

James M. Gordon

Significant Stuttering about the Inexpressible

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George Herbert's sonnet *Prayer I* uses disciplined structure and a rich diversity of imagery to explore and express the experience of prayer. On the one hand Herbert's refusal to say what prayer *is*, suggests a reluctance to define mystery. On the other hand he accumulates a collection of startling images any one of which seems to offer a viable definition.

- 1 Prayer, the Churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
- 5 Engine against th' Almightye, sinners towre,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-daies world-transpōsing in an hour,
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;
- 9 Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse
Exalted manna, gladnesse of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
- 13 Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices; something understood.¹

'Something Understood'; Metaphor as Definition?

In *Prayer I* Herbert deliberately avoids the constraints of definition. The poem lacks a main verb, forcing the reader to choose, from a bewildering array of alternative images. Herbert is seeking to articulate the experience of prayer while avoiding definitive explanations

1 C. Patrides, ed., *The English Poems of George Herbert* (London, 1974), 70-71.

which distort rather than clarify. Herbert frequently points to the limitations of all language in the presence of God.² He eschews description by verbal precision, but illumines the understanding of the reader by passing before the mind a kaleidoscope of images which are nevertheless precisely fitted together. The absence of a main verb turns the poem into a connected statement of partial definitions, the impact being cumulative rather than conclusive, ruminative rather than definitive. Rosemary Tuve's comment on literary art is an apt description of Herbert's achievement:

A work of art is a highly conscious achievement; perhaps the human consciousness is seen functioning at its highest when it tries thus to give form to the formless . . . but the excitement of literature is that a mind has shaped into loveliness that which otherwise would lie unshaped and dumb.³

The series of metaphors Herbert has chosen and arranged form a catena of images, imaginative triggers releasing intellectual, emotional and spiritual responses. The lack of conjunctions and verbs gives an impression of rapid variety, changing images and flashing movement which, because of the evocativeness of the metaphors, tantalises the mind, making it reluctant to move on, but unable to resist anticipating the next image while still pondering the last. The result is intellectual frustration as the mind fails to absorb all the meanings Herbert presents, a response Herbert the theologian fully intends and Herbert the poet carefully contrives.

Yet the poem ends with the apparently contented phrase, 'something understood'. However in relation to God, understanding is not know-how but knowledge, not intellectual control but adoration, not meaning extracted but significance perceived and mystery acknowledged. For Herbert, theological reflection and devotional lyricism take place in the middle-ground of a tension that cannot be resolved, 'the familiar tension in Herbert's verse between the knowledge that the imagination is limited, self-centred and flawed, and the knowledge that it is all we have with which to face the world.'⁴ In similar vein, Tuve's ironic observation explains the necessity for both reticence and reverent imagination in theological speech:

The child who has never met mystery in the shape of the inexplicable Trinity, or symbols in the Alpha and Omega of the church window becomes the adult who does not know there are any mysteries until he is

2 C. Hodgkins, *Authority, Church and Society in George Herbert* (Columbia, 1993), 90-95.

3 R. Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago, 1952), 93.

4 J. B. White, *'This Book of Starres'* (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 141.

5 Tuve, 109.

beaten on the head by the tragedy of his own destiny.⁵

The same writer rebukes the all too human lust for lucidity, the unwise determination to analyse and assay each metaphor, gauging their value by the weight of meaning they yield.

It is the nature of metaphors to be infinitely suggestive, and "what do they mean" is an inquiry that cannot possibly ever be finished. This has its troublesome side, but it is the basis for poetry's claim to be a mode of knowing truth.⁶

Reflecting on the metaphors in *Prayer I*, but keeping in mind Herbert's own refusal to define and intellectualise the experience of prayer, perhaps modern readers may discover, 'a mode of knowing truth', that is both devotionally and theologically valid.

'The Churches Banquet': Eucharist and Self-Knowledge. (lines 1-4)

Prayer and the Eucharist are immediately connected by an image of celebration. The OT echo may be Song of Sol. 2.4 'He brought me to the banqueting table and his banner over me was love'. Prayer is experienced as a feast of gratitude, a celebration of indebtedness, an act of devotion centring on the self-sacrificed Saviour. The Eucharist is not a private spiritual privilege, but shared praise, corporate worship, an act of remembrance and assimilation given spiritual reality by the presence of Christ. There is studied ambiguity in Herbert's choice of words in his treatment of the Eucharist in his poem '*Banquet*':

Only God, who gives perfumes,
 Flesh assumes,
 And with it perfumes my heart.
 But as Pomanders and wood
 Still are good,
 Yet being bruised are better scented:
 God, to show how far His love
 Could improve,
 Here, as broken, is presented.⁷

The fragrance of bruised flowers and wood are evocative images of the bruised Christ, whose presence is intangible but real, and whose blessings are tasted afresh in the Eucharist. The Churches banquet, the Eucharist, is the liturgical centre of Herbert's devotional practice, and he is careful to avoid the 'ungenerous precision' which provokes controversy, opting more often for the reverent ignorance of Calvin:

6 *Ibid.*, 96.

7 The Banquet, lines 21-30.

'I rather experience than understand it.'⁸

Angels are ageless, but human beings are made lower than the angels. God's purpose in creation was that the angels might praise God in heaven and humans would glorify and enjoy God on earth. The phrase 'Angels age' suggests human longing for uninterrupted fellowship, a fullness of presence free from the frustrating limitations of mortal life with its moral ambiguities and fear of death. Prayer offers a glimpse of such possibility, but Herbert reminds himself in the next image that humanity is created, finite, dependent on God for every breath. God's breath' gives life and identity to each human personality, so that prayer is the kiss of life for the Christian soul. In the intimacy of communion between God and the human heart, Herbert may be suggesting that prayer is a literal offering of breath back to its source. The thought occurred to a later Cambridge Puritan, Thomas Goodwin: 'Prayer and thanks are like the double motions of the lungs; the air that is sucked in by prayers is breathed forth again by thanks'.⁹

In the next phrase, 'the soul in paraphrase', Herbert places 'soul', a word weighted with eternal possibilities, alongside a word which means to render so as to expose meaning more clearly or fully by descriptive expansion. The soul in paraphrase suggests a process through which personal identity is clarified in the light of eternity and in the light of the Divine presence. Prayer can be an experience of such intimacy with God that some of the enigmas of self are spelt out in a process of soul exegesis. Through communion with God self-knowledge is increased while at the same time the praying Christian know themselves to be fully known, utterly and finally understood.

Using 'heart' as synecdoche for Christian, Herbert combines it with 'pilgrimage', creating an image rich in Christian content and biblical allusion. Prayer can be as a journey, seeking a better country, wandering after God, the heart in pilgrimage. The heart cannot stand still, life is gift to be lived and its energy and time expended on the journey after God. 'A pilgrim or traveler is he that is going homeward.' We are strangers and pilgrims on earth. The one implies our absence, the other implies our moving to the place of our abode.¹⁰ In 'The Pilgrimage' Herbert warns of aching frustration, 'I travell'd on, seeing the hill, where lay / My expectation. A long it was and weary way.'¹¹ Self knowledge is humiliating before it is healing, and the jour-

8 C. Hodgkins, 29: J. C. Hunter, "'With wings of faith" Herbert's Communion Poems', *Journal of Religion* 62, January 1982: 57-71.

9 *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, ed. J. Miller, (Edinburgh), 1861 vol. 3. 390.

10 Richard Sibbes, *Works*, vol. 7, (Edinburgh), 1982, 450.

11 *The Pilgrimage*, lines 1-2.

ney to God an arduous test of the pilgrims perseverance.

The plummet is a homely image, a builder's tool used for determining the vertical, an instrument enabling objective judgments to be made about quality of workmanship. Alongside 'sounding', the plummet more likely has a nautical reference. In 'Agonie' Herbert exploits this meaning :

Philosophers have measured mountains,
Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, of kings,
Walked with a staff to heav'n, and traced fountains:
But there are two vast spacious things,
The which to measure it doth more behove:
Yet few there are that sound them: Sin and Love.¹²

These two vast spacious things, sin and love, contain within them Herbert's entire theological agenda.¹³ Prayer can be profound theological reflection, the devout mind attempting to do what the first-born seraph tried in vain, 'to sound the depths of love divine'. A modern theologian concurs: 'Prayer is a fundamental style of thinking . . . that is deeply rooted in our humanity . . . to pray is to think in such a way that we dwell with reality, and faith's name for reality is God.'¹⁴

In these first four lines the metaphors refer to gift and gratitude, intimacy and communication, knowledge of self and knowledge of God. They suggest the attractiveness, the blessing of prayer. In the second quatrain the imagery is altogether more disturbing, suggesting violence, conflict and fear.

'Engine Against th' Almighty' : Violence and Passion (lines 5-8)

The raising of an 'engine against th' Almighty' daringly describes prayer as laying siege to heaven. Prayerful conflict underlies many of Herbert's verses. 'The Storm' is an exploration of one such inner tempest:

A throbbing conscience spurred by remorse
Hath a strange force;
It quits the earth, and mounting more and more
Dares to assault and besiege thy door.¹⁵

12 The Agonie, lines 1-6.

13 G. E. Veith, Jr, *Reformation Spirituality. The Religion of George Herbert*, Toronto, 1985. This book is written on the assumption that 'Sinne and Love' are the two poles of Reformation spirituality around which Herbert wove his poetry. See especially ch.2.

14 J. Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, (London, 1972), 30.

15 The Storm, lines 9-12.

The battle of wills implied in such prayerful conflict raises questions about the relationship between importunate prayer and the will of God. In a scene in *Grace Abounding*, Satan tells Bunyan, God 'hath been weary of you these several years' your bawlings in his ears hath been no pleasant voice to him.' (par.117) The psychological desperation of the sinner needing to be heard, is balanced in Herbert by his conviction that God is not so easily offended by the prayer of a 'throbbing conscience' as Satan suggests, and Bunyan fears. The importunate prayer is, to a merciful God, a legitimate distraction:

Glorie and honour are set by, till it
An answer get.¹⁶

Donne, Herbert's friend and mentor, had few inhibitions about using the language of violence in an attempt to compel the divine will :

Prayer hath the nature of impudency . . . we threaten God in prayer, and God suffers this impudency and more. Prayer hath the nature of violence; in the public prayers of the congregation we besiege God and we take God prisoner and we bring God to our conditions, and God is glad to be straitened by us in that siege.¹⁷

John Preston shows more theological propriety, carefully defending the integrity of the divine sovereignty:

When you go about to strive with God in prayer, when you contend and wrastle with him, you alter not him but yourselves, you persuade your own hearts to more faith, to more love, to more obedience, to more humility and thankfulness.¹⁸

The catapult, the battering ram and the shielded ladder are weapons of assault, and according to Herbert they have their counterpart in Christian prayer. Prayer as 'the sinners towre' suggests Babel revisited. In the place of prayer, confused language is clarified, communication is restored, hubris is repented of and heaven is reached by the legitimate tower of penitent love.

The thunder image has powerful biblical associations which Herbert leaves hanging. The thunder that finally silences Job's complaint is reversed, but meaning what? The thunder of the divine presence at Sinai is reversed but if so to what effect? The thunder proceeding from the heavenly throne in the Apocalypse is reversed but what can such a reversal signify? Does Herbert mean the overwhelm-

16 *Ibid.*, lines 15-16. R Strier, *Love Known; Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry*, Chicago, 1986, 186-7. Strier's book argues that Luther's Reformation theology provides the thematic core of Herbert's poetry.

17 C. Patrides, *The English Poems of George Herbert*, 70n.

18 'George Herbert and Puritan Piety', J.C. Hunter, *Journal of Religion*, vol. 68, 1988, 239.

ing thunder of the transcendent Word that called the world into being and silenced Job, has been translated into the Word made flesh? Or that in prayer the thunder of God's judgment becomes the voice that speaks forgiveness, or even that the thunder from the heavenly throne no longer repels the sinner but gives voice to the depths of the mercy of God, not the ominous rumblings of anger but the profound reverberations of redeeming grace, the bass notes in the music of the redeemed? Whatever the reader decides Herbert 'means' by reversed thunder, they are reduced to the confession of another puzzled worshipper, 'Lo these are the parts of his ways; but how little a portion is heard of him? But the thunder of his power, who can understand?' Job 24.16.¹⁹

The piercing of Christ is an affront to the Crucified. For Herbert the business-like stab of an executioner, confirming the death of the condemned, becomes 'the Christ-side-piercing spear' which releases blood and water. The sacramental significance of blood and water recurs elsewhere in Herbert, and putting words into the mouth of the crucified Jesus he gives his own interpretation of the soldiers action.

Nay after death their spite shall further go;
For they will pierce my side, I full well know;
That as sin came, so Sacraments might flow.²⁰

Whereas the soldier's action is spiteful affront, a Christian's prayer as Christ-side-piercing spear is grateful appropriation, a seeking of access to the heart of the crucified Christ, even an entry into the heart of God. Calvin makes the connection devotionally explicit:

God the Father declares to us that Jesus Christ, who once had His side pierced, today has His heart open . . . that we may have the assurance of the love that He bears us: as He once had his arms fastened to the cross, now he has them wide open to draw us to himself.²¹

'The six-days world' suggests recreation, the discordant creation being re-tuned by faithful prayer into 'a kind of tune'. The making of music is a favourite image. Affliction is 'but tuning of my breast to make the music better'; while in times of spiritual dryness Herbert's soul 'lay out of sight, untun'd, unstrung', provoking the prayer, 'O cheer and tune my heartless breast'. The music of creation and re-creation, the composition of all that is, into final harmonious melody, is the hope of one no longer satisfied with personal, private, immediate blessing.

19 An extensive range of alternative biblical possibilities for this image is gathered in L. Ryken, J. C. Wilhoit, T Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (Leicester, 1998), 869.

20 *The Sacrifice*, lines 245-47.

21 Hunter, *Puritan Piety*, 239.

‘Church belles beyond the starres heard’: Vision and Understanding. (lines 9-14)

The last six lines of the sonnet begin in an atmosphere of languorous contentment, carry on into images of festal celebration, then push the horizons of mind and experience beyond knowledge to speculation and aspiration. The last two words of deliberate anti-climax exert a firm control over speculation and experience, and finally ground prayer in the relationship of mutual understanding between God and the one who prays.

The series of conjunctions in line 9 gives an effect of continuity, suggesting that the descriptive list is as inexhaustible as the love of God. While some of the earlier images hint at love this is the only explicit mention of love in relation to prayer in the sonnet. Interestingly Herbert makes restrained and only modified use of the Song of Songs, the happy hunting ground of so many 17th century devotional writers looking for images to portray the passionate union of God and the soul. His contemporaries John Preston and Richard Sibbes both used marriage/union imagery extensively. Preston in *The Breastplate of Faith and Love* and Sibbes in a work the title of which is more suited to the language of the Seventeenth Century pharmacy than the pulpit, *Bowels Opened, or a Discovery of the Neere and Deere Love, Union and Communion betwixt Christ and the Church*.

Herbert seems more interested in the eucharistic imagery suggested by Song of Songs 2.4 than any explicitly erotic union imagery. Herbert’s powerful meditation on the welcoming love of God in *Love III* explores the nature of Divine love by using the image of feast, invitation, welcome and nourishment, concluding with the guests reluctance overcome:

‘You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat. / So I did sit and eat.’ The last line carries a typical Herbert payload of understatement and spiritual matter-of-factness.

The Eucharistic theme recurs yet again in ‘exalted manna’, suggesting, not for the first time, that prayer is a traffic between heaven and earth. Mans breath returning, thunder reversed and manna ascending each describe processes which are reciprocal and responsive. However manna was not an exclusively eucharistic image in Herbert’s day. The nutritional value of the Bible recalled the daily provision of manna. The ‘Translators’ Note to the Readers of the Authorised Version’ describes the nature of scripture thus:

It is not a pot of manna or a cruse of oyle which were for memorie only, or for a meales’ meate or two, but as it were a showre of heavenly bread sufficient for a whole host, be it never so great; and as it were a whole cellar full of oyle vessels; whereby all our necessities may be provided for and our

debts discharged.²²

In the following phrase, 'gladnesse of the best', prayer and Eucharist are again linked by biblical allusion. The best wine for the Christian soul is prayer as Eucharist, recalling the wedding at Cana and anticipating the marriage celebration of Christ and his church. The phrase illustrates well the subtle concentration of allusions Herbert packs into a phrase, and how much he assumed of his readers in a biblically literate culture.²³

One of Herbert's most celebrated poems, '*Elixir*', expounds at least one meaning for 'heaven in ordinarie' :

All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with this tincture (for thy sake),
Will not grow bright and clean
A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine;
Who sweeps a room as for thy laws
Makes that and the action fine.²⁴

The praying Christian discovers 'heaven in ordinarie' as the mundane is sanctified, and faithfulness in routine details becomes an expression of devotion.

The phrase 'man well drest' recalls the self-conscious nakedness of humanity after the fall. The praying Christian has no need of fig-leaves to cover shame since they are clothed, 'well drest', in Christ. Lamenting 'the profaneness in his head', and 'defects and darkness in his breast', Herbert expresses the underlying confidence of those who feel disqualified from entering the presence of God, in *Aaron*, a name synonymous with privileged access:

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,

22 C. Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible*, (University of California Press, 1985), 1-2.

23 C. Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth Century Revolution*, Penguin, 1994, 3-46, gives an account of 'A Biblical Culture'. 'In the turmoil of the seventeenth century, the Bible became a sword to divide, or rather an armoury from which all parties selected weapons to meet their needs. And what an armoury!' Herbert wrote pre-civil war, and his use of the Bible, though equally ingenious, was altogether more irenic in spirit.

24 The *Elixir*, lines 13-20.

My onely music, striking me ev'n dead;
 That to the old man I may rest,
 And be in him new drest.²⁵

From the third last line the poem becomes 'a sort of glossolalia, an attempt to transform verbally the experience of love, especially the love of God, into a stream of metaphorical designations bearing on intuitively chosen objects of beauty and bliss'.²⁶ In contemporary usage, 'the Milkie Way' was a euphemism alluding to a woman's breasts, a primal image of nourishment, beauty, desire and love. While not an impossible allusion for Herbert, he is just as likely to be pointing to the naturally observed phenomenon of the night sky, an image of infinite distance, vast spaciousness and unlimited possibility.

The bird of paradise provided seventeenth century divines with a piece of natural history capable of varied homiletic application. The belief that the bird of paradise lived its whole life in the air was an idea of obvious devotional value, pointing to the possibility of uninterrupted communion with God, elevating the Christian's life above the limitations of earthly concerns. Jeremy Taylor moralises with the flair of the pulpit virtuoso:

Mankind now, taken in his whole constitution and design, is like the Bird of Paradise . . . , born without legs, but by a celestial power they have a recompense made of them for that defect; and they always hover in the air, and feed on the dew of heaven. So are we Birds of Paradise, but cast out from thence, and born without legs, without strength to walk in the laws of God, or to go to heaven; but by a power from above, we are adopted in our new birth, to a celestial conversation, we feed on the dew of heav'n.²⁷

'Church bells beyond the starres heard', relates the vast canopy of heaven to the insignificant bell tower of the village church. The stone structure supporting a cast bronze contrivance is the modestly human response to the incomparable divine architecture of the galaxies. Church bells calling Christians to prayer are terrestrial reminders of the one who plays the music of the spheres. But who is it who hears the church bells beyond the stars, Creator or creature? The ambiguity again suggests prayer as two way traffic. Prayer is heavenly music heard, then replayed in the heart, heard in heaven, and absorbed into the heavenly worship. Distant music has its own beauty, mystery and wistful elusiveness, tugging at the ropes that moor us to reality, a far-off sound that by its very poignancy answers to spiritual longing, inarticulate desire for God, while yet inviting investigation.

25 Aaron, lines 12-20.

26 E. B. Greenwood, George Herbert's Sonnet "Prayer I": a Stylistic Study, *Essays in Criticism*, 15, 1965, 27-45.

27 *The Golden Grove; Selections from the Sermons of Jeremy Taylor*, (Oxford, 1930), 41.

The cosmic scope of prayer now becomes micro-cosmic. The 'soul's blood' turns attention from the universe without to the inner world of each life with its moral and spiritual necessities. Prayer is the *sine qua non* of Christian existence, the source of vitality and health. But in Herbert, blood is always likely to draw meaning from the Passion, so that prayer must articulate the soul's sacrifice, love poured out in costly self-giving and in the offering of praise. In Herbert's thought Christian discipleship is cruciform, reflecting 'his hopeful and joyful conception of the nature of love as the very loss of the self in sympathetic identification with that which is loved.'²⁸

The sacrificial motif recalling the Passion, is now complemented by 'land of spices'. The gospel accounts of the women disciples going to the tomb with embalming spices gives the phrase strong associations with the Passion. Equally, the spice metaphor is rich in Old Testament associations. Sweet spices with pure frankincense were mixed to produce a fragrant offering to the Lord, placed in the Tabernacle of the congregation, the place of prayer (Ex. 30). A combination of blossoms, fruits and all chief spices fill the enclosed garden of the lovers in the Song of Solomon, evoking the prayer, 'Awake O north wind; and come thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits.' (Song of Sol. 4.16). Evocative joy, anticipated consummation, purity of self-offering; such is prayer.

Conclusion

Herbert's reluctance to define prayer has resulted in a poem which doesn't explain what prayer is; not in so many words. Prayer is 'the land of spices', a place of unearthly beauty and pervasive fragrance, a place unknown but which sets up an ache of longing which by its nature can never be satisfied. It is the longing for God, for the 'Church's banquet' of bread and wine; it is the restlessness of 'the heart in pilgrimage', the bafflement of the mind 'sounding heav'n and earth'; it is the defiant impudence of the importunate soul raising its 'engines against th' Almightye' and it is an endless list of blessings joined by an infinite number of conjunctions, 'Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse' and . . .'; it is 'church bells beyond the stars heard' and it is 'the souls blood.'

And it is something understood. Not everything, not anything, but something. In this poem we hear what Bishop Ian Ramsey once called 'significant stuttering about the inexpressible'. Through

Herbert's significant stuttering the reader learns something about prayer, but only if they unlearn something about language, in particular the habit of intellectual control by prosaic explanation, what P. T. Forsyth more pungently called the 'lust for lucidity'. Herbert has used his 'utmost art' to attempt the impossible. Not even his highest gift, used to its utmost expression, can say what prayer is.

In an age of paperback spirituality and do-it-yourself prayer manuals, the mechanics and practicalities of prayer are often spelt out with a self-confidence which scorns the hesitations of those who know that in the presence of God they stand on the brink of mystery. Herbert's refusal to define prayer reveals the proper reticence of the true theologian, too humble to restrict the meaning of the divine-human relationship to his own mental stretch, but too honest to leave questions of meaning unattempted. Prayer, in all its mystery and meanings, remains, simply, something understood.

Abstract

This article attempts to understand Herbert's suspicion of all attempts at defining the soul's relation to God, and suggests that each image Herbert uses, captures something of that relationship, but only partially. I suggest that the poem is a quiet but effective rebuke to all who 'approach the burning bush with cheerful aplomb'.²⁹

29 O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, vol 1, London, 1966, 420.

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