

Praise (II)

King of Glorie, King of Peace,
I will love thee:
And that love may never cease,
I will move thee.

Thou hast granted my request,
Thou hast heard me:
Thou didst note my working breast,
Thou hast spar'd me.

Wherefore with my utmost art
I will sing thee,
And the cream of all my heart
I will bring thee.

Though my sinnes against me cried,
Thou didst cleare me;
And alone, when they replied,
Thou didst heare me.

Sev'n whole dayes, not one in seven,
I will praise thee.
In my heart, though not in heaven,
I can raise thee.

Thou grew'st soft and moist with tears,
Thou relentedst:
And when Justice call'd for fears,
Thou disentedst.

Small it is, in this poore sort
To enroll thee:
Ev'n eternitie is too short
To extoll thee.

“Wherefore with my utmost art”

A discussion of George Herbert’s *Praise II*

T.S. Eliot commended *King of Glorie, King of Peace* for its “Masterly simplicity”. Other than pointing out that it was personal and a hymn, he declined to elaborate further. That was very Eliot, and true to the virtue he was extolling. In comparison with such poems as “Love III” or “The Elixir”, “Praise II” seems to be admirably straightforward. It ostensibly looks back on the anguish of faith from the position of grace.

Whatever Eliot meant, this poem should not be regarded as simple at all. Congregational hymn singing both intensifies and streamlines understanding: it channels utterance down one line. Complexity is not sought and seldom encountered. The one explicitly complex stanza in *Praise II* – the sixth - has been cut by editors of hymn books, including those of *Rejoice and Sing*. But even when singing this mutilated poem as a hymn, many must feel that its outward simplicity was not entirely convincing. There is arrogance in the naïve enthusiasm of the opening stanza “I will move thee” and pointlessness at the end. Both are odd sentiments in hymns.

Praise II seems to be a late addition to the cycle of poems that is *The Temple*. It does not appear in the Dr Williams manuscript, and so it is assumed that it must postdate the other poems by Herbert that are used as hymns.

It starts with a direct lift: the opening lines are identical to L’Envoy, the final lyric of *The Temple*. The first four of the sixteen lines of L’Envoy run:

King of glorie, King of peace,
 With the one make warre to cease;
 With the other blesse thy sheep,
 Thee to love, in thee to sleep.

Openings matter. In classical poetry, in which Herbert was both the leading scholar and practitioner of his day, how you address a deity is of utmost importance. It defines their role, and, depending on the tone of voice, shapes the poet’s (and so the reader’s) relationship to them.

We know that Herbert’s background was very grand. It is seldom noted that it was very violent. He was born in 1593 into a long line of thugs. They needed to be. Marcher aristocracy, their job was to keep order in the Wild West of Wales. Apprehending some outlaws in Llandinam (now a pleasant village between Newtown and Llanidloes) , his grandfather received an arrow in the pommel of his saddle. Asking why this had happened, the principal outlaw said that “he was sorry, but that

he had left his best bow at home: that would have carried the shot to his body.” As Herbert senior was sword in hand and with a terrifying reputation to maintain, retribution must have been swift. The family history in the sixteenth century involves them in seizures of land, imprisonment despite writs of habeas corpus, starving rivals’ children to death and endless brutal engagements.

George’s siblings were martial, and, despite the Jacobean Peace, were involved in the constant wars that were taking place on the Continent. Two of his brothers died on active service. One who survived, his elder brother Edward, enjoyed a dazzling career as a soldier, courtier and author both under James and Charles. In recognition of his services as Ambassador to France, Edward was ennobled as Baron Herbert of Cherbury in 1629. But even to the end of his life he was constantly duelling or getting involved in violent scraps. Sometimes this was chivalrous: he challenged the Spanish Champion of a besieged garrison to single combat. Sometimes it was foolhardy: he tried to fight a duel with the Lord de Walden, which had to be called off by the Privy Council. This constant duelling led to his recall as Ambassador to France. He was still getting in fights after his ennoblement, prompting the Privy Council (who sounded sick of being involved) to reprimand him in 1633 that “persons of his age” - he was fifty – “and illness” should not get involved in violent conduct.

George was not one of these. His early career was stellar, but pacific: a Kings Scholar at Trinity College Cambridge, he was second in his year when awarded his BA, rapidly becoming a fellow, lecturer and reader in Rhetoric. In 1620, at the age of 27, he became University Orator for Cambridge, arguably the most public position and placed him in front of any distinguished visitor to the University. In 1623 he made a politically charged address calling on the country not to engage in War with Spain as a result of the failure of the Spanish Match, where the then Prince Charles and Duke of Buckingham had attempted to woo a Princess in Madrid. King James wanted peace, Charles and Buckingham wanted war. Herbert sided with the King. The Latin text was printed and circulated immediately as a brilliant exercise in rhetoric by the brother of the Ambassador to France. It should have found him favour at court, but the king was dying. This very open opposition to the Prince of Wales meant that within two years, with Charles on the throne and Buckingham pre-eminent, Herbert’s hopes of advancement were dashed. Previous orators had become Secretaries of State: Herbert, despite numerous attempts to ingratiate himself at court, gained no preferment.

War had killed his siblings, Peace had punctured his secular career. His court career was inglorious.

So it the opening line of this hymn drips personal significance, and echoes the closing lines of the entire poetic enterprise. We should anticipate something extraordinary.

What we are presented with, at first glance, is both simple and breath-taking.

King of Glorie, King of Peace,

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I will love thee:

And that love may never cease,

I will move thee.

“The practising poet,” said Peter Porter “examining a Herbert poem is like someone bending over a Rolls Royce engine. How is it all done?” Today the answer is “import it from Germany” as you would see a BMW engine looking back at you, but the point is made. What we have looking back at us is a poem of seven stanzas divided into four lines. These are split into pairs of two lines of seven and four syllables. So the base structure of the poem is deeply irregular: there is no other poem with this pattern. Odd numbered lines read odd. The only way we can sing it is by adding an extra beat on the third syllable.

Rhythmically it is equally novel. In Herbert, we would normally expect an iambic beat, with virtuoso variations. In the seven syllable lines, we have a stressed opening syllable followed by a pattern of unstressed and stressed beats culminating in stressed ending. It is called a catalectic trochaic tetrameter: a line with a missing beat, front stress (it goes dum-dee, rather than dee-dum) and four metrical feet. It is unusual, but not unknown outside the *Temple*.

Puck and Oberon drop into using it (reasonably loosely):

Through the forest have I gone.

But Athenian found I none,

On whose eyes I might approve

This flower's force in stirring love.

And Blake, famously:

Tiger, Tiger, burning bright

In the forests of the night.

Herbert did not live to get the chance of disliking Blake. But both in Shakespeare and in Blake the rhythm has an air of unreality, wonder and urgency. Particularly at the start of the poem, the symmetry of this rhythm makes each line robust and self-contained. It is aggressively *poetic*: there is no conversational flow from line to line.

This is followed by a line of four syllables: four stressed syllables. There may be a precedent, and a word for it (a double spondee?) but I have not found it. It is the poetic equivalent of four thuds. A correspondence with the preceding line is obtained by matching not the syllables, but by both lines having four stresses each. It is effective because, apart from the end of the poem, the words are all monosyllabic

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and contain utterly sincere statements of real import. It drives home the importance like a hammer: "I will love thee."

In rhyme, he imposes upon the poem an aural straightjacket. The scheme (if you apportion a letter to each end rhyme) goes ABAB, CBCB, DBDB and so on until the transitional sixth verse (where Herbert does not appear in person), only to recover the pattern in the last stanza. Additionally, in each second line he rhymes the penultimate syllable (love/move, heard/spar'd, sing/bring etc.) He needs to do this, as each second line are repetitions: "I will..thee", "Thou hast..me". Herbert's perseverant impulses to display gratitude, balanced with his perception of God's response, are integral to the structure of the poem.

Rhyme schemes are normally regarded as binding poems together. This one seems to be built out of rock: a rhyme scheme with a poem grafted on top. Herbert varies it just enough. As we will see, this breaks down towards the end; whilst sustained, it has an Old Testament consistency, an Old Testament *constancy*, in the reiteration.

If the first lines pulse with Herbert's proud purpose, the reason is laid out in the second, where there is a palpable sense of release:

Thou hast granted my request,

 Thou hast heard me:

Thou didst note my working breast,

 Thou hast spar'd me.

But note that this stanza is in a different tense. The first was all to do with Herbert's intention: he will love, he will move God. In the second, God's work with Herbert appears accomplished.

Nevertheless, because of this, sincere gratitude is warranted. Back comes the future tense, full of good intentions:

Wherefore with my utmost art

 I will sing thee,

And the cream of all my heart

 I will bring thee.

This is followed, as promised, by the Praise itself, which occupies the central stanza and adopts a legal tone:

Though my sinnes against me cried,

 Thou didst cleare me;

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And alone, when they replied,

Thou didst heare me.

What was heard? It was, of course, in Herbert's world a moot point how far prayers for the direct forgiveness of sins can be answered without faith. The court metaphor may work perfectly in the eschatological imagination. Yet justice in this area cannot be sought, only justification granted.

The fecklessness of the impulse becomes evident in the return to the future tense:

Sev'n whole dayes, not one in seven,

I will praise thee.

In my heart, though not in heaven,

I can raise thee.

This is the breakdown point. The relentless constancy of the praise may be unremitting, but the purpose is internal: "In my heart, though not in heaven, I can raise thee." What seems on first glance to be a rhetorical compliment, contains a realisation of failure. The shift in word from will to "can" is also a shift in the rhyme scheme. There is an echo of the almost churlish lines in *Easter*

"I got me flowers to straw thy way

I got me boughs off many a tree

But thou wast up by break of day

And brought thy sweets along with thee".

The penultimate stanza (which is cut in *Rejoice and Sing*) depicts a God who has been human and is compassionate; the crowd of "st" alliterations nearly justifies the use of the (even then) archaic verb suffix for the second-person singular.

Thou grew'st soft and moist with tears,

Thou relentedst:

And when Justice call'd for fears,

Thou disentedst.

These are purposefully difficult words. They gasp sympathy. It is the first time Herbert relinquishes his iron like grip on monosyllables, and recognises a God who actively intervenes in despair.

Herbert final lines are almost defeatist.

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Small it is, in this poore sort

To enroll thee:

Ev'n eternitie is too short

To extoll thee.

Enroll here means “list in a roll of honour”, both Herbert (and the poem) are poor sorts. Nothing is adequate.

Yet the poem was written, and the hymn is sung.

This edifice is stalked by a poet discussing poetry and portraying himself as a failure. Praise may be the primary function of heaven, the principal activity of angels and the duty of creation. But we are fallen: and our praise is prone to self-centeredness. Yet through this failure the “I” and “Thou”, “Thee” and “Me” refrain steadfastly reiterates the confidence of Herbert’s relationship with his maker. This is a framework of Buberian intimacy. It is a hymn of praise, real praise: praise which concedes the limits of human activity and the overwhelming power of grace.

One of the reasons why Herbert’s poetry has become so popular is his seeming relevance to an age of uncertainty. To misquote Larkin, doubt was for him what daffodils were for Wordsworth. But sometimes we are reminded that we are dealing with a sensibility four hundred years old. In this poem Herbert does something very odd, but surely important.

Herbert is careful with syllables, eliding and expanding words where necessary. The rhythm is ostentatiously rigid. But, in the fifth stanza, two additional syllables are inserted in the first and third lines of this stanza. This is a signal that there is something worth attention. There is number symbolism here. Seven is the biblical number, it is the sacred number. There are seven stanzas. The seven syllable lines can be split into four and three syllables, which can then be reconfigured with the following line as two sevens overlapping a trinity in the middle; a trinity with four gospels and doctors of the church on either side. Line 17 itself contains the words “one” and “seven”. There is a temptation to follow this down a path decorated with numeric associations: 1 and 7 make up the octave that is central to Herbert’s musical expression of praise. To twentieth (and twenty-first) century minds these readings are irrefutable and so unverifiable.

Yet Herbert has an impulse to include intentional (and extraneous) features of interest in his poetry. Number symbolism falls into the same category as his concrete poetry and acrostics. Herbert’s Creator delights in dreadful puns: “who made the eyes but I” laughs Love.

In Praise I think it goes even further. There is another departure from the syllabic scheme. In the penultimate line of the poem there is an extra syllable. This is partly a poetic effect: “eternitie” is the only four syllable word in the poem and (rather like his

godfather Donne's use of the four syllable "expansion") he has chosen a big word for a big subject. But he could have easily used an apostrophe to elide the "is" that follows. He chose not to. He purposefully made it an eight syllable line.

Why is he shifting the numerical underpinning of the poem?

These are like the tiny adjustments you find in a classical building. With numbers go proportion. There is one proportion that mattered to a contemporary of Inigo Jones: that of the Divine proportion. This is a division whereby the ratio of the lesser to the greater portion is the same as the greater portion to the whole. To the seventeenth century mind it had magical qualities that were proof of divine presence in creation. It now has the rather dull approximation of .618; its inverse is 1.618. If you proceed .618 of the way through the 28 lines of the poem you come to the seventeenth line we have just discussed. But if you proceed the same distance through the 157 syllables you come to the 98th, which sits in the second half of the *eighteenth* line.

It forms one word: praise.

In his *Life of George Herbert*, written some 35 years after his death, Izaak Walton reports an incident on one of Herbert's walks from his Parish of Bemerton to Salisbury, where he regularly took part in a musical evening. At the time it was noteworthy that he walked rather than rode. It is not without poignancy that the distance of roughly two miles was covered by a man suffering from the early stages of Tuberculosis. It is widely taken to be apocryphal.

In another walk to Salisbury, he saw a poor man with a poorer horse, that was fallen under his load: they were both in distress, and needed present help; which Mr. Herbert perceiving, put off his canonical coat, and helped the poor man to unload, and after to load, his horse. The poor man blessed him for it, and he blessed the poor man; and was so like the Good Samaritan, that he gave him money to refresh both himself and his horse; and told him, "That if he loved himself he should be merciful to his beast." Thus he left the poor man; and at his coming to his musical friends at Salisbury, they began to wonder that Mr. George Herbert, which used to be so trim and clean, came into that company so soiled and discomposed: but he told them the occasion. And when one of the company told him, "He had disparaged himself by so dirty an employment," his answer was, "That the thought of what he had done would prove music to him at midnight; and that the omission of it would have upbraided and made discord in his conscience, whensoever he should pass by that place: for if I be bound to pray for all that be in distress, I am sure that I am bound, so far as it is in my power, to practice what I pray for. And though I do not wish for the like occasion every day, yet let me tell you, I would not willingly pass one day of my life without comforting a sad soul, or shewing mercy; and I praise God for this occasion. And now let's tune our instruments."

Walton was writing with the rosiest of rose tinted spectacles: he looked back on an arcadia through the prism of civil war. "In order for you to be well informed about

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the times in which I lived, let me tell you” wrote Henry Vaughan, “that they were cruel.” Herbert was already being venerated for his piety as much as his poetry. Soon his poetry would fall catastrophically out of favour.

This anecdote has a ring of authenticity about it. For Herbert does not come out that well. He seems keen to hand out solemn admonitions, to be recognised as someone grander than his position and with a calling even grander than that. He is portrayed as an **unlikely** Samaritan. But behind this we have a Herbert whom the act of creation was important, even more important than homilies. This is the Herbert of *Praise II*.

Tom Jenkins