so create the pretense that what you saw and learned was simply there, and that it would, or should, be the same for everyone. Working in this way you would pretend to disappear into a transparent pane of glass through which this reality could be seen. But the knower is always part of the known; the language that you learn is always different from the language I learn; my Herbert can never be exactly the same as yours. Meaning does not lie in the text, or in the culture, to be picked up like a stone, but in an experience of interaction, which is naturally different for each of us.

Yet this perception can be carried too far, to the point of conceiving of the text or culture as having no reality beyond the one we give it, to thinking of the reader, or traveler or anthropologist, as the only real actor in the universe, the only intelligible speaker. While your experience and mine of a new language, or of Herbert, will not be identical, they should have important similarities and overlaps, and this should be true not only of particular phrases or poems, but of the process by which they are learned. If we both succeed in learning French, we shall, after

all, be able to speak to one another in a new way, and to others as well, for our respective versions of that language will be to some degree mutually intelligible.

In writing about my experience of Herbert's language, then, my task is neither to pretend to erase myself nor to claim that my experience is the only relevant reality, but to find a way to do two partly inconsistent things: to recognize my constant presence in everything that is seen or said, and at the same time to keep attention focused on what matters most, the language and the poems as they are seen from this point of view. We ought not deny the objective reality of the poetry, but we should recognize that this same reality is perceived differently by different people, just as a landscape or a flower is. This book is directed not so much at Herbert's poetry, then, as if it could be simply seen for what it is, but at our respective experiences of that poetry, which after all exist for us only as we participate in their making. I shall speak out of my own experience, to the reader's experience, telling her or him not "what is there" so much as what one traveler's sense of it has been. I hope you will recognize the place I describe, but I know it will—and should—be different for you.

In the opening section of the book I am explicitly autobiographical, suggesting in some detail how I worked my way into Herbert's poetry and language. My hope is to define a position from which, and something of a method by which, his poetry can be thought about more thoroughly. Thereafter I am gradually less intrusive, focusing attention on the texts themselves as they are seen from the position I have earlier defined.

Herbert's poetry has a single subject, his own religious life, and this presents the modern American reader with special difficulties. We live, if not in a secular nation or age, in a public intellectual world that has for some time represented itself as resolutely secular, and many people regard religious belief as silly or superstitious or otherwise beneath them. Even when it is respected it is often regarded as personal or private, not to be talked about. What is one to do with this poetry, then: simply disregard its subject matter and focus on its form, voice, and feeling? Or is the subject matter part of its appeal and meaning? If this is so—and I think it is—how is one to think and speak sensibly about this poetry, particularly in a culture that seems to be divided between the secular and religious, and indeed among different religions, in such a way as to preclude any conversation across the lines of separation?

I think that these questions cannot be evaded. This is religious poetry,

and to understand it one must in some sense learn the religious language in which it is composed. This means that one must face the question how this language works, and what it means, in two ways: what it means in the hands of Herbert, or one of his contemporaries, and—to the extent this is a separable question—what it means to us, as we even briefly inhabit it. In reading Herbert we shall thus need to think about the nature of religious belief and language, both in Herbert's world and in our own. In fact, as I shall say at length later on, I think that one cannot really read Herbert, or Milton either, whatever one's own beliefs and disbeliefs may be, without engaging in something that looks very much like the practice of theology. If I am right, this is a circumstance full of interest, and perhaps peril.

These are matters as to which we are somewhat differently situated from each other, differences that require, I think, reflection in the way we talk. For me, Herbert's religious language and beliefs have a particular set of associations, arising from the fact that I was raised in the American branch of his church and thus find his modes of thought, including his religious aesthetics, in a rough way familiar—though at the same time dramatically strange. But it is also true that I have found the language of that church deeply problematic, both as a young man and now, in late middle age. At one time I left it behind entirely, feeling that I simply could no longer say the creed in which the fundamental articles of belief are articulated: it was not so much that I did not believe them, as that I could not understand what many of these sentences could possibly mean. Yet I also discovered that a purely secular life was for me impossible, a kind of despair. For many years I regularly attended Quaker meetings, which were systematically—to me, blessedly—silent on all doctrinal matters, an experience that has I think helped me to understand somewhat better Herbert's own attitudes both towards doctrine and towards silence. Years later I find myself once again in the church in which I was raised, but still continuing to find its language problematic. In this way I bring to my own reading of Herbert a set of concerns about the character of his religious beliefs, and the language in which they are expressed, that another might not have, and may on that account find uncongenial; on the other hand, this very fact may enable me to be helpful to those to whom this discourse, and the way of life it involves, are more completely foreign than they are to me.

As I said above, I shall begin by speaking of the ways in which Herbert's poetry came to my attention in the different places that I inhabited, as

a way of explaining the perspective from which I finally turned to this work in a systematic way. This part of the book is not only autobiographical, but a tiny fragment of cultural history, since the places I inhabited were of course also held by others. This is especially true of the education in reading I received at Amherst College, distinguished for its teaching of English.

In part 1, I shall discuss a series of rather well-known poems, with the thought that these are likely to be among those with which the reader is already most familiar. In this way I hope to recapitulate not only my own beginnings with Herbert but something of the reader's as well. Then in part 2 I start again, at the beginning of *The Temple*, working through several sequences of poems in the order in which Herbert presents them. Here I mean to show how the poems can be read in light of each other, both as one poem responds to those that precede it and as each set of poems creates a series of themes, like musical ideas, that will carry through the rest of the book. Finally, in part 3, I consider first two sets of poems that deal with certain central themes of Herbert's verse, especially the definition of God and self, and then the sequence that brings Herbert's book to a close. The three parts are written somewhat differently, for they are meant to reflect different stages in the process of learning Herbert's language, and they accordingly make different demands on the reader. In particular, the reader will notice that as I proceed the tempo of the book gradually picks up: I read more selectively, leaving a larger number of poems to the reader's future attention, and at the same time my own observations become shorter. By the end I assume the sort of shared understanding that permits real brevity of remark.

I shall make rather little reference to what other people have said about these poems, for my aim is not so much to contribute to a conversation with other critics, however corrective and enlightening that might be, as to find a way to express what it has meant for me to read my way into this poetry. When I am aware of someone else's ideas, of course I do refer to them; what I mean is that I have not canvassed the literature in order to contrast my reading of each poem with those of others. This means that on particular points I have no doubt been anticipated by others and, more seriously, that my own readings may in one way or another be significantly incomplete. But it has seemed to me important to proceed in this way, with all of its costs.¹ My

1. I say more on this subject in the Note on Method at the end of the book. In

imagined audience is accordingly not so much the expert on Herbert, though I hope such a person can read this book with interest and attention, as any reader who has a general interest in poetry, and in what reading poetry involves—and all the better if he or she finds the poetry of Herbert at once appealing and problematic.

In talking about the experiences these poems offer their reader, I frequently use the first-person plural: “we see,” “we learn,” “surprises us,” and so forth. This is an old-fashioned locution that some people dislike because they feel that it asserts a kind of cultural or attitudinal unity that they wish, often rightly, to deny. I know of no better way to talk, however, and hope it can be understood by my reader that I am not claiming that all of us somehow respond in exactly the same way—this book is in fact built on the opposite principle—but that this is my way of talking about how a poem works. I use the first-person plural to express a hope, not to dictate a result, and I want my own reader constantly to ask whether a particular use of “we” or “us” does speak for her or him. My aspiration is not that you will agree with everything I say, but that you will find this performance of what Herbert means useful in shaping your own understanding of his poetry.

The poems are printed in larger type than the rest of the book. This is meant both to make the poems easier to read and as a typographical expression of the importance of Herbert’s poems compared to what I say about them. My hope is that after reading this book the reader will say, not that I am a good critic but that Herbert is an extraordinary poet, who has become both more accessible and more important as a result of this reading.

For the most part I reproduce in full the poems I talk about. This is partly because I do not want to assume the reader’s familiarity with the poetry, partly because I want to invite the reader to slow down and pay real attention to the verse, which will itself do much to teach us how it should be read. The reader will thus be asked to shift repeatedly back and forth between two modes of reading, the kind appropriate for discursive prose and the kind required for dense and difficult poetry. This is a book that asks to be read slowly.

Another reason for reproducing entire poems is that selective quotation, always dangerous, is in Herbert’s case especially so. The speakers

the Note on Bibliography I describe some recent books on Herbert, both as a way of locating what I have done in the context they define and as a way of inviting the reader to turn to those that seem interesting to him or her.

of Herbert's poems, while in a sense all of course aspects of the author, are not, I believe, mouthpieces for a central and secure self whose utterances can be quoted as representing what Herbert believed. It is in fact the peculiar genius of this poetry to throw every single utterance, without exception, into question, as it is poised in sequence with others or set against them, and in the process to render uncertain as well the identity and stability of the speaking person. This verse, more than any I know, makes simultaneously problematic both the self and its language. For Herbert, truth lies not in what is or can be said at any one moment, but in the relations that can be established among various things that can be said at different times—among the statements, gestures, and voices that make up his verse. The meaning of his poetry accordingly lies not in particular utterances but in its iridescent movements from point to point.