

All That Is Gold Does Not Glitter: Plainness and Eloquence in Jonson, Donne, and
Herbert

by

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Abstract

This thesis traces a stylistic development from the dichotomy of plainness and eloquence in Elizabethan style, through the stylistic innovations of Ben Jonson and John Donne to the ultimate synthesis of the two styles in George Herbert's poetry. To accomplish this, the thesis reads a selection of their works closely, paying particular attention to the effects of style on the reader's reception of a poem's content. A progression is observed, in which Jonson demonstrates that ornamental language does not necessarily obscure truth; Donne uses that eloquence for didactic purposes, to illuminate paradoxical truth; and Herbert enlists delightful language within a plain style in his effort to communicate persuasively in his devotional lyrics. Thus the development of the "metaphysical" style is read not as an adoption of classical or continental style, but as a response to the problems of style inherited from the Elizabethan dichotomy between plainness and eloquence.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

The early years of the seventeenth century saw the publication of two cornerstones of the English tradition, the works of Shakespeare and the King James Bible, but at the same time as two dimensions of the tradition were being established, another was being tested. The conventions of style that had come to govern English poetry by the end of the sixteenth century had apparently been taken to their limits, and the excesses of the “golden” style written at and for the court drove some of the next generation of poets to react against a mode they felt had become centred on the meaningless performance of wit. Sir Philip Sidney, courtly poet *par excellence*, had defended poetry against its detractors by arguing, with Horace, that it was “a speaking picture; with this end, to teach and delight,” so that while Nature's “world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden” (106). Using that “hand of delight,” he concluded, the poet

doth draw the mind more effectually than any other art doth: and so a conclusion not unfitly ensueth, that, as Virtue is the most excellent resting place for all worldly learning to make his end of, so Poetry, being the most familiar to teach it, and most princely to move towards it, in the most excellent work is the most excellent workman. (116)

Despite this noble argument, the poets that followed him were keenly aware that the goals of poetry, which Sidney had so eloquently united in the dual end “to teach and delight,” had drifted farther and farther apart, becoming separate, exclusive pursuits – and in the process, invalidating poetry's position as “the most excellent workman” in “the most excellent work.” Instead of serving to delightfully season poetry's delivery of teaching about virtue, ornaments of style became ends in themselves for the eloquent style, while the plain style came to avoid ornamentation so as to focus its reader's attention on the substance of its argument. From a familiar narrative of the development of English literature, we know that the necessary innovation came in the form of the metaphysical style, introduced and quickly refined over the careers of such poets as Ben Jonson, John Donne, and George Herbert. However, their work was not a creation *ex nihilo*, but the result of their need to begin the pursuit of the combination of truth and beauty over again, driven by an apparent dichotomy between poetry that taught and that which delighted. In the following pages I seek to read Jonson, Donne, and Herbert's struggle with questions of style as a response to the conventions of the plain and eloquent styles so dominant in the English tradition they received.

In the introduction to his essay on “Style in Raleigh's Short Poems,” C.Q. Drummond observes that while critics can agree that sixteenth-century verse was characterized by two distinct styles, there is a wide variety of adjectives employed by critics to describe them: “one can be called golden, Petrarchan, sugared, ornate, courtly, sweet, pleasant, eloquent; and the other drab, flat, native, moral, didactic, plain” (159). Many of these terms represent the critic's reading of the styles in miniature; Drummond

comments that “[C.S.] Lewis's Drab and Golden cannot help but suggest, despite his disclaimer, an awed approval of gold and a condescending dislike of drabness,” and cites Yvor Winters's corrective that “Lewis should have used the sixteenth century's own terms and called the two styles the 'plain' and 'sugared' or 'eloquent,’” advice I intend to follow (159). As indicated by the varied critical terminology, the contrast between the two sides is pronounced, as is the contrast between the attitudes toward language that they represent. This is an important connection to recognize. To choose an illustrative pair of terms, compare the “sugared” with the “moral”: the former style uses language to please, entertain, and impress its audience, and judges its success accordingly, while the latter uses language as a tool to teach, persuade, and exhort its audience. Obviously, I am describing each style by its extreme, but as court poetry became more and more about performance or show, it was increasingly important for the “moral” to avoid even the appearance of the “sugared,” and these extremes capture the opposing essences of the two approaches to poetry.

Drummond sets up his discussion using the classic examples of the two styles, Christopher Marlowe's “Passionate Shepherd to his Love” and Walter Raleigh's response in “The Nymph's Reply,” which confronts the shepherd's golden, pastoral images with the sober rationality of the real world. In the example of what Drummond chooses to call the “golden” style, “the 'naturally delightful' items with which the poem is loaded are offered here (to the reader as well as to the nymph) to be admired for their own sakes; we are to wonder at each extravagant, lovely object” (161). While Raleigh's nymph refers to the same objects in her reply, she uses them quite differently, as illustrations in a moral

discourse: “Whereas it is the principle of Marlowe's poem to keep these abstractions, and all of our everyday moral concerns that they imply, out of his poem, Raleigh's achievement is to subdue the diction of the golden pastoral to the real world” (163). Similarly, while Marlowe's shepherd “smooths out the line,” playing down the stresses and running the lines together, Raleigh uses his “emphatic rhythm” as a powerful rhetorical tool (165).

The same two poems are compared by J.V. Cunningham as exemplars of their respective styles, which he characterizes as follows:

Indeed, *The Passionate Shepherd* attains the perfection of which the sweet style is capable, for that style aims at a harmonious arrangement of elements that have already a preestablished harmony. It really is an abstract style, like a Navaho rug, dependent on design, and its triumphs are quite impersonal. Such a poem is written by no man but by a tradition.
 (“Lyric Style in the 1590s” 313)

This contrasts with “The Nymph's Reply,” which as

the exponent or symbol of this particular and quite limited tradition [*i.e.* the “moral”] is easy to describe: a heavy-handed seriousness, a scorn of urbanity, a deliberate rejection of that delicacy which would discriminate shades of white and of black. It is a morally ruthless, secure, and overpowering style. (315)

Cunningham concludes that these were the two major options available to the young poet in 1590, styles which had to be either accepted or rejected, and “those we are concerned with here for the most part rejected them” (316). The last part of Cunningham's essay

briefly sketches out the beginning of the innovations that followed, especially in the verse of Donne and Jonson, the result of which he describes as “the English plain style,” a style he attributes to Donne's pioneering “effort to realize in English the forms of Latin poetry, and their appropriate styles” (323-324).

The classical authors on style were a central influence on poets of this period; the very divisions of style into the grand, middle, and low, and the accompanying subject matter appropriate to each, was a system laid out for Renaissance writers by classical authority. Manuals of style in sixteenth-century England drew on the works particularly of Aristotle, Quintilian, Cicero, and Horace, as well as others, not only as the proof texts for their comments on style, but also as the source of the questions about style that they sought to answer. However, as Michael Gallagher points out, most English rhetoricians did not achieve a simple transmission of classical precepts, to the particular detriment of the plain style: “due no doubt to the lingering guilt complex about the inadequacies of the vernacular, rhetoric became almost exclusively the art of ornamentation and handbooks of rhetoric offered only an impoverished notion of the classical plain style” (497). A major part of the revival of the plain style around the turn of the century was due to a return to such principles as the *urbanitas* and *subtilitas* Cicero had ascribed to the plain style. G.C. Fiske discusses the term *urbanus*, explaining that “it connoted not only wit and cleverness, but also to a much greater degree elegance and refinement,” a refinement involving a subdued power, so that Horace “associates the *urbanus* definitely with the plain style because he restrains his strength” (124, 125). Thus, this “more finished nuance of the plain style” has a “studied simplicity, a simplicity which looks easy of attainment, but in

reality demands the constant use of the file” (125). This is the same principle expressed by Cicero's description of the plain style as a woman's attire that displayed “a certain diligent negligence,” and is the ancestor to Jonson's “sweet neglect.” This revival of the classical plain style enabled the repetition of a movement noted by Fiske in the classical authors he discusses, from the *ignobilitas* used by Lucilius as a stylistic term associated with the plain style, to the *humilis* with which Horace described his own *sermones* (457). The return to Cicero and Horace allowed authors such as Jonson to re-establish the plain style as something to be valued in its own right.

The classical tradition was certainly a significant influence on Jonson, Donne, and Herbert, and some excellent and varied scholarship has already been done on their indebtedness to classical rhetoric. For this reason, in this thesis the subject of their relationship to the classical tradition appears in a supporting role to my primary interest, which is to read their poetry in terms of how they were responding to the immediate tradition of the plain and eloquent styles that had dominated the previous generation of English poetry. In order to better understand that immediate context, however, it is helpful to recognize one more significant influence, that of Augustine. His modification of the classical principle of sharply separated styles is itself a refinement of the classical tradition, and serves as a model for Jonson, Donne, Herbert, and their contemporaries of one way to approach the problem of oppositional styles. As a rhetorician-turned-Christian, Augustine led the development of a specifically Christian style based on classical rhetoric, so that the influence of classical principles on later Christian stylists came in large part *via* his mediation.

While Augustine maintained the three gradations of style, the heart of his baptizing of rhetoric was in the divorce of the level of style from the level of subject. As Erich Auerbach explains,

a Christian orator recognizes no absolute levels of subject matter; only the immediate context and purpose (whether his aim is to teach, to admonish, or to deliver an impassioned appeal) can tell him which level of style to employ. A Christian orator's subject is always Christian revelation, and this can never be base or in-between. (35)

In the gospel story of God become man, Christ born in a stable, the sublime becomes the humble. Even a thing as lowly as a cup of cold water is elevated by its spiritual significance. Further, the style of Scripture is such that it is humble and lowly (*humilis*), yet not without complex and difficult passages, which the simplicity of its style invites even the uneducated reader to explore. The *humilitas* of this style, as Auerbach sums it up, is that “there is no fundamental difference between the profound, obscure passages and those that are clear and simple; the former merely open up deeper levels of understanding” (51). Thus Augustine's work simultaneously establishes the plain style as characteristically Christian, while preserving a place for each of the three levels in the rhetorical instruments available to the Christian orator. In part because of Herbert's focus on devotional lyrics, in his verse we can read his struggle to implement Augustine's principles in a specifically Christian rhetoric, and his indebtedness to Augustinian rhetoric seems more explicit than Jonson's or Donne's, whose relationship with classical style is apparently less mediated (witness, for example, Jonson's comments on classical Roman

authors in the “Discoveries,” and Donne's imitation of Latin poetic forms). However, as the model for a Christian use of classical style, Augustine's work is foundational to the activity of early modern Christian poets, so while his relevance to the chapter on Herbert's verse will be clear, we should also remain attentive for points in the work of Jonson and Donne where Augustine's influence can be discerned.

Augustine's conclusion that the plain style had Biblical precedent and was peculiarly appropriate for Christian authors combined with the medieval rhetorical tradition to play an important part in producing the state of stylistic affairs in English poetry at the end of the sixteenth century. In the introduction to his history of the plain and eloquent styles, Douglas Peterson summarizes the impact of medieval rhetoric on the attitude of English poets writing in the first part of the sixteenth century:

The poets who wrote during that period were faced with a language which since Chaucer had, if anything, regressed, and with a verse tradition which offered little in the way of models suitable for imitation. They considered the vernacular inadequate as a literary medium, and they turned to the rhetoricians for the same reasons they turned to Petrarch, primarily in an attempt to enrich the vernacular . . . Whatever the inadequacies they saw in the current vernacular and whatever the continental models they chose to follow, it is a medieval theory of eloquence which, at least up to 1580, informs their judgement. That theory identified literary excellence with the copious embellishment of style by means of verbal trope and grammatical scheme. (4)

Combined with Augustine's association of Christian sincerity with the plain style, the medieval association of "literariness" with eloquence laid the foundation for the great divide between the two styles by the Elizabethan period. As the eloquent style became more and more a "courtly attainment," about the cultivation of "embellishment and mannerisms as social graces," adherents of the plain style broadened or shifted their focus "from matters of style and structure to content and attitude" (6, 7). In this way what may have begun merely as a focus on one or the other side of poetry's end "to teach and delight" in the plain and eloquent styles became an emphasis tending to exclude the other part, and through the eloquent style's association with the court, grew to include implicit attitudes toward courtly love, social class, and everything else that the court came to represent.

My project is motivated by a purpose similar to Peterson's, if less deliberately targeted at mistaken scholarship. In his introduction he aims at two textbook clichés about "the 'birth' of a new poetry of the imagination," that the "Golden Age" of English poetry was preceded by little of note, and that the poetic revival begun by such "masters" as Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare was due in large part to "the domestication of continental conventions" (3, 4). Peterson's goal, as stated in his title, is to trace the development of the English plain style "from Wyatt to Donne," anchoring Donne's much-admired style in an English stylistic tradition characterized by the opposition between the plain and eloquent styles. I wish to continue the narrative where Peterson leaves off, so to speak, to trace the stylistic development from the dichotomy of the plain and eloquent styles through Jonson and Donne to Herbert, reading them not primarily as the fathers of

an entirely new metaphysical style, but to understand their innovations in terms of how they inherited the plain and eloquent tradition and what they made of the potential of the contrast between the two styles. How did these authors address the problems of style, especially questions about the relationship between form and content and the effect of poetic form on the reader? Does an ornamental style necessarily obscure truth and a plain style necessarily illuminate it? In this way, through a series of close readings my work contributes to our understanding of Jonson, Donne, and Herbert's work in relation to their past, with the potential for this project to lead into a discussion of how they in turn became an influential force for the future of poetry.

Because these questions have to do with the effect of style on the reader, my method in exploring them draws implicitly on reader response criticism, following Sidney and Augustine, who both make it a central concern for their use of rhetoric that it provoke the desired response (*i.e.* a pursuit of virtue) from their readers. To understand Jonson, Donne, and Herbert's use of style, then, it is important to ask how it is designed to affect the reader, or what it is designed to *do*. Stanley Fish articulates the emphasis of this approach in *Self-Consuming Artifacts*:

Whatever is persuasive and illuminating about this analysis (and it is by no means exhaustive) is the result of my substituting for one question – what does this sentence mean? – another, more operational question – what does this sentence do? . . . It is no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader. And it is this event, this happening – all of it and not anything that could

be said about it or any information one might take away from it – that is, I would argue the *meaning* of the sentence. (386)

While I do not intend to adopt the full implications of Fish's theory, such as by preferring the question of “what does this sentence do?” to the exclusion of “what does this sentence mean?” or by duplicating his particular method of close reading, it is helpful to acknowledge that the poems dealt with in the following chapters were written *to be read*. They exist not in and for themselves, but as texts addressed from an author to a reader. As such, to be interested in their style is to be interested in the experience of reading them.

Chapter 2 – Jonson

The Subtleties of Love, For Two Registers

Well known for his mastery of the plain style as well as for his witty epigrams and artful occasional pieces, Ben Jonson is a suitable beginning for two reasons: first, because he was widely read in his own time and so set a precedent for his contemporaries, and, second, because his work displays the plain and eloquent styles relatively distinctly. Many critics consider Donne and Herbert poets of greater subtlety than Jonson, but Jonson should not be passed over too hastily; as my discussion shows, he navigates the problems of style carefully, and shows himself capable of using both the plain and eloquent forms and of capitalizing on the potential of the tension between them. Jonson has received recognition for the way that he drew on both the classical and English traditions in his own graceful development of the English plain style, and the three “Poems of Devotion” represent the kind of work characterized by this critical assessment, religious poems composed of ordinary diction that flows with a simple elegance. “A Celebration of Charis” comes from the different world of romantic court poetry, and Jonson accordingly employs a different style, one whose ambiguities and nuances are useful in illuminating Jonson's receipt of the conventions of the eloquent style. It seems obvious from a cursory reading

of the “Poems of Devotion” that they belong wholly to the plain style, while the stylistic variation within “A Celebration of Charis” defies simple classification, so although the overarching question remains the same, my approach to the two differs slightly. In reading the “Poems of Devotion,” my focus is to see how Jonson relates form and content in the simple devotional lyric, and whether he includes any ornamentation (and how). Inclusion of these poems in Jonson's collection is an implicit argument for the literary value of the plain style, an important point in overcoming the divide between the plain and the eloquent. With “A Celebration of Charis,” however, the question has to do with the effects Jonson achieves through his stylistic choices, and what the series overall ultimately suggests about the truthful use of poetic language.

Much has already been written on the subject of Jonson the plain-stylist, aided and guided by Jonson's own comments on style in the “Discoveries,” particularly his often-referenced statement that “of the two (if either were to be wished) I would rather have a plain downright wisdom, than a foolish and affected eloquence” (385). Critical endeavour is often focused on illustrating how Jonson avoided both of these extremes, with an emphasis on the presence of that “plain downright wisdom” in opposition to the “affected eloquence” of courtly or even foreign influences. Richard Flantz argues that the power of Jonson's innovations in English poetic style come from his “mastery of measure,” which “was a major contribution to the authority not only of his own poetic voice, but also of the genre that he was helping to establish in English as a serious and valid alternative to the exhausted but insistent Italianate conventions of lyric” (59). He suggests that this is the quality that gives Jonson's short poems their vim and vigour, and asserts the artistic

value of topics and forms other than those of the eloquent style. Flantz argues in close detail how Jonson uses rhythm and stress in conjunction with syllabic length to direct or emphasize the sense of his words, or even to augment or ironically undercut their meaning, and concludes that through this “mastery of measure” Jonson “re-create[d] the ground of decorum” for the plain style (70). Such a new poetic norm would not exclude eloquent language, but in fact provided a frame for its “more functional use” (71).

Engaged in a similar project to Flantz, George Parfitt attributes the essential quality of Jonson's verse to not one, but two characteristics: his simple, direct language, and a syntax that complements his word choices by mimicking the rhythm and word order of ordinary speech. Parfitt argues that Jonson favours precision over complexity and simplicity over suggestion, employing “common-place words in his verse [with] a solidity and weight of meaning which is far from inert or imprecise,” and using rhythmic devices to emphasize the significance of individual words (112). This assessment of Jonson's work can be traced back to a passage in “Discoveries,” where he writes that “pure and neat language I love, yet plain and customary. A barbarous phrase hath often made me out of love with a good sense; and doubtful writing hath racked me beyond my patience” (“Discoveries” 430). Good sense must be allied with language that respects the conventions of usage and strives to make that sense clear, rather than withholding it in obscurity from the reader.

While this kind of criticism identifies fundamental qualities of Jonson's poetry – Flantz's discussion of Jonson's “quantitative augmentation of emphasis” is particularly helpful – these qualities belong primarily to Jonson as a plain-stylist, and do not account

satisfactorily for a poetics and practice that also embraces aspects of the courtly tradition. For example, Parfitt's characterization of Jonson's style as clear, precise, and based on the use of "apparently bald adjectives" recuperated by emphasis seems to leave little room for Jonson's description of poesy as "a dulcet, and gentle philosophy, which leads on, and guides us by the hand to action, with a ravishing delight, and incredible sweetness" ("Discoveries" 446). Jonson recognizes that a large part of that sweetness comes from the truthfulness of its subject, but the "ravishing delight" with which poetry leads its reader to truth comes also from the graceful use of language. The question will be to see what shape that delight might take in the context of religious and romantic lyrics, and more importantly, what appropriate uses Jonson finds for both plain and eloquent language.

The "Poems of Devotion": An Innocent Man Needs no Eloquence

Despite the commonplace that Jonson is a master of the plain style, these three poems, comprising the larger part of Jonson's religious poetry, have garnered relatively little critical attention, perhaps suffering from comparison with "To Heaven." For example, in his study of Jonson and the plain style, Wesley Trimpi focuses his interest in Jonson's religious poetry almost exclusively on "To Heaven," which he calls "one of the finest religious poems of the seventeenth century" (205). In Trimpi's words, the poem speaks from the context of Jonson's "entire personal experience" with "the conversational idiom of a completely unspecialized language," which gives it an "urbanity of diction and movement" superior to such other work as Herbert's "The Pulley" (206). One reason for this preference for "To Heaven" may be that it applies the qualities of Jonson's secular

plain-style verse (which are well-documented) to religious meditation with great effect, while the “Poems of Devotion” are more firmly within the tradition of didactic moral poetry that earned the epithet “drab” from some critics. To an audience charmed by the apparent spontaneity or eloquent emotion of Donne or Herbert's religious verse, the “Poems of Devotion” would then seem comparatively plain and conventional, hardly persuasive ambassadors for the value of the plain style. Perhaps this is a justifiable conclusion, but it may be more productive to see the poems in relation to their predecessors in the moral plain style, rather than to their descendants in the devotional lyric. Especially in light of how Jonson responded to received stylistic conventions, we would do well to see for ourselves what shape they give to the plain style. With this goal in mind, I restrict my focus to the first two “Poems of Devotion,” since they offer sufficient opportunity to see Jonson writing on religious subjects in contrasting ways within the plain style.¹

The “Poems of Devotion” are the first entry in Jonson's collection called *Underwoods*, subtitled “Consisting of Diverse Poems,” and prefaced with a note to the reader explaining that the title refers to the relationship between “the *Forest*, in my former book,” and “these lesser poems, of later growth” (122). Like the *Forest*, *Underwoods* draws its arboreal name from the classical tradition of calling “that kind of body *Sylva*, or *Hule*, in which there were works of diverse nature, and matter congested” (122). The note thus prepares readers to encounter a variety of styles and subjects, so that even within contained sequences like the “Poems of Devotion” or, later, “A Celebration of Charis,” we

1 “A Hymn on the Nativity of My Saviour” is particularly interesting for the way that it uses the “I sing” of bardic expression to give Jonson's use of the plain style a third shape. Since the first two of the “Poems of Devotion” offer ample material to represent the salient features of Jonson's plain style in these poems, I have refrained from paying close attention to “A Hymn on the Nativity of My Saviour” here.

can expect to be presented with “works of diverse nature.” As the first and second entries in *Underwoods*, dealing with the subjects of heavenly and earthy love, the two sequences establish a tone for the rest of the collection.

As the first poem of the trio, “The Sinner's Sacrifice” is a convenient place to begin, but it is also a useful beginning because it establishes the basic elements of style that carry on, with some variations, into “A Hymn to God the Father” and “A Hymn on the Nativity of My Saviour.” Its use of language is an example of the simplicity of the plain style; deviations from prose syntax are few, as are deviations from iambic metre. Most exceptions to the iambic metre serve normal English speech rhythms, such as the substitution of an anapest to accommodate “than a heart contrite” (15), or are standard variations like the inversion of a line's first foot. It should be noted that this regularity does not exclude all poetic devices; for example, rhythm and syntax do not prevent Jonson from making good use of one of his key devices, the period, as in the short, choppy lines that describe his troubled state in the poem's opening stanzas:

O holy, blessèd, glorious Trinity
 Of persons, still one God, in unity,
 The faithful man's believèd mystery,
 Help, help to lift

Myself up to thee, harrowed, torn, and bruised
 By sin, and Satan; and my flesh misused,
 As my heart lies in pieces, all confused,

O take my gift. (1-8)

The tension built through the broken phrases of the second stanza finds its resolution in the simple appeal of the stanza's last line. The rhymes are regular and even in cases where they are dissimilar endings (as in stanza 2, or the “sanctifier / desire / entire” of stanza 11) they are still fairly close rhymes, asserting the unity of each individual stanza and gently linking each pair of stanzas.

Formally, the stanzas are perhaps the most interesting device, since every two stanzas are linked by the rhyme across their final lines, and occasionally more strongly by enjambment (1-2, 3-4, 11-12), each set of four stanzas comprises a smaller unit within the poem: the sinner's sacrifice, the nature of the Trinity, and the sinner's hope of enjoying the light of the Trinity in heaven. To stretch the stanzas' significance to its farthest, one could also observe that the total number of stanzas is that of the tribes of Israel and the apostles. This is not as great a reach as it might be even in other religious verse, because of the pattern of Biblical references Jonson employs throughout the poem. In places Jonson combines familiar terms into unfamiliar phrases, such as in the first stanza where he calls the Trinity “the faithful man's believèd mystery,” while in others he borrows specific phrases. These can be characterized by several of the more recognizable instances: the “broken heart” and “heart contrite” that God values “bove the fat of rams, or bulls” uses the language of Psalm 51:17 and I Samuel 15:22; the Father's work of breathing life into creation refers to Genesis 2:7; and the Son's cry “All's done in me” is a rewording of John 19:30.

The ecumenical Christian creeds provide a second pattern of allusion in stanzas

five through ten, which continues to emphasize the didactic and communal nature of the poem. This section of the poem seems hardly to belong under the title “The Sinner's Sacrifice,” because it shifts away from the personal confession of sin in the first stanzas and takes on the tone of a creed. This kind of language about the Trinity would have been familiar to both Catholic and Anglican Englishmen particularly from the Athanasian Creed, with its focus on the doctrine of the Trinity. The beginnings of stanzas five through seven suggest the tenth phrase of the Creed, which describes the eternal nature of each person of the Godhead: “The Father eternal, the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal”; the description of the Spirit as “God from both proceeding” echoes the twenty-third phrase of the Creed, “the Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son: neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding”; and the first lines of the ninth stanza, “Beholding one in three, and three in one, / A Trinity, to shine in union,” mimic the antimetabole of the Creed's twenty-seventh phrase, “So that in all things, as is aforesaid: the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped.”² The combination of

2 These references are to the second section of the Athanasian Creed, which focuses on the doctrine of the Trinity. In the 1559 edition of *The Book of Common Prayer* it reads as follows: “And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the persons: nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate: and the Holy Ghost uncreate, The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible, The Father eternal, the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals: but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensibles: but one uncreated and one incomprehensible. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty: and the Holy Ghost almighty. And yet they are not three almighties: but one almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods: but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord: and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet they are not three Lords: but one Lord. For like as we be compelled by the Christian verity: to acknowledge every person by himself to be God and Lord, So are we forbidden by the catholic religion: to say, there be three gods or three lords. The Father is made of none: neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone: not made nor created, but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son: neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers, one Son, not three Sons: one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is afore, or after another: none is greater, nor less than another. But the whole three persons: be coeternal together, and coequal. So that in all things, as is aforesaid: the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity

Biblical and creedal sources gives the language of “The Sinner's Sacrifice” its conventional character, something which readers looking for the wit of a Donne or the passion of a Herbert poem could very well read as a fault, but those among Jonson's contemporaries would have recognized as firmly at home in the moral, didactic tradition of the plain style: it is eminently familiar language to even the uneducated seventeenth-century English reader.

All this notwithstanding, “The Sinner's Sacrifice” has its poetic touches. Many of these can be described in terms of parallelism, which runs throughout the poem in various shapes. As is fitting for a poem about the Trinity, sets of threes are ubiquitous, from the trio of adjectives for the Trinity in the opening line to the three threes on the Trinity in the eleventh stanza,

My maker, saviour, and my sanctifier,
 To hear, to mediate, sweeten my desire
 With grace, with love, with cherishing entire,
 O, then how blessed; (41-44)

The creative actions of God in the fifth stanza, giving and breathing, are in parallel phrases (highlighted by alliteration) slightly offset from the line-endings, so that creation's purpose arrives with the stanza's resolution:

Eternal Father, God, who didst create
 This all of nothing, gav'st it form, and fate,
 And breath'st into it, life, and light, with state
 To worship thee. (17-20)

in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved: must think thus of the Trinity” (65-66).

The single stanza with feminine line-endings, the seventh, is a striking example of the way that Jonson chooses rhymes with parallel rhythms. The extra syllable makes it particularly noticeable here, but Jonson gives each stanza this steady flow.

Eternal Spirit, God from both proceeding,
 Father and Son; the comforter, in breeding
 Pure thoughts in man: with fiery zeal them feeding
 For acts of grace. (25-28)

The poem closes with a confident, assertive stanza, in which the sinner, after his encounter with the three-person God, expresses his ultimate hope,

Among thy saints elected to abide,
 And with thy angels, placèd side by side,
 But in thy presence truly glorified
 Shall I there rest! (45-48)

This ending is fitting for the poem's confessional manner, since the Creed ends with the believer's expectation of everlasting life. It also returns our attention to the sinner who began the poem, although in the confidence of this conclusion he leaves his broken heart behind. In a devotional lyric about sinfulness and repentance, this awkward shift from personal confession to a creedal statement would be odd, but this poem needs to be read for what it is, not what its contemporaries are. As much as it is titled "The Sinner's Sacrifice," its focus is not on the sacrifice itself but on the person to whom the poet is presenting his sacrifice, as indicated in the subtitle: "To the Holy Trinity." The acceptance for his gift that the poet desires is that the Trinity would "help, help to lift / Myself up to

thee,” the glorified state hopefully looked forward (or upward) to by the final stanza (4-5). It is a poem first about worship, and about repentance only as worship's opening movement.

Despite self-identifying as a hymn, “A Hymn to God the Father” is much more of a personal confession of sin than is “The Sinner's Sacrifice.” The latter's worshipful focus, communal expression, and stanzaic form suggest that it belongs to the public genre of religious hymn, the kind described by the *OED* definition of “hymn” as “any composition in praise of God which is adapted to be chanted or sung; spec. a metrical composition adapted to be sung in a religious service.” However, there are no mentions of “we” or “us” in the prayerful address of “A Hymn to God the Father,” which also begins with a broken heart, though one that is much more simply expressed. By titling the poem as a hymn, Jonson highlights for his readers the way that it remains an expression of worship, though in a more private form. Instead of taking four allusive stanzas to deliver, here the opening appeal to God is arrestingly minimal, as if the poet feels no need to describe his broken heart except to acknowledge that he has nothing else:

Hear me, O God!

A broken heart,

Is my best part:

Use still thy rod,

That I may prove

Therein, thy love.

If thou hadst not
 Been stern to me,
 But left me free,
I had forgot
 Myself and thee.

For, sin's so sweet,
 As minds ill bent
 Rarely repent,
Until they meet
 Their punishment.

Who more can crave
 Than thou hast done:
 That gav'st a Son,
To free a slave?
 First made of nought;
 With all since bought.

Sin, death, and hell,
 His glorious name
 Quite overcame,

Yet I rebel,
 And slight the same.

But, I'll come in,
 Before my loss
 Me farther toss,
 As sure to win
 Under his cross. (1-32)

The first stanza sets the tone for the rest of the poem: it is at once simpler and yet more complex than “The Sinner's Sacrifice.” The lines are lightly balanced, and each consists of a single, contained phrase so that there is room only for the nice statement of the poem's argument. However, the gracefulness of this simple language lies in its more complex features. For example, in the second stanza, God's verb has its own phrase, preceded and followed by the qualifying phrases “if . . . not” and “but,” then Jonson's verb has its phrase, and in the concluding predicate the two subjects come together gently. Also, both thematically and grammatically, each stanza is itself a contained arc within the overall movement of the poem; the only full stops in the poem are those found at the end of every stanza.

The first stanza also exerts an influence over the rest of the poem through the guiding image of the rod, which takes on varied significance as each verse calls out different Biblical resonances for the word. The first, perhaps most obvious sense, is the rod of correction, employed by the stern God of the second stanza to mete out the

punishment of the third. This is the God described in the book of Proverbs 3:11-12, where Solomon advises, “My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction: For whom the LORD loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth” (this and all subsequent Biblical quotations KJV). The third stanza introduces a new direction to the poem, toward God's Son, against whom “yet I rebel,” who freed a slave and “quite overcame” “sin, death, and hell” (26, 25, 23). These are the actions of the kingly Son, whose royal descent is described in the prophecy of Isaiah: “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him” (11:1-2). The “rod” from “the stem of Jesse” combines the images of a family tree with new growth from an old stump, since the Davidic line had been lost until it was renewed by Christ, but the rod is also the king's sceptre, the symbol of his authority, and considering it in this sense we can see especially clearly the semantic leeway Jonson allows when he introduces the word in the first stanza: “Use still thy rod, / That I may prove / Therein, thy love” (4-6). The only restriction given here is that God's rod is an object whose use will allow Jonson to test or witness to God's love. As long as it is sustained by the rest of the poem, then, we could very well see the “rod” as all three – the symbol of authority by which God acts, the instrument with which He punishes, and the means by which He redeems the wayward poet. Finally, the rod may also gesture forward to the close of the poem, since the cross was also known as the “rood,” a word the *OED* observes to have developed from the meaning “a piece of wood” as in “a staff; a wooden spar,” and which had various spellings in Old and Middle English, including “rod.” These connections add an element of

semantic continuity between the beginning and end of the poem, as well as underlining the semantic tension between the “rod” of correction and that of salvation.

It is important to observe, however, that none of this allusiveness is essential to the poem's basic meaning. Its language and syntax is as straightforward and easy to grasp as that of “The Sinner's Sacrifice,” and its argument is perhaps even simpler. Though the insensitive reader might miss the grace of the minimal lines and the depth of meaning in the image of the rod, the several facets of the poet's address to God are relatively easy to grasp. Even the theme of tension between punishment and mercy as equally expressive of God's love, so neatly woven into the complex image of the rod, would not entirely escape a simple reader. “A Hymn to God the Father” thus represents a subtler (one might say, more artful) approach to writing in the moral tradition of the plain style, but at no point does it risk sacrificing comprehension. Rather, its allusiveness rewards the sensitive reader with a deeper, more complex matrix of the same meaning available on its surface. Stylistically, this is a more graceful embodiment of the “dulcet, and gentle philosophy” that Jonson suggested poesy ought to be (“Discoveries” 446).

Describing the qualities of a hymn, J.G. Nichols points out that “A Hymn to God the Father” “has simplicity, clarity, and dignity, and expresses beliefs and attitudes which are public rather than private, the beliefs and attitudes of all who sing it” (147). This description may in fact be more apt for “A Sinner's Sacrifice,” whose simple style is in keeping with the didactic nature of the traditional English plain style, and whose chiefly formal ornaments are suitable for what could be a hymn. Its Biblical and creedal allusions are clear, but are not devices integral to the meaning of the poem so much as points of

contact with the institutional language of devotion. If we consider “A Sinner's Sacrifice” in the genre of a creedal hymn rather than a personal prayer, its relative lack of adornment becomes noticeable not as a fault but rather as an appropriate stylistic choice for a poem that belongs to the moral tradition of the native English plain style, rather than to the more artful style of “A Hymn to God the Father” – though even in this Jonson does not risk sacrificing sense to subtlety. The same principle is at work here as the one Augustine attributes to the style of the Bible, and Auerbach describes as a lack of “fundamental difference between the profound, obscure passages and those that are clear and simple; the former merely open up deeper levels of understanding” (51). Of course it would be taking the correlation too far to assert that Jonson deliberately follows Augustine's comments on Biblical style, but deliberate or not, “A Hymn to God the Father” embodies the essence of the *humilitas* Augustine ascribes to Scripture.

In the “Discoveries” Jonson writes that “as it is a great point of art, when our matter requires it, to enlarge, and veer out all sail; so to take it in, and contract it, is of no less praise when the argument doth ask it” (433). It is a point of art for the “Poems of Devotion” to treat their moral argument in a “contracted” manner, the more so to preserve its clarity. Beauty here is located in the matter of the poems, in the praise offered to the Trinity and the recognition of God the Father's mercy and love, and their formal elements remain secondary to these concerns. Considering his poetry in the light of his carefully controlled style, we should recognize that Jonson uses the simple style of these two “Poems of Devotion” for its ability to place its matter in a particular genre as well as for its propriety, though the contrast between the two demonstrates that Jonson can work

within that genre in different shapes and to different effects.

“A Celebration of Charis”: Nothing is Lasting that is Feigned

One of the contrasts between the “Poems of Devotion” and “A Celebration of Charis” is the way the latter establishes itself as a rhetorical performance from the very beginning. It is, in a sense, an occasional series that constructs its own occasion, drawing on the literary precedent of the aged poet-lover. Nichols points out that Horace suffered similarly at the same age, and that this is probably the particular allusion, if any, meant by Jonson when he writes “I have had, and have my peers” (1.4). As with the “Poems of Devotion,” Jonson is consciously working in a particular genre, and “His Excuse for Loving” introduces the series as a story addressed directly to the reader, setting up the dramatic relationship between the poet and reader. It also invokes this literary precedent of the poet-lover, and promises to teach the reader whom to love, and how. Further, the poem signals that style will be an important theme in the series – substituting “poet” for “lover” in the following, it almost could be a passage of “Discoveries” in verse (compare it with Jonson's scorn for the “women's poets” in whose pretty, shallow verse “there is no torrent, nor scarce stream” [396]):

And it is not always face,
 Clothes, or fortune gives the grace;
 Or the feature, or the youth:
 But the language, and the truth,
 With the ardour, and the passion,

Gives the lover weight and fashion. (1.7-12)

The balanced periods on either side of the central commas in lines 9-11 emphasize how words can have a weight and fashion of their own. In this prologue the reader can also detect a humorous undercurrent that foreshadows the multiple layers of the following poems. The reader must prepare for the regret that will inevitably be occasioned by the poet's tale, since it will illustrate to the reader that he or she has never really loved properly before now:

If you then will read the story,
 First prepare you to be sorry,
 That you never knew till now,
 Either whom to love, or how. (13-16)

Such hyperbole is in keeping with the grand scale of the praise that the poet offers to Charis a few lines later, but at the same time it seems an odd advertisement for the wisdom being offered to the reader. The goal of teaching is typically to guide future conduct rather than to occasion regret for the past, but the answers that Jonson goes on to give to this thesis statement turn out to be not as pat as advertised. As the speaker's narrative continues, it becomes clear that, notwithstanding the didactic purpose stated in this first poem, the series will have its delightful moments.

The narrative proper begins with "How He Saw Her," the second poem of the sequence, which flows into "What He Suffered," its third poem, to describe the poet's first sight of the beautiful Charis and the unpleasant consequences of his falling in love. Stylistically, the two belong with the first poem of the series, although they do introduce a

few poetic flourishes as Charis makes her entrance in person into the narrative: “her look outflourished May: / And her dressing did out-brave / All the pride the fields then have” (2.2-4). The style of these introductory poems (the prologue and first act, in dramatic terms) is Jonson's typical plain style; it is a little more relaxed than the restrained formality of “The Sinner's Sacrifice” in its conversational tone and fast-moving dramatic action, but it generally adheres to the syntax and periods of “plain and customary” language. Exceptions occur for emphasis, most often by using line breaks or caesuras for dramatic effect as the poet's narrative picks up its pace: the poet is dismayed by Cupid's reaction to catching sight of Charis, “for away / Straight he ran, and durst not stay,” which puts the emphasis on the directness of Cupid's flight from Charis (2.5-16); later, Charis's glance takes the poet's volition from him “So that there, I stood a stone, / Mocked of all,” where the unnatural comma in the middle of the line abruptly jars the flow of the sentence, as if the reader shares the poet's astonishment for a moment (2.27-28). “How He Saw Her” ends with one of the more amusing self-portraits in literature, a product of the unfriendly laughter the poet sought to pre-empt in the opening lines of “His Excuse for Loving,” as one of the audience mocks the aged poet-lover as “Cupid's statue with a beard, / Or else one that played his ape, / In a Hercules his shape” (2.30-32). Jonson applies a similar description to himself elsewhere, in “My Picture Left in Scotland,” where another spurned poet-lover laments that his beloved has seen

My hundreds of grey hairs,
Told seven and forty years,
Read so much waist, as she cannot embrace

My mountain belly, and my rocky face

And all these through her eyes, have stopped her ears. (14-18)

In this, the poet's charming language has proven fruitless, and his "conscious fears" suggest that his unflattering physique must be the reason for his failed suit. In "How He Saw Her," though, our unfortunate poet has not even had the opportunity of wooing properly before Charis's glance turned him to stone, and the mockery he endures is not mere supposition. Trimpi makes a further connection to "the greatest lover of the Platonic tradition," that "old man of undignified appearance and unsavory personal habits, Socrates himself" (216). This is a contrast not unlike that of the poetic styles, between the ugly though sincere poet-lover and the beautiful but satirical maiden. In one way or another, this contrast drives the dramatic tension between the poet and Charis through the rest of the series.³

Our poet's small consolation is that Charis herself seems not to mock, but takes pity on him and eventually restores his use of his eyes and limbs – though, the poet says, this is in order "to hurt me more" (3.4). "What He Suffered" introduces an interesting element to their relationship; though it and the two preceding poems appear to be little more than a narrative frame for the more interesting poems that follow (for example, Trimpi devotes seventeen pages to "A Celebration of Charis" but spends only four of those on the first three poems, and only a short paragraph on "What He Suffered"), that frame is key for understanding what is going on below the surface of these poems. These

3 The distinction between "Jonson," "the poet," and "the speaker" may seem to be somewhat muddled, and this confusion is invited by Jonson himself, but I have maintained a distinction between "Jonson," the author, and "the poet," the speaker. The speaker identifies himself as a poet with features similar to Jonson's other self-portraits, expresses opinions voiced by Jonson elsewhere, and is addressed by Charis as "Ben" in the first line of "Her Man Described By Her Own Dictamen."

undercurrents, as we will see, have important consequences for how we are to interpret the various styles Jonson adopts for the different phases of the series. The poet is freed by Charis on the condition that he return Cupid's bow and arrow to him, which Cupid promptly turns on the unfortunate poet in accordance with Charis's wishes, though with more enthusiasm than she intended:

And (to gain her by his art)
 Left it sticking in my heart:
 Which when she beheld to bleed,
 She repented of the deed,
 And would fain have changed the fate,
 But the pity comes too late. (3.15-20)

As if Charis's astonishing glance were not enough, the poet suffers a real wound at Cupid's hands. Strangely, though, this wound does not have the effect that Cupid's arrows usually induce, because although the poet had already been smitten with love for Charis completely apart from Cupid's archery, when wounded, he plans to retaliate against her rather than continue to praise her. It seems that Jonson does not intend for the relationship between the poet, Cupid, and the beloved to conform entirely to type. The poet certainly does not plan to play Petrarch and sigh for love.

Loser-like, now, all my wreak
 Is, that I have leave to speak,
 And in either prose, or song,
 To revenge me with my tongue,

Which how dextrously I do,
 Hear and make example too. (3.21-26)

The character of this revenge is further complicated by the fact that Charis gives the poet permission to do his worst. We are thus led to question the introductory promise to teach whom and how to love: the story does not seem to be playing out the way that the poet intended; note that the tense changes here from past to present. We thus need to ask if the poems that follow still teach the reader to love Charis (or her like), and how their object might now be altered. Finally, we are left wondering whether the stated revenge is directed only at Charis, or if it also includes her accomplice, Cupid.

Sheldon Zitner suggests that critics have overlooked these lines at the cost of missing the point of the following poems, particularly of the immediately following “Her Triumph,” which has typically been read as “the best illustration of ‘the complex delicacy of Jonson’s metrical technique,’ a sympathetic embodiment of ‘the finest traditions of the mode’ of Elizabethan love poetry,” and “a union of classical, neoplatonic, and native elements,” among other praiseworthy things (“The Revenge on Charis,” 129). However, Zitner argues, “Her Triumph” (and by extension, the “Celebration” as a whole) is not a departure from the rest of Jonson’s work, but when understood in the context of the poet’s promise of revenge, is the kind of move that we have already seen elsewhere in places where Jonson has “exploited the verbal trappings of attitudes he objected to in order to demonstrate that they grew out of false estimates of experience” (134). Thus, the golden language that glorifies Charis and culminates in the ecstatic “O so white! O so soft! O so sweet is she!” is the poet’s own use of the kind of words he refers to when he

enjoins his hearers, “Do but mark her forehead's smoother / Than words that sooth her!” (4.30, 15-16). Zitner observes that “there is a creaturely limitation in a forehead which takes on the form of what flatters it,” and directs us to the passage in “Discoveries” where Jonson records what he thinks of this kind of poetry (133):

Others there are, that have no composition at all; but a kind of tuning, and rhyming fall, in what they write. It runs and slides, and only makes a sound. Women's poets they are called: as you have women's tailors.

They write a verse, as smooth, as soft, as cream;

In which there is no torrent, nor scarce stream

You may sound these wits, and find the depth of them, with your middle finger. They are cream-bowl, or but puddle deep. (396)

Jonson's language in “Her Triumph” is not meant to the credit of either a gilded style or its uncritical auditors. However, the poet's revenge is two-part. Trimpi interprets lines 17-20 in Neoplatonic terms, so that the light of Charis's eyes is “easily associated with the divine light emanating from God, which is responsible for the harmonious proportion of parts that is called beautiful,” the “gain” and “good” in the last line of that stanza, but Zitner connects them with a thread of mutability running through the poem (219). He points out that the lily and the snow are both recommended to the hearer before they are spoiled or “smutched,” and the briar bud and burning nard are both similarly short-lived. Zitner concludes that the poet's promised revenge takes the form of “a reminder of the transience that makes physical beauty a triumph; and it is dextrous because Jonson does not merely rattle the skull of *memento mori* or insist on the sourness of new grapes” (136).⁴

⁴ Zitner goes on to answer two objections to his reading of Jonson's rhetoric and of his ideas. Though he

Considering the poet's description of Charis before he received his wound – she proved such a “mark of glory” that even Cupid was afraid (2.8) – this praise is not necessarily undeserved. Its hyperbole is appropriate to the genre of eloquent love poetry, and if the poet's initial valuation of Charis was valid, she is an appropriate addressee. However, the reminder of transience that Zitner reads in “Her Triumph” effectively calls our attention to the fact that this is hyperbole, something that reflects as much on the tendency of the eloquent style to lack any real depth as it does on Charis's inevitable loss of her beauty.

As the sequence progresses, the poet's attitude toward Charis and the passing beauty she represents does not become any less complicated. Despite his promise of revenge, the poet defends his beloved in the highest terms in “His Discourse with Cupid,” but this dialogue is also complicated by its rhetorical context, since it is a conversation the poet reports to Charis. In it, the divine attributes the poet has ascribed to Charis are drawn from the poetry he has been working on, presumably written in the same strain as “Her Triumph”; to this beauty the poet adds wisdom, climaxing his praise of her to Cupid with a comparison to not one, but three goddesses:

For this beauty yet doth hide,
 Something more than thou hast spied.
 Outward grace weak love beguiles:
 She is Venus, when she smiles,
 But she's Juno, when she walks,
 And Minerva, when she talks. (5.49-54)

allows that Jonson may suggest Neoplatonic values, he maintains that the realistic elements of the “Celebration” as a whole, the context of promised revenge, and the effect of the third stanza together form a reminder that “the [supernal] meanings are not the emblems themselves which, having a life of their own, must also have a death” (140).

Here the poet acknowledges that outward beauty (such as he praised in “Her Triumph”) attracts “weak love,” personified by Cupid, a symbol of courtly love poetry, but what he values in Charis goes beyond her smiles to her stateliness and wisdom. Despite the poet's previous double-edged praise of her, here we see that she is indeed worthy of his attentions by Jonson's standards: her beauty, he tells Cupid, is “the least / Of her good” (5.43-44). This recuperates the poet's promise to show his readers who to love, but also suggests that Charis is quite capable of understanding how the poet is going about his revenge.

The next two poems, “Claiming a Second Kiss by Desert” and “Begging Another, on Colour of Mending the Former,” seem to be addressed to Charis only. In the first of these two, it appears that she has given the poet a kiss, and the poet suggests several flattering scenarios about how Charis was viewed by the rest of the company at a wedding later in the day, with the hope of earning a second:

Guess of these, which is the true;
 And, if such a verse as this,
 May not claim another kiss. (6.34-36)

The implication is that the poet means to describe Charis as the most beautiful lady in every part of the day – in lines six and seven he refers to bets that he and his muse laid on her beauty, but here he is betting quite safely: each of the choices he offers her are “true.” Though how much of his praise is truth and how much flattery may be impossible to tell (he claims that the entire court shared his opinion, suggesting its truth, but none of the court are present to corroborate it), at bottom the poet is simply performing courtly love.

Without witnesses it is impossible to say whether the poet's praise is objective, but in terms of their relationship, the important part, the poet's opinion of Charis, is all we have to go on: while the style of his verse is meant to win her favour, its basic matter is honest, since his admiration of her is the reason that the poet desires her favour in the first place. In a private address such as this, the poet's primary gain will be in terms of their private relationship – as witnessed by his eliciting a private response in the form of a kiss. (That they are in private is evident from the second part of his appeal, in the next poem, where he assures her “here's none to spy, or see” [7.3].) Finally, after all, if this is mere flattery, the poet has forfeited any right to present himself as a model lover, and Jonson's project to teach his reader how to love is a failure.

Thus, regardless of the revenge that he might have set out to take in public, the poet's love for Charis clearly continues unabated in private – and Charis does not find his suit altogether disagreeable, since the next poem seems to follow immediately with the poet's earnest appeal “for Love's sake, kiss me once again” (7.1). All this talk of kissing demonstrates that, much as the poet, and Jonson behind him, is interested in Charis's abstract virtues, they are not purely Platonic lovers. It also showcases Jonson's poet using his skill in yet another context, combining a straighter version of his earlier eloquence with the impudence we expect from “Jack” Donne, as when he promises that “I'll taste as lightly as the bee, / That doth but touch his flower, and flies away” (7.5-6).

Shifting tones and dramatic contexts again, in “Urging Her of a Promise” the poet shows himself to be as capable a mocker as the one that labelled him “Cupid's statue with a beard,” as he provokes Charis into settling the company's uncertainty about her choice

in love by “speaking her man.” In “Her Man Described by Her Own Dictamen,” Charis initially replies in a similar vein, choosing the kinds of attributes that run contrary to those Jonson values – as Trimpi points out, “she is teasing Jonson, for she knows that no qualities could irritate him more than these,” but she eventually arrives at the kind of qualities for a lover that Jonson would recognize as valuable (223). As she moves into this more serious part of her reply, though she maintains the gracefulness of her speech, she leaves off the similes with which she had illustrated the teasing attributes of her ideal, and states her requirements more plainly.

Valiant he should be as fire,
 Showing danger more than ire;
 Bounteous as the clouds to earth;
 And honest as his birth.
 All his actions to be such,
 As to do no thing too much. (41-46)

Both Charis and Jonson are performing to an audience in the immediate dramatic context of a question of love as well as to Jonson's readers.⁵ In her use of imagery and satire Charis shows herself to be as capable of manipulating language as the poet, and in the serious conclusion to her “dictamen” she displays the kind of good judgement for which the poet had earlier praised her to Cupid. This poem, and Charis's obvious contrast with the shallowness of the anonymous lady privileged with the last word in the sequence, prompts the reader to complete a retrospective reassessment of the relationship between

⁵ See Trimpi 221-225 for a discussion of “Her Man Described by Her Own Dictamen” as a *discorsi* on the subject of love.

the poet and Charis. If we are right to read Charis's desire for noble blood and French fashions as a lighthearted dig at her poet, and the virtues she names in the second part of her speech as evidence of having deserved Jonson's praise, it seems that in the end we really have been shown who to love. We are left to answer for ourselves what the real extent of the poet's revenge was – whether it was limited to linguistic performance or not – and whether Charis is finally rejecting or tacitly accepting the poet through her depiction of the ideal lover.

Jonson may not obviously be blending the two styles into one in “A Celebration of Charis,” but he certainly does employ them in tandem, partly to criticize the affectation of courtly eloquence, but also to colour the eloquent mode through a rhetorical context constructed by the plain. This strategy of embedding one style in another for contrast, which Jonson employs in terms of plain and eloquent styles as well as serious and comic tones, as we have seen, is one that is indicated by Augustine when he comes to comparing the “three manners” of speech:

It is important to consider what style should be used to vary what other style, and what style should be employed in specific places . . . And it is within the power of the speaker that he say some things in the subdued style which might be spoken in the grand style so that those things which are spoken in the grand style may seem more grand by comparison and be rendered more luminous as if by shadows. (159)

The opposite is also true, that those things which are spoken in the subdued style may seem more simple; the key point is that the styles work together under a guiding principle

that makes each of them function differently from the normal classical divisions, the roots of the dichotomy between plain and eloquent in sixteenth century England. The way that the poet uses his eloquence to be revenged on Charis and to advance his suit in more than Platonic ways means that we cannot take the graceful heights of language in "A Celebration of Charis" at their face value as conventional eloquence. Charis's use of somewhat elevated language to communicate, not only her mockery of the aged poet-lover, but also her serious judgement in choosing the characteristics of her ideal lover leaves space for the use of delightful language when it is allied to good sense. The allusive personification of the plain and golden styles in the forms of the poet-lover and Charis and their complicated relationship throughout the sequence contribute to its verdict on style, since Charis is praised for her beauty as well as for her wisdom, and the poet demonstrates that eloquence can be turned to argument's use.

The "Poems of Devotion" display a similarly deliberate use of style, but it seems that with their weightier subject matter, Jonson cannot afford to be misunderstood. He therefore confines himself to working within the conventions of the plain style, though the contrast between "The Sinner's Sacrifice" and "A Hymn to God the Father" displays what Jonson is capable of doing even within that tradition when he applies his subtlety to its conventions. However, when dealing with a courtly love affair, even with the sober overarching purpose of teaching his readers how to love, Jonson is on different ground and can allow himself a freer range of stylistic and rhetorical devices. In fact, as we have seen, "A Celebration of Charis" must draw on both the plain and eloquent styles to achieve its effects, and its readers must be prepared to follow the poet's moves carefully to

avoid being caught in his revenge. It seems that Jonson's claim to offer his reader "works of diverse nature, and matter congested" is more deliberate than might initially seem. The *OED* gives the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sense of "congested" as "heaped together; accumulated," and while the "Poems of Devotion" are a comparatively loose collection, the way that Jonson uses the stylistic diversity of "A Celebration of Charis" demonstrates his ability to put that congestion to meaningful purpose. In this way, Jonson takes a vital step forward: by demonstrating that a serious poet can have a legitimate use for the eloquent style, especially when it incorporates elements of the plain style or is used alongside it, he opens the way toward a further amalgamation of the old styles.

Chapter 3 – Donne

Beyond Borders: Testing the Limits of Conventional Expression

Although Ben Jonson and John Donne were contemporaries, they stand in slightly different relation to the Elizabethan styles that defined the conventions of their time. As a court-poet-turned-preacher, Donne had occasion to write for the traditional audiences of both styles, and one might therefore expect to find a clear distinction between plainness and eloquence in his work, varying according to his audience. However, while it is possible to divide his work between secular and sacred subjects, it resists any easy division into the plain and eloquent styles; in terms of the response to Elizabethan style, Donne follows Jonson's "works of a diverse nature, and matter congested," in further combining the two styles in his poetry ("Underwoods" 122). The poems I have chosen are representative of two significant places where Donne works with the conventions of the plain and eloquent styles: the religious devotion of the *Holy Sonnets* is the traditional material of the plain style, while the "Valediction" poems are the lover's parting address to his beloved in the eloquent style. In these poems it is clear that Donne both adopts and adapts qualities that belong to the two styles, so my question will be to examine more closely how he does so, considering whether *Holy Sonnets* 5 and 7 are properly defined by

the plain style or “A Valediction: Of my Name in the Window” by the eloquent, and in what ways these poems go beyond the boundaries of their respective traditions. Thus, it is not my intention to broadly characterize Donne's style, but by asking what these poems suggest about the appropriate manner(s) for religious and romantic subjects, to place him in relation to the two poles of Elizabethan stylistic convention on their traditional ground.

Douglas Peterson sees Donne as the height of the development of the English plain style, as indicated by the title of his work, *The English Lyric from Wyatt to Donne*. Peterson acknowledges that Donne “is indebted as a love poet to the courtly tradition for various themes and conventions,” but maintains that “with respect to manner and attitude his major antecedents are to be found in the tradition of the plain style” (285). He apparently considers the plain-style ancestry of Donne's devotional verse to be nearly self-evident, and dispatches this point in several pages, concluding that “the *Holy Sonnets* by observing the stylistic norms recommended in the treatises on meditation, preserve the old straightforward and unadorned manner of the tradition of the plain style” (334). Peterson then focuses the remainder of his attention on the *Holy Sonnets* chiefly on demonstrating their unity as a group of penitential lyrics, a task not directly of interest here. However, the brevity of Peterson's treatment of the plain style of the *Holy Sonnets* leaves something to be desired, and suggests a wider critical assumption about Donne's use of style in the sonnets. Peterson quotes a representative manual on the “Art of Meditation” from Louis Martz's study of meditative poetry,⁶ Edward Dawson's *Practical Methode of Meditation*, where Dawson “advises that in prayer the novitiate 'talke with God as a servant with his Maister, as a sonne with his Father, as one friend with another, as a

6 *The Meditative Poem: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Verse*. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1963.

spouse with her beloved bridgrome, or as a guilty prisoner with his Judge" (334). The staggering variety of potentially appropriate styles indicated by this list (Jonson's advice in the "Discoveries" on letter-writing between friends alone also allows a wide range of tones) renders Peterson's conclusion unsatisfactory: he may be correct that the *Holy Sonnets* "preserve the old straightforward and unadorned manner" of the plain style, but this is not necessarily true due to the suggested cause (334). It is the danger of making this kind of critical assumption that underscores the need to read the style of the *Holy Sonnets* more carefully, and the importance of asking whether or to what extent they can be properly defined by the plain style.

When it comes to Donne's love poetry, things do look up; Peterson recognizes that the metaphorical nature of Donne's poems seem to distance them from the plain style, but points out that "the plain style was never identified by a lack of trope but rather by its avoidance of decorative trope" (288). As with the *Holy Sonnets*, in classifying the *Songs and Sonnets* as plain-style, Peterson is more interested in their content than their form:

The fact that the Donnean conceit usually has, as Leonard Unger has shown, a function within an argumentative, or 'conceptual,' structure aligns Donne with the plain stylists, who freely use metaphor as a figure of thought, even though the tradition of the plain style contains nothing in the way of specific stylistic precedent for it. (288-289)

Discussing Donne's philosophy of love and his rejection of Neo-Platonism occupies the centre of Peterson's attention more than teasing out the formal elements of the *Songs and Sonnets*. His premise is apparently that establishing the anti-courtly sense of Donne's

poetry is sufficient to place it in the plain style, and he passes briefly over places that he identifies as Donne's wittiest moments. In this way, although he develops a fairly comprehensive understanding of what he characterizes as Donne's "anti-courtly sentiment," the establishment of this sentiment as context for every poem in the *Songs and Sonnets* is apparently sufficient proof that Donne "is not engaging in a virtuoso display of wit in such poems as 'The Sunne Rising,'" and little further attention is necessary to carry this point (295).

Peterson can successfully place the *Songs and Sonnets* outside the excesses of the eloquent style, but without meeting in more detail the implicit difficulty for his argument posed by Donne's prolific and occasionally gratuitous wit, he cannot convincingly establish them as wholly plain. Reading the "Valediction" poems more closely, I address the question of how Donne interacts with the two stylistic traditions, and show in greater detail how his stylistic decisions colour his argument, paying particular attention to the relationship between their forms and content, and whether they can be accurately characterized by either set of stylistic conventions. In his conclusion Peterson describes the new version of the plain style developed by the later authors of his study, which often used "the tropes, schemes, and rhythms of the eloquent," though still with the sense of "rejecting ornament and rhetorical affectation as not pertaining to the truth" (355-356). If this statement accurately describes Donne's poetry, we can expect to see a kind of evolved plain style, where the devices of eloquence appear in the service of argument. The concerns of the plain style would remain central, including a mistrust of language's potential to obscure truth, but they might animate a more complex, allusive use of

language that demands closer attention than earlier plain-style poetry.

The *Holy Sonnets*: “A little world made cunningly”

The penitential attitude of the *Holy Sonnets* would place them by default in the plain tradition. Rather than evincing the intricate conceits and wordplay of many of the *Songs and Sonnets*, the *Holy Sonnets* are generally characterized by a simpler use of language, though they are not without such well-known figures of thought as the “little world made cunningly” (5.1), dramatic openings like the stirring command “At the round earth's imagined corners, blow / Your trumpets, angels,” (7.1-2), and equally dramatic denouements such as that of Sonnet 10: “One short sleep past, we wake eternally, / And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die” (10.13-14). These are places where Donne's stylistic choices catch our attention and delight us as much, if not more, than they teach. They are also elements of the sonnets that excite critical attention, in large part because understanding them is key to an effective interpretation of each poem as a whole. To better understand how these evidently remarkable devices act on their respective poems, and ultimately to evaluate where they might stand in relation to the tradition of the plain style, two of the *Holy Sonnets* are particularly useful in the way they exhibit Donne's use of figures of thought as well as rhetorically effective dramatic scenes.

The first of these is Sonnet 5:

I am a little world made cunningly
 Of elements, and an angelic sprite,
 But black sin hath betrayed to endless night

My world's both parts, and, oh, both parts must die.
 You which beyond that heaven which was most high
 Have found new spheres, and of new lands can write,
 Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might
 Drown my world with my weeping earnestly,
 Or wash it if it must be drowned no more:
 But oh it must be burnt; alas the fire
 Of lust and envy have burnt it heretofore,
 And made it fouler; let their flames retire,
 And burn me O Lord, with a fiery zeal
 Of thee and thy house, which doth in eating heal. (310-311)

The opening lines of the sonnet introduce it as one shaped by the poet's interest in natural philosophy. The composition of the speaker as a world made of "elements, and an angelic sprite" draws from the Platonic conception of the human being made up of an earthy body and heavenly soul, while Donne later refers to the cutting-edge science of astronomy that has begun to explore "beyond that heaven which was most high" (2, 5). The theme of penitence and the poet's desire to be cleansed of his sin are central to the poem; in this sense, it is driven by its content. Its diction is relatively uncomplicated, and many lines are composed primarily of single-syllable words; its three sections move from the opening conceit through the astronomical references to the poet's desire to be refined by holy fire, a movement from ontology to natural philosophy to penitence, from poetic conceit to simplicity.

Formally, the poem adheres to conventions of the sonnet, rhyming *abba abba cdcd ee*, and employing iambic pentameter with the occasional ordinary variation of a substitution of a trochee in the second foot (e.g. “But black sin hath betrayed to endless night,” 3); such variation here follows normal speech patterns, and the emphases fall on significant words in each line. The major exception occurs in the penultimate line, which introduces a second trochaic substitution in the third foot, though still continuing the same pattern of emphasis on significant words:

- / / / / - - / - /

And burn me O Lord, with a fiery zeal

The effect is first to underline the poet's need to be refined, because until this point he has referred to himself in terms of being a “little world”; here he discards the mediating conceit in the fervency of his appeal: “burn *me*, O Lord.” The secondary effect focuses the line on the second substitution, the object of his appeal. In restating the poet's cry I added a comma to increase the emphasis on “me” for illustration, but the fall of emphases in the line suggests the possibility of an unpunctuated caesura there, with the sense of setting the “O Lord” apart. The last line returns to straight iambic pentameter except for the addition of an eleventh syllable, an unstressed “and” in the line's first half. Although somewhat complicated, these irregularities maintain the rhythm of ordinary speech patterns, and combined with the balanced phrases of the final couplet, give the poet's appeal to God a heightened evenness and grace. Thus, taken together with the content of the sonnet stated broadly, so far Sonnet 5 is clearly at home in the plain style tradition.

The first quatrain establishes the foundation for the rest of the poem with the

image of the “little world made cunningly,” an idea that remains implicitly at the centre of his thought as he subjects it first to water, then to fire (1). By delaying the preposition “of” until the second line, Donne seems initially to be heading toward the act of creation and the person of the Creator, but he then redirects our attention back earth- or Donne-ward, leaving the implied Creator behind in the residue of the adverb, to rush into the poet's real concern, the fate of that cunningly made creation.

I am a little world made cunningly
 Of elements, and an angelic sprite,
 But black sin hath betrayed to endless night
 My world's both parts, and, oh, both parts must die. (1-4)

The unfaithful subject in this sentence is not the poet – he is a passive body, first made and now betrayed – but “black sin,” emphatically underlined by the trochee in the second position, which has plunged not “me” or “myself” but “my world” into “endless night.” This introduces the relationship between the poet's self and the two-part world that composes him, an ambiguous space, but one that both implicitly rejects the neo-Platonic location of the self in the “angelic sprite” imprisoned in an elemental body, and allows the poet to interact with that little world in describing his search for sanctification. This insistence on a two-part world, spiritual and physical, is the same principle at the heart of Augustine's concept of Christian style, though here applied to the poet's self. The heavenly and earthly, the high and the low, are inextricably conjoined in the Christian story of God become man, and the implications of the Incarnation affect both language and what it means to be human. Whether Donne extends this principle to language, as

Augustine does, may be, but he knows how it applies to his self: the risk of detachment by the end of this quatrain is prevented with a word, in the sigh interjected by the poet in the fourth line that reminds his readers of what it means to him that the entirety of his self has been plunged into endless night.

From the depth of this darkness the poet raises his attention to the heavens. His imaginative mode shifts somewhat bewilderingly, moving from the level of the cunningly made little world to an apostrophe addressed to an astronomer, then fetching “new seas” from the “new spheres” discovered by astronomy, which the poet proposes to cry from his eyes to drown his world. Each of these is clearly impossible in reality, but taken together their transitions challenge even the power of imagination to integrate into a whole. These transitions force the reader to accept the way that Donne draws an essential piece from each of these disparate elements to combine them into a meaningful expression of the lengths to which the poet must go in his effort to escape his sin.

You which beyond that heaven which was most high
 Have found new spheres, and of new lands can write,
 Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might
 Drown my world with my weeping earnestly,
 Or wash it if it must be drowned no more. (5-9)

The fifth line begins the quatrain with a syntactical suspension, dividing the subject “you” from its predicate “have found new spheres” with a pair of relative clauses, with the effect of foregrounding where the exploring astronomer has gone. The sixth line inverts the syntax of its second phrase to set up a neat chiasmus, with the new spheres and lands at

the centre, surrounded by the astronomers' activity. These two lines deviate somewhat from ordinary speech patterns, but not without a sensible purpose, since they focus the reader's attention on the essential part of the imaginative flight of the quatrain.

The poet's new tears are to be brought for him from out of this world, from beyond the traditional dwelling place of God (a connection further suggested by the phrase "most high," which in the language of the King James Version of the Bible frequently refers to God). The adventures of natural philosophy beyond the Ptolemaic universe are of more particular interest to critics discussing Donne's use of the "new philosophy," but here is it enough to record the impression of fetching new, unused water from other worlds – this point is emphasized by the accent on "new seas" in line 7. The ninth line provides the key to understanding what Donne is aiming at in this section, which is why it is useful to include it with the second quatrain in the quotation above: God drowned the Earth with the Flood in response to the overwhelming sinfulness of its inhabitants, and promised Noah that the Flood would never be repeated. It seems that even though the poet is imaginatively able to access the floodgates beyond heaven, so to speak, he is similarly unable to repeat the Flood to deal with the sin of his little world. Although this section seems to be dominated by its references to natural philosophy, it in fact depends on its Biblical allusion, which is essential for its effectiveness as part of this sonnet as devotional lyric. Although the potential disconnection of the imaginative leaps through this section is still present, it does not derail the poem.

As the first apocalyptic response to sin, an event as ultimately ineffective for the poet as washing with water, the Flood transitions naturally to the purifying fire that is the

subject of the last third of the poem. The effects of lust and envy have so ruined the poet's world that he appeals to God to fight fire with fire, replacing the flames of sin with "a fiery zeal / Of thee and thy house" (13-14). It is easy to pass over the indefinite article here, but such an oversight makes a significant difference for the reading of these lines. If the poet is burned by "the zeal of the Lord,"⁷ he remains passive (as he was when "betrayed to endless night," 3) while his impurities are burned away as if by flames issuing from God's temple. However, he prays to be burnt "with a fiery zeal," which may originate outside him in God's fire, but as that zeal takes hold of him and begins to generate its own flames, the zeal itself begins to belong to him.

But oh it must be burnt; alas the fire
 Of lust and envy have burnt it heretofore,
 And made it fouler; let their flames retire,
 And burn me O Lord, with a fiery zeal
 Of thee and thy house, which doth in eating heal. (10-14)

In this way, the poet finally becomes an active subject himself, although he as yet only looks forward to this. The Biblical reference here is to Psalm 69:9, "For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up," a verse later applied to Christ's actions by His disciples.⁸ This reading makes sense with the second layer of reference in the final phrase: in the context of "thee and thy house," the activity that "doth in eating heal" is Communion (14).

Communion involves the receipt of the bread and wine, representative of Christ, which become part of the body of the believer when eaten, and contribute to the process of his

⁷ A common Biblical phrase; e.g. Isaiah 9:7, "The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this."

⁸ Referring to the episode when Jesus expelled the moneychangers from the temple courts (John 2:13-17).

or her sanctification, a process that is visible in their actions. The allusion suggests that here the poet would have the tables turned and he himself be consumed, though with the same result. The more striking part of the image of a world entirely burned with purifying fire refers to Judgement Day, but since the poet evidently hopes to be healed by the process (similarly as through Communion) rather than burned away and remade (however cunningly), it is possible that Donne had in mind I Corinthians 3:15, which reads, "If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire."

The poem's locus of reference thus shifts from beginning to end, from neo-Platonism to the new philosophy to a complex series of Biblical allusions. Although its diction and rhythm are fairly simple, the abrupt shifts of imaginative scale and focus and the depth of the Biblical allusions in the latter part of this poem make it challenging. In its content and attitude it clearly belongs to the plain-style tradition, but it demands more of its reader for comprehension than is in keeping with the didactic purpose of earlier plain-style religious poetry. Because the overriding goal of that poetic form was the clear communication of a particular truth, it could not afford much ambiguous or challenging language lest any reader miss its meaning and the poem fail on that fundamental level. In Donne's sonnet, however, the meaning of the poem is inextricably linked to its poetic language: its stylistic complexity cannot be merely divorced from its sense. The meaning of lines 5-9 would not become clearer by rephrasing them more simply, and the poem would only become more difficult by altering the language of the final lines. A prose rendition of this sonnet could gain clarity only by expanding Donne's poetic devices, not

by simply transcribing them into prosaic language. It might thus be more accurate to describe the poem as embodying a sort of evolved plain style, since several elements of the eloquent appear as indispensable parts in the service of devotional practice. It is not dissimilar from how Augustine describes the style of Scripture, as in the passage Auerbach quotes: "Those clear truths it contains it speaks without subterfuge, like an old friend, to the hearts of learned and unlearned alike. But even the truths which it hides in mysteries are not couched in such lofty style that a slow, uncultivated mind would not dare to approach them" (50). There are moments of both clarity and mystery in what remains a plain poem at bottom, so it seems that in pushing the limits of the plain style for devotional poetry, Donne arrives (deliberately or otherwise) at the same place as Augustine in his pushing the limits of classical style for Christian rhetoric.

In Sonnet 7, "At the round earth's imagined corners," we find Donne orchestrating his effects on an even grander scale. Sonnet 5 moves from the charming conceit of "a little world made cunningly" through the heavens down to the arresting earnestness of the poet's final prayer, perhaps impressing the attentive reader with its complex references, but it remains comparatively even in tone across these transitions.

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow
 Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
 From death, you numberless infinities
 Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go,
 All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,
 All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,

Despair, law, chance, hath slain, and you whose eyes,
 Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe.
 But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space
 For, if above all these, my sins abound,
 'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace,
 When we are there; here on this lowly ground,
 Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
 As if thou hadst sealed my pardon, with thy blood. (311-312)

Sonnet 7 opens with the blast of angelic trumpets, as the poet summons the dead of all the ages to rise, then suddenly turns at the ninth line from this apocalyptic vision to a meditation on the poet's need for grace, emphasizing his sober penitence by contrast to the fireworks of the octave. Stylistically, the descent from the furious heavenly scene throws the simplicity of the "lowly ground" into sharp relief, using the drama of its eloquence to call attention to the poet's change of style. The first phrase of the turn also shifts the rhetorical context of the poem as, in addressing his Lord, the poet reveals that the vision of the octave has been an imaginative construct on his own part; he has no actual power over angels or corpses, and in fact the scene he invoked was of an event he wishes delayed. By asking his Lord that the dead be allowed to remain asleep, he implicitly acknowledges that what has preceded this request has not actually made anything happen: the timing of Judgement Day is the Lord's prerogative. This might lead us to ask what the point was of the scale of the first part of the poem – obviously it is more than a complicated set of antecedents to "them," "these," and "there." Especially in the context

of a penitential lyric, the octave seems to lack the meaningfulness of the sestet. To put it another way: what justifies the presence of this conspicuously eloquent passage in a *Holy Sonnet*? The answer, I would argue, has to do with how it constructs a stylistic contrast that deepens the sense of the sestet.

As in Sonnet 5, this sonnet leads up to an appeal to God by the poet, and as in Sonnet 5, here the force of that appeal is derived from what precedes it. The urgency and earnestness of the poet's need for forgiveness are revealed by contrast with the day of judgement and its grandeur, a contrast epitomized in the twelfth line's juxtaposition of "there" and "here." The caesura, reinforced by a semi-colon, emphasizes that in the moment of the poem, "there" is imagined, while the "here" is the urgent present. The poet calls "here" "this lowly ground," but need not actually describe it: the point is that it is sufficiently defined by contrast with the glory and activity of the heavenly scene. The poet also uses this contrast to give shape to his awareness of his own sin in line 10, where the antecedent to "all these" is the impressively exact list of the dead in the second quatrain,

All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,
 All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
 Despair, law, chance, hath slain, and you whose eyes,
 Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe. (5-8)

The place where the poet seems to be kneeling is far below the glory of heaven, while his sins abound above those of the heavenly multitude. The Biblical reference here is to I Timothy 1:15, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus

came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief.” The grand style of the octave is thus used to emphasize both the great and small things in the sestet, precisely as Augustine would have it. Augustine's concept of the Christian sublime is also present, in the juxtaposition of “there” and “here,” since while the distance between heaven and earth is emphasized by the stylistic shift, it is bridged by the omnipresence of God. The heavenly drama acted out by “numberless infinities” is no more weighty than the earthly one, with its two players.

The abrupt stylistic change is clearly signalled to the reader in the turn at line 9, which reminds us that Donne's stylistic choices are deliberate and made in full awareness of the traditional conventions of style. However, as in Sonnet 5, these are conventions he does not merely accept, but uses: it would be an equal mistake to expect transparency in the last six lines as it would be to dismiss the grandeur of the first eight lines as poetic posturing. The best example of the sestet's complexity is seen in the poem's final couplet, which has perplexed many of its interpreters.

Teach me how to repent; for that's as good

As if thou hadst sealed my pardon, with thy blood. (13-14)

Sheldon Zitner does an excellent job surveying the various readings of these lines and their respective difficulties, which he summarizes beginning with Helen Gardner's relatively straightforward reading:

Dame Helen (p. 68) glosses the couplet as follows: 'True repentance is a guarantee that the general pardon purchased by Christ's blood is sealed to a man individually.' This illuminates the meaning that perhaps *ought* to be

primary in these lines, but it does not deal (as perhaps no paraphrase could), with the ambiguities and tone of Donne's statement. It is these rather than the doctrinal point which create problems in interpretation, and – for some readers – the sense that the sonnet is most problematical where it should be the clearest. (“Rhetoric and Doctrine in Donne's Holy Sonnet IV,” 72)

A little later Zitner mentions what might be the key to understanding the couplet, that “the poem seems to conclude as it began,” although he does not develop the idea as far as he could (72-73). Those who find Gardner's gloss inadequate are in fact finding that the ordinary method of interpreting the plain style is inadequate to this couplet, something that should not surprise in light of the way Donne combines qualities of the plain and eloquent. In the opening line of the poem Donne presents a logical contradiction in “the round earth's imagined corners,” but one that captures the Biblical image from the book of Revelation of four angelic trumpeters announcing the apocalypse from the earth's corners. It is impossible, yet aptly true to the Biblical description, a poetic image that we can easily appreciate in the context of the eloquent style. The last lines do the same thing, but with the much more significant topic of justification. Zitner points out that, doctrinally speaking, “the Donne of the sermons would probably not have entertained the idea that repentance was as efficacious as Christ's sacrifice,” but nevertheless he believed that repentance and grace must work together (73). It is the impossibility of this relationship that pushes the poet to harness the ambiguity available in the eloquent style to express a spiritual truth beyond the reach of purely denotative language.

The theological truth the poet addresses is a paradox, like the round earth with its corners. The poet's repentance is essential for his salvation: without repentance he will never be acquitted on Judgement Day. At the same time, even that repentance (and the teaching that instilled it) is the product of the "abundance of thy grace" (11). Grace does not need to be augmented by repentance, yet repentance is absolutely necessary. The difficulty of these two lines lies in large part in the way Donne divides and even opposes these two elements of salvation. On its own, the proposition "repentance is as good as pardon by grace" would be logically absurd to Donne and a perhaps largely Calvinist Protestant audience, who might have replied that repentance is worthless unless it is preceded by grace. In fact, they would find the entire comparison absurd, since the hypothetical act to which repentance is being compared is the essence of the Christian faith. The believer would be brought up short here – "What do you mean, 'as good / as if thou hadst sealed my pardon'?" What repentance is "as good as" *has already happened*, and has already accomplished what the poet seeks to gain through repentance. By placing repentance and grace in this rhetorical comparison, Donne can assert the necessity and even efficacy of repentance without detracting from the efficacy of grace to do so. The value of repentance in the proposition is wholly derived from the value of grace, but the poet has yet to learn repentance, while he subtly reminds the reader (and himself) that abundant grace has already been secured for him.

In Sonnet 7, then, as in Sonnet 5, it is impossible to arrive at a satisfying reading without employing the kind of interpretive methods demanded by the eloquent style. Sensitivity to the use of figures of thought and of speech (*i.e.* poetic imagery, rhythm, and

rhetoric) deepens our appreciation of these sonnets' meaning, and not merely of Donne's wit, because the qualities of the eloquent style are intermingled with the concerns of the plain style. At the same time, the centrality of what each poem has to teach concerning grace, repentance, and the awareness of coming judgement demands that the reader also make use of the interpretive methods of the plain style, or else miss the heart of the poem. While the classical virtues of the plain style are present, the essential quality of these poems is due to the combination of plainness and eloquence; their delightful style is an indispensable instrument for teaching an attitude of the heart. By thus drawing on both styles, Donne pushes the devotional lyric beyond the conventional boundaries of expression, in both form and content.

The *Songs and Sonnets*: “No means our firm substantial love to keep”

The old contrast between the reverend John Donne and the rakish Jack Donne is a somewhat tired cliché, but it does originate in at least one reasonable observation, that there is a striking difference between the style and focus of Donne's devotional poetry and those of his love poetry. In terms of the present discussion of style, the cliché would read Jack Donne as a witty, eloquent, aspiring court poet, and John Donne as a sober, plain, moral poet, whose occasional moments of wit represent flashes of his youthful wit. One of the consequences of correcting the assumed chronology of Donne's poetry is that those two styles can no longer be accounted for as belonging to two distinct periods of his life. The question prompted here, then, is whether there is consistency in Donne's stylistic practice across the variety of his poetic works. Do the qualities of eloquence evident in

the *Holy Sonnets* have an analogous plainness in the romantic poems of the *Songs and Sonnets*? Since the “Valediction” poems clearly belong to the eloquent, as works commemorating a lovers' parting, they furnish an appropriate test field for this discussion. Like “A Celebration of Charis,” they occupy a deliberately constructed rhetorical context that places the poet and his beloved in dialogue about the nature of their relationship; as Dwight Cathcart observes about “A Valediction: Of my Name in the Window,” “the poem arises out of a coming together of two people who disagree over ways to act” (27). The question is whether the poem is really concerned with how and whom one ought to love – like “A Celebration of Charis” – or whether it is primarily an arena for Donne to show off how many inventive allusions he can draw from a single image.

“A Valediction: Of my Name in the Window” certainly does not lack for clever conceit, and the way that we are struck by the inventiveness of its speaker is a mark of a successfully eloquent poem. It is somewhat more flowing and less stylistically dense than, for example, the sonnets discussed above, so its basic concerns are relatively straightforward in considering how the poet's beloved ought to conduct herself in his absence and what might happen to love when two lovers are parted. To evaluate the poem in terms of the plain and eloquent styles, it is, of course, necessary to investigate its content more closely in order to discover the presence (or absence) of the plain style's sense. This is how Peterson approaches the poem: in the context of a discussion of Donne's anti-Platonism, he works through its metaphors to reveal the argument that “whatever the metaphysical arguments and means available to demonstrate that parting lovers have no cause to fear inconstancy, it is finally only the inexplicable 'magique' of

love that can provide any such guarantee” (321). It is not enough, however, to demonstrate the “Valediction”’s plainness simply to find meaningfulness in its metaphors, especially when that meaning is that love can be preserved through proper remembering of a lover, guided and intensified by metaphor – a conclusion rather more appropriate to the eloquent style. There is more to be considered in this poem, not least the dramatic relationship between the two lovers which, as Cathcart points out, provides the conflict and so the thrust of the poem. That interaction provides the rhetorical context in which the poem must be read, in much the same way that the fascinating interplay between Jonson and Charis has a profound effect on the sense of “A Celebration of Charis.”

Like the sonnets, for the most part “A Valediction: Of my Name in the Window” uses normal syntax and diction – “emparadised” in line 26 and perhaps the Latinate “superscribing” in line 57 are the exceptions to the rule of ordinary language. In keeping with its rhetorical context as an extended apostrophe, it flows more smoothly than the comparatively dense sonnets, as if designed to be spoken as much as read. Even the enjambed stanzas are relatively self-contained thought units, and while the poem’s sentences have multiple clauses (such as stanzas six and seven, which have only one full stop between them), the progression from phrase to phrase is straightforward, and commas and line endings break up the long periods. The challenge to understanding the poem comes not from its language, but from the inventive way Donne develops its conceit – a characterization which could apply to either the plain or the eloquent style.

The first three stanzas present the poem’s conceit and the basic argument the speaker makes to his beloved about their relationship. The lover intends that his beloved

should use his name scratched in her window as a means to remember him, the more so since it is a peculiarly appropriate symbol for their relationship (as well as his honesty):

'Tis much that glass should be
 As all confessing, and through-shine as I,
 'Tis more, that it shows thee to thee,
 And clear reflects thee to thine eye.
 But all such rules, love's magic can undo,
 Here you see me, and I am you. (7-12)

The last lines of this stanza mark the transition from a creative description of the literal reality – e.g. the simile that glass is “as all confessing . . . as I” – to the metaphorical vision afforded by “love's magic,” “here you see me, and I am you.” The lover's transparency is the product of both his honesty and the extent that he is known by his beloved, part of the relationship that love's magic has produced. Inspired by this magic, the lover asserts that “so shall all times find me the same,” the point that he is most eager for his beloved to remember (16). However, the first lines of the following stanza, as Cathcart points out, hint “that the 'you' of the poem has resisted the importance he has given to the carving” (26). The speaker changes tack, graciously skirting around his beloved's implied objection with a pun on the action of engraving.

Or if too hard and deep
 This learning be, for a scratched name to teach,
 It, as a given death's head keep
 Lovers' mortality to preach,

Or think this ragged bony name to be

My ruinous anatomy. (19-24)

Rather than moderating his metaphors, though, the speaker then names the inscription “the rafters of my body,” and links it with the fact that, as he puts it, “all my souls be / Em-paradised in you,” which together guarantee his return (28, 25-26). Until that return, he recommends that she use his name as an object of meditation, to recall fully the love and grief of their parting. “No door 'gainst this name's influence shut,” he entreats, betraying his fear that she will not be as interested in preserving her love for him in his absence as he might like (39). In the next three stanzas the speaker imagines his name coming alive in three progressive stages to guard his beloved's fidelity: first, by protesting against her opening the window to allow “new battery to thy heart,” then by replacing the name on the interloper's love letter, and finally by redirecting her reply from the rival suitor to him: “in forgetting thou rememberest right, / And unaware to me shalt write” (59-60). Thus, the argument of the poem becomes more involved and asserts a progressively greater influence over the beloved's affections as it develops. Cathcart describes this progression in terms of the different attitude the lovers appear to have toward their relationship:

Beginning as a parting gift, the name in the window becomes an unwanted insertion into her life, placed there by a man who will not be forgotten. It is an explicit reproach to her, and it is a dissent from her attitude toward their relationship, an attitude which includes the suggestion that the engraving is not only, after all, a name in a window, but also an unwelcome

reminder of the speaker's absence, an offensive suggestion that the 'you' has less freedom than she might think she has. (26)

It seems that the speaker is not unaware of his audience's cool reception of his parting gift, since he drops the conceit in the final stanza, which concludes the poem on a much more sober note:

But glass, and lines must be
 No means our firm substantial love to keep;
 Near death inflicts this lethargy,
 And this I murmur in my sleep;
 Impute this idle talk, to that I go,
 For dying men talk often so.

The speaker apparently realizes that their “firm substantial love” cannot really survive their parting, despite his best attempts to preserve it. That lovers die at parting is a poetic sentiment, but a true lovers' parting is deeply meaningful and imbued with great feeling, while this parting will effect not merely a symbolic death of their love, but potentially a real one. The fault is not in the inability of “glass” or “lines” to represent a real love, even in the absence of other, literal means, but in the nature of their love, which lacks the vitality to survive a separation. This final stanza suggests that the speaker's earlier reference to “love's magic” was also more poetic than experiential, since not even through its invocation can either the memorial metaphor or love letters sustain their love in the face of physical absence.

Having read the poem by focusing on how it reflects and reveals the lovers'

relationship, the reader may object that proper attention has not been paid to the poem's remarkable series of metaphors. Many other critics have admired or criticized their inventiveness in greater detail elsewhere; the presence of Donne's characteristically witty metaphors in this poem is hardly an original observation, and it is their presence rather than their relative success that would initially classify the poem in the eloquent tradition. I have considered "A Valediction: Of my Name in the Window" to be eloquent until proven guilty. What is particularly interesting is the attitude that the speaker of the poem takes toward his own eloquence, since in the final stanza he dismisses everything that has preceded it as "idle talk" (65). It seems that the speaker does not expect his beloved to remain faithful in his absence precisely because of the inadequacy of language to substitute for action: love cannot be performed by linguistic proxy. The poem begins more confidently, but as the conceit progresses it becomes less actual (when you see your reflection in the window with my name on it, you see me in yourself) and more fanciful (when you write to my rival, this engraving will cause you to misaddress your letter); less about actual fidelity *in absentia* in the future and more about the negative consequence of the present moment, their separation.

The speaker himself lacks confidence in the efficacy of his eloquence. Even as he instructs his beloved, "thou shouldst, till I return, / Since I die daily, daily mourn," he immediately imagines her welcoming the addresses of another (41-42). This realization, that representation in glass or lines is insufficient to sustain their present reality, is part of an attitude toward language long held by the plain stylists. Metaphor is no true replacement for action. This poem is not unequivocal and subversive in its attitude

toward eloquence, though; instead, there is an interesting tension present. The opening stanzas, which are apparently rejected by the speaker's audience on the grounds that their learning is "too hard and deep," contain the most charming and apt metaphors of the poem, the kind of parting gift that another of Donne's interlocutors might have treasured – hardly worthy of the speaker's dismissal as only his "idle talk." The failure of the opening stanzas is not due to a systemic failure of eloquence, but is the consequence of the inability of the lovers' "firm substantial love" to withstand the shock of separation. It is in responding to this failure that the speaker stretches his eloquence, and the vanity of that attempt and its foregone conclusion is what he recognizes in the final stanza.

"A Valediction: Of my Name in the Window" is not so critical of eloquence as to be properly in the plain style, especially considering that it draws its theme and style from the eloquent tradition, but the self-awareness of its eloquent speaker and his criticism of the limitations of language do set it apart from poems that belong whole-heartedly to the golden tradition. At the same time that he attempts to leave his beloved with an eloquent keepsake of himself, the speaker refers to how the lovers should act to preserve their love: with constant remembrance of each other's fidelity, vivid recollection of the emotional depth of their relationship, and through the exchange of letters – but he also recognizes that their love is not the kind to survive on this diet. In this sense, the "Valediction" is similar to the Holy Sonnets that we read earlier in that it draws on qualities and attitudes belonging to the opposite tradition, and an interpretation that is sensitive to the presence of elements beyond these poems' superficially conventional nature can discover ways that Donne pushes each style beyond its conventional boundaries of expression.

The subdued conclusions of “Of My Name in the Window” and Sonnet 7 both refer back to the eloquence that precedes them, though the “Valediction”’s dismissive “idle talk” suggests a different reading of that eloquence from the sonnet’s appeal “but let them sleep, Lord”; in the former the speaker recognizes the impotence of his metaphors, while in the latter he is concerned lest they take too sudden effect. In both cases, though, the plain ending of the poem directs our reading of its eloquence. Though in the “Valediction” particularly this redirected reading partially undercuts that eloquence and so alters the flow of the poem, such a redirection need not necessarily detract from the efficacy of the poem’s eloquence. This potential meaningfulness in the contrast between the eloquent and the plain is a distillation of the way Jonson employed the two styles with and against each other in “A Celebration of Charis,” and demonstrates that an eloquent style does not necessarily obscure, but can be a more effective way of illuminating paradoxical truth – principles Herbert uses on an even smaller scale and with sharper contrast in poems such as “Jordan (I).”

Chapter 4 – Herbert

“Flowing With Milk and Honey”: Poetry in the Promised Land

We find George Herbert in a slightly different place from both Jonson and Donne. In contrast to the latter's more familiar relationship with the court, Herbert rejected the court for the church, rather dramatically, by taking a position at the parish of Bemerton. His career choice reflects the same attitude that prompted him to write to his mother, shortly before his seventeenth birthday, about “the vanity of those many Love-poems, that are daily writ and consecrated to *Venus*,” in opposition to which he enclosed a pair of sonnets “to declare my resolution to be, that my poor Abilities in *Poetry*, shall be all, and ever consecrated to Gods glory” (quoted in Gallagher 504). Although he deliberately defined his own work from an early age against the emptiness he saw in the excesses of the eloquent style, we can see in much of his poetry that he did not simply adopt the existing qualities of the opposite convention, but worked through for himself what it meant to combine poetic art with sincere spirituality. The result is that while critics have long considered Herbert to be writing firmly in the plain style, his approach to the plain style lacks for neither variety nor invention, as Helen Wilcox's descriptive phrases attest: “Herbert's collection is full of witty forms which surprise the reader into contemplating

their significance”; “*The Temple* is not only a picture gallery but a place of singing”; Herbert is “a paradoxical poet,” who “could achieve brilliant effects with his ‘trim invention’” (xxiv, xxxi). These qualities make Herbert's work an important subject for my thesis interest, since “witty forms,” “brilliant effects,” and “trim invention” seem much rather to describe the eloquent style than the plain. The question is whether Herbert compromises his plain matter through the use of this eloquent manner, and if not, how he makes use of it to preserve the simplicity of his style.

Michael Gallagher begins his essay on “Rhetoric, Style, and George Herbert” by reminding his readers of Herbert's background in oratory and rhetoric. As a university-trained orator, Herbert would have studied classical rhetoric, and been aware of contemporary trends in rhetorical thought. As observed previously, Gallagher points out that by and large, although sixteenth-century English rhetoricians claimed to develop their rhetorical handbooks based on classical thought, “little serious attention was given to the classical plain style and as a result this level of style was generally maligned and misunderstood” (496). The *subtilitas* and *urbanitas* applied by Cicero to the plain style nuanced it with unaffected grace and craftsmanship, but these nuances were overlooked by sixteenth-century rhetoricians, who termed it the “low” or “base” kind. We have already seen fruits of the renewal of classicism that began on the continent and spread to England in Jonson's statements on style in *Discoveries*, such as in the “sweet neglect” ultimately derived from Cicero. In this revaluation of the plain style, it no longer meant the absence of art, but returned to its classical beginnings as that style which seems simple but proves difficult to imitate. Gallagher refers to one of Herbert's letters where he

comments in a postscript on the style of his letter, “apologizing for the style of the letter and in particular for avoiding various elaborate forms of address; he defends himself by setting 'Romana elegantia' over against the more fashionable and florid style” (500).

A second significant influence on the development of the English plain style, and a particularly important one for Herbert, was Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*.⁹ Augustine's work, as we observed earlier, was not only a transduction of classical rhetorical principles into Christian forms, but an effort to produce a distinctively Christian style. Gallagher argues that in rhetorical terms, this rhetorical style focused on “the needs of the audience and of the occasion rather than on the status of the subject matter. Christian subject-matter broke down the classical framework since it was paradoxically both humble and sublime” (502). Classically low subject matter became a field for the spiritually sublime, so that the direct link between the height of a subject and its style was replaced as a guiding principle by the author's purpose in addressing his audience. Thus, in the fourth book of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine argues that

that which the moderate style urges, that is, that the eloquence itself be pleasing, is not to be taken up for its own sake, but in order that things which may be usefully and virtuously spoken . . . may have knowing and sympathetic audience which sometimes may assent more readily or adhere more tenaciously to that which is being said because of the delight aroused by that eloquence. (161)

The idea that “beauty of expression” could be appropriate for the expression of moral

⁹ Gallagher lists a number of references to *On Christian Doctrine* in works on rhetoric from Herbert's time, as well as observing that “it is one of only two printed works mentioned in his will, the other being a commentary on Scripture, and thus it may have been one of his treasured possessions” (501).

truth is one that we can see Herbert working to reconcile with Augustine's unequivocal condemnation of the temperate style, which is elegant and ornate and aims only to cause pleasure – precisely the fault of courtly poetry. Much of *The Temple* reflects this negotiation and Herbert's pursuit of the happiest result of the combination of truth and beauty in poetry.

One of the basic questions that drives critical interest in the style of Herbert's poetry is how to reconcile the apparent contradiction of a devotional poet writing to praise plain, godly speech in such artful poetry. Part of the difficulty may come from reading Herbert's eloquent plainness in the oppositional terms of the earlier conflict between the plain and eloquent styles. Gallagher observes about the Augustinian tradition that “there emerged, even more than in the classical *genus tenue*, a new eloquence of plainness, an eloquence that could be independent of the display-techniques of traditional rhetoric” (502). This accords with Jonathan Post's argument that “if [Herbert] was conscious of the need to work *through* courtly forms, as many have argued, he did so in order to go beyond them” (16), as well as Wilcox's warning that “it is vital to make the distinction between poems that are simple (which Herbert's are not) and those that arrive at simplicity through the use of, as well as the explicit rejection of, complex learning and rhetoric” (xxx). While we might see the same traditional stylistic conventions at work, we should not necessarily expect them to function in the same way for Herbert as they did for his predecessors. Herbert was ideally placed to help return the plain style from the English simplicity of the sixteenth century to the artfulness of the classical plain style, and to do it in a peculiarly Christian manner, putting Augustine's

principles into practice with remarkable focus. In approaching his poetry, then, we must credit Herbert with having the capability to make deliberate rhetorical decisions, and an awareness of the consequences of his stylistic choices. The question in reading *The Temple* is what Herbert did with the plain style, or what “plain speaking” means in his work. What does he implicitly argue is possible within the boundaries of an appropriate style for devotional poetry?

The Temple: Poetry in the Court of the Gentiles

“The Quidditie” is an appropriate starting point for any study of Herbert's poetry, since it is concerned with the essence of poetry, and is particularly appropriate here because it describes poetry through an opposition between the busy court and the poet's simple devotion to God. As with many of Herbert's poems, its title is significant. Wilcox observes that in the Williams manuscript (the earlier, incomplete collection of *The Temple*), this poem is simply titled “Poetry,” which is perhaps the essence suggested by one sense of the new title; its second sense, “an oversubtle or sophistic quibble,” is also at work in the poem in the catalogue of worldly values contrasted with the simple resolution of the poem's conclusion (254). While the title of the “Jordan” poems requires a careful reading of each poem to unravel the title's significance, here Herbert uses the title to direct our reading, priming our expectations to receive an essence and a quibble, expectations confirmed and focused on poetry by the first line and stanza:

My God, a verse is not a crown,

No point of honour, or gay suit,

No hawk, or banquet, or renown,
 Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute:

It cannot vault, or dance, or play;
 It never was in *France* or *Spain*;
 Nor can it entertain the day
 With a great stable or demain:

It is no office, art, or news,
 Nor the Exchange, or busie Hall;
 But it is that which while I use
 I am with thee, and *Most take all*. (253-254)

This poem is relatively simple in form compared to the inventive variations Herbert employs elsewhere in *The Temple*, being composed of three four-line stanzas rhyming *abab cdcd efef*, and using an easy tetrameter throughout, where the emphasis falls according to sense rather than a strict metre. The language is plain, and much of its poetry comes from the even alternation of phrases of different lengths, as controlled and well-mannered as its rhyme. This is not to say that Herbert does not put the rhythm to any particular effects; for example, the two consecutive stresses at the end of the second line create a natural pause in the flow of the verse, a pause repeated using semi-colons in the second and third stanzas. Similarly, the light stress on the third syllable of the fourth line – “good” receives more weight than the unstressed single syllables like “a,” “is,” “or,” but less than the full

stress on the noun it modifies, “sword” – is repeated in the last lines of the next two stanzas.

Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute:

...

With a great stable or demain. (4, 8)

In the final stanza, the rhythm shifts to follow the turn at the beginning of the eleventh line, though the pattern of a light stress on the third syllable of every fourth line suggests that “with” ought not to be entirely unstressed: the poet's focus is on God, but his interest is in the way that his use of poetry brings him to be with God.

But it is that which while I use

I am with thee, and *Most take all*. (11-12)

The italics and initial capitalization of “*Most take all*” set it apart and ensure that the reader does not miss the emphasis on each word, even though the iambic rhythm remains distantly present. Wilcox cites F. P. Wilson to observe that ““most” is used in the sense of “the most powerful”; that is, ‘God the all-powerful takes complete possession of [the speaker]’” (255). The particulars of the list that takes up the most part of the poem are superseded by the wide potential of these terms. In the sense of “winner takes all,” the greatness of God is asserted over the attractions of the court, so that the “Most [High]” not only takes “all” of the speaker, but all of the earthly things that came before. Where Augustine read Scripture as in a style which absorbs all earthly styles in its plainness, here Herbert extends that divine pre-eminence to include literally all, including but not limited to his use of language. God is the most dynamic subject in the poem: poetry is

described as what it is not, while the poet's main verb is also merely of being, so that God's activity takes centre stage. In this light, poetry becomes the means by which the poet offers himself as well as the apparatus of the court to God.

Rhetorically, the poem builds up to this point by the repetition of what poetry is not, a definition by a series of negations that gives the poem its character. Since a thorough definition by negation is practically impossible, it is an obviously rhetorical move on Herbert's part, whose goal is not really to define poetry but to assert the nature of poetry in opposition to "courtly life and the symbols of secular verse" (Wilcox 254). It seems that Herbert views the court as his chief rival for the right definition of poetry, though he broadens his scope in the third stanza to include "the Exchange, or busie Hall" (10). The effect of this repetition is partly to build suspense and curiosity in the reader, who is denied the resolution of a positive definition until the end of the poem, but also to illustrate how Herbert has chosen *not* to define poetry. Poetry is not a thing or activity that is valuable of itself (a crown or dance) or by courtly reckoning (renown or French manners) but finds its essential value in the relational effects of its use. Instead of being a tool for favour or position at an earthly court, poetry is implicitly more valuable than such tools, because it wins the poet admittance into a heavenly court.

The simplicity of the last two lines belie their depth – a point about style Herbert makes elsewhere – but it is important to recognize that, as in the reading of Donne's Holy Sonnet 7, these plain lines need the preceding ten to give their simplicity and style a real impact. The choices of indefinite terms and a purely relational nature to describe the essence of poetry are made deliberate and meaningful by the reminder that it is not

necessarily so. The reader might pause and observe that, contrary to what Herbert says, poetry *can* be a point of honour or communicate a gay suit, bring renown, and even entertain the court for a day with a play, perhaps of a great stable or domain: Herbert's definition has a certain personal ring to it. However, the implication that poetry is more valuable than such things suggests that what Herbert is after is poetry's highest use, to pay respect to the heavenly king. At this point the title intervenes to remind us that Herbert is aiming for the essential nature of poetry, its lowest common denominator; since "most take all" in the poet's service to God, every other aspect of poetry is subordinated to that service.

In "Jordan (I)" the poet applies the resolution of "The Quidditie" more particularly to the subject of style, as if in response to the question "in what manner must I write to use poetry in this way?" The same opposition to courtly values carries over to Herbert's specific intention for the shape of his poetry, and the poem reaches a similar conclusion asserting God's supremacy over an earthly king. Where in "The Quidditie" Herbert defines the purpose of his poetry, in this poem Herbert's defence moves on to assert the validity of the plain style. However, this overlap between courtly values and eloquence complicates matters for critics, since although it is clear that Herbert advocates honesty and simplicity, it is not clear exactly what the poem's attack is directed against. Wilcox cites critics who have read Herbert's argument as attacking Petrarchanism, "the elaborate, artificial duty paid to the king through masque or Court Poetry," love poetry's "usurpation of the whole field and very title of poetry," all bad poetry either secular or sacred, or even poetry itself (198-199). Much of the difficulty of this critical discussion

comes from the stylistic challenge presented by an eloquent appeal for plainness. By beginning with close attention to Herbert's use of rhetoric and style, perhaps a way through the varied critical positions on this poem's argument will become somewhat clearer.

The repeated questions through the first two stanzas mimic the repeated negations of "The Quidditie," indicating poetry by what it is not or ought not to be, though here this device functions rather differently. As rhetorical questions, they solicit the reader's agreement and involvement in the argument, beginning with the appeal "who sayes?" that immediately prompts the reader to identify either with the poet or his imagined opponent. Composed of artificial, rhetorical figures, the address of the first two-thirds of the poem avoids the kind of plain, direct speaking of the poem's final phrase.

Who sayes that fictions onely and false hair
 Become a verse? Is there in truth no beautie?
 Is all good structure in a winding stair?
 May no lines passe, except they do their dutie
 Not to a true, but painted chair?

Is it no verse, except enchanted groves
 And sudden arbours shadow course-spunne lines?
 Must purling streams refresh a lovers loves?
 Must all be vail'd, while he that reades, divines,
 Catching the sense at two removes? (1-10)

Despite the lack of direct statements, Herbert's meaning is implied fairly directly in a rhetorically controlled way; the connotations of the things he chooses to oppose make it clear which side he is on. Fictions are “false hair” (1), poems must “do their dutie” to a “painted chair” (4-5) – evoking the affectation and artificial beauty of a “painted” mistress – and “enchanted groves / and sudden arbours” function to “shadow course-spunne lines” (6-7), concealing the plain craftsmanship of the cloth (something typically of lasting, everyday value) with smoke and mirrors, while against these are ranged “truth,” “good structure,” and “a lovers loves.” However, before assuming that this is a complete dismissal of eloquence, it must be noted that each of these questions contains an absolute modifier: “onely,” “no,” “all,” “must.” The strict, plain sense of Herbert's questions do not exclude eloquence altogether, but merely protest against the exclusion of plainness. “Is there in truth no beautie” is not equivalent to “There is in beautie no truth.”

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing:

Riddle who list, for me, and pull for Prime:

I envie no mans nightingale or spring;

Nor let them punish me with losse of ryme,

Who plainly say, *My God, My King*. (11-15)

In challenging the college of poets to revoke his poetic license (with the nicely ironic rhyme in his plain phrase), Herbert puts the final touch on his argument that the plainness of “*My God, My King*” does not exclude it from “becoming” a verse – neither from being appropriate to nor being developed into poetry.

Here I differ from Stanley Fish's interpretation of “Jordan (I),” which discovers in

the poem a “Platonic-Christian anti-aesthetic” (194). He argues that “if ‘My God, My King’ are the most beautiful words, they are so in a sense that makes the standard of beauty, as we are accustomed to apply it, irrelevant,” and cites *On Christian Doctrine* in support, “where eloquence is declared to be attendant on wisdom, rather than a quality separable from it” (194). However, Augustine does not in fact deny the potential delightfulness of language altogether; for example, in discussing Biblical examples of the moderate style he comments that the reader “will find many kinds of expression of such beauty that they are beautiful in our language, although especially beautiful in theirs, which are not found at all in that literature concerning which they are so vain” (149). It is therefore necessary for Augustine to specify later in *On Christian Doctrine* exactly how beautiful language ought to be used: “not ostentatiously but prudently, not content with its end that the audience be pleased, but rather using them in such a way that they assist that good which we wish to convey by persuasion” (162). This is not to deny that which Augustine and Herbert would emphatically assert, that heavenly beauty is superior in every way to its earthly counterpart, but such an assertion does not make “beauty” (as we are accustomed to apply it) irrelevant. Heavenly beauty transcends but does not negate earthly beauty. Contemplating his own ultimate journey to heaven in “The Forerunners,” Herbert writes

True beautie dwells on high: ours is a flame

But borrow'd thence to light us thither.

Beautie and beauteous words should go together.

Yet if you go, I passe not; take your way:

For, *Thou art still my God*, is all that ye

Perhaps with more embellishment can say. (28-33)

The earthly light given by Herbert's borrowed flame is still light, even though it cannot bear comparison to the splendour of his destination, which "had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it" (Revelation 21:23). He recognizes that his poetry cannot add anything to "true beautie," and that he must relinquish it along with the rest of his earthly possessions, which are rendered meaningless by the abundance of heaven. Nevertheless, he was not wrong earlier when he "brought [sweet phrases, lovely metaphors] to Church well drest and clad," since "My God must have my best, ev'n all I had" (17, 18). "Beauteous words," like other earthly things, are instruments that must be turned, however imperfectly, to God-honouring use. Augustine would agree, as Auerbach points out: "would it not be absurd, he says in substance, to leave the weapons of eloquence in the exclusive possession of the advocates of the lie and to deny them to the champions of the truth?" (33). Eloquence is thus a vehicle for truth, appropriate and valuable when used prudently, whether in prose or in poetry. In this light, where Fish finds that the final rhyme of "Jordan (I)" represents Herbert's failure to surrender the self-glorifying wit of his ostensibly humble poetry, that rhyme is revealed as Herbert's defiant assertion that plain truth is as appropriate to poetry as "enchanted groves" and "sudden arbours."

Herbert's attack in "Jordan (I)" is directed not at poetry itself, but against those who consider plain-speaking poetry inferior to its eloquent relative, and the pointed

reference to the “not . . . true, but painted chair” and Herbert's related emphasis on truth and honesty strike particularly against the artificiality of court poetry. Mary Rickey puts it well when she writes that “his quarrel here, it seems to me, is with glib, cliché-ridden amorous verse, prompted not by genuine sentiment, but by the desire to imitate other imitations – a kind of writing clogged with useless artificiality and wornout embellishment, representing the exercise of wit for its own sake” (30). The cornerstone of this complaint is in lines 9-10: Herbert finds fault with all artifice in poetry that comes between the truth and the reader. Courtly love poetry is the chief criminal here, though some kinds of religious poetry – poorly executed allegory, for instance – could also be found guilty. The poet must make truth supply the beauty of his verses, so that, in good Platonic style, the most beautiful poetry is that which most transparently affords the reader a view of truth, rather than foregrounding the achievement of its author. It is demanding enough that the reader must catch the sense at one remove, by having to read, let alone that he or she should have to “divine” the truth from the obscurity of the text. This manifesto clearly sets out the kind of poetry that Herbert intends to write.

This clear-cut conclusion must be qualified by the recognition of a “doubleness” centred on the poem's style. Herbert invites a closer rereading in the final line of the poem, the climax of his new determination to write simple poetry. This, the plainest line in the entire poem, is also its most arresting rhyme, in part because the most important word of that line is the last. It resonates back to line 5 and the poet's decision to offer his verses to the true chair, emphasizing the poet's separation from court poetry and defending him against “losse of ryme” by claiming to be in the service of divine authority.

Given this significance, it is thought-provoking to observe that the companion word that makes this rhyme – that makes the poet's plain phrase poetry – is a metonym for the pastoral love poetry that he has just rejected. Once our awareness is thus awakened, the allusive resonances of the poem begin to proliferate. Combined with the poet's complaint at having to catch the sense “at two removes,” we can hardly fail to catch the reference to *The Republic* in the opposition between true and painted chairs, while in Biblical mode, the poet's identification with shepherds foreshadows his quotation of the singing shepherd, David (“My God, My King” is repeated several times in the Psalms). These are not merely bonus allusions, either, planted to reward the clever reader: the Platonic search for true virtue and the way it is hindered by artifice is an important part of Herbert's critique of the “painted chair” and what it represents, and the Biblical references align Herbert with the tradition of sacred poetry dating back to the Psalms, together giving substance to his stand against what is lacking in courtly love poetry.

Perhaps the most difficult allusion in the poem is its title, which Herbert uses differently from “The Quidditie.” There, the title serves as an introduction to the body of the poem, whereas with “Jordan (I)” it is necessary to have read the poem in order to understand the significance of the title. Its relative difficulty arises because it stands in relation to only one thing on the page, the poem, and that as a whole, as opposed to the allusions within the poem proper which can be contextualized with both what precedes and follows them. In the Christian tradition, the river Jordan has two primary significances: as the symbolic entrance to the Promised Land from the wilderness, Jordan represents God's fulfilled promises as well as Israel's submission to God's kingship; as the

river where Christ was baptized, it is both a symbol of washing and rebirth and a source of Christian inspiration, since it was at Christ's baptism that the Spirit descended from heaven in the form of a dove. Wilcox points out that Herbert appears to be imitating Thomas Lodge, who in his preface to *Prosopopeia* (1596), wrote that "having abandoned his 'lewd lines', and 'beeing washed in the Jordan of grace', he hoped that he might 'employ [his] labour to the comfort of the faithfull'" (200). Critics have chosen to emphasize various elements of the Jordan's significance, but need not select one to the exclusion of the others: the relationship between the poem and its title is a metaphorical one left deliberately ambiguous, so that the title functions to invoke a complementary series of meanings that places Herbert's poetic endeavours in the context of the historical relationship between God and His people.

I have not even touched on the obvious eloquence of the way Herbert describes the characteristics of usurping poetry, but I think that the point has been adequately made: for a poet ostensibly committed to simple, direct speaking, Herbert's argument employs rather complex rhetoric and imagery. The leaps from one image to the next require an imaginative effort from the reader, similar to that required by Donne's Holy Sonnet 5, while the effective characterization (which some critics have read as subtly ironic or scornful) of ornamented poetry makes its own case for eloquence – when properly used. Considering that Herbert's argument for the value of plain poetry is abundantly clear, "Jordan (I)" is remarkable for its simultaneous ease and difficulty: there seems to be little doubt about its basic point, but several different readings in any more complex discussion of its meaning. This relationship between the plain and eloquent is of

the same quality, though different in degree, as we found in Jonson's "A Hymn to God the Father," where the essential sense of the poem is communicated plainly, but sweetened and complemented by Jonson's artful touches. "Jordan (I)" does not fit naturally into either of the traditional English styles, though this is not an internal contradiction, since Herbert's argument does not condemn eloquence altogether; spoken entirely in the present tense, it is a defence rather than a manifesto.

"A Sweetnesse Readie Penn'd": Poetry in the Court of the Priests

"Jordan (II)" is the second instalment of Herbert's discussion of poetic style, in which Herbert turns his focus to the internal process of writing and the experience of putting his previously-stated intentions into practice – this poem's original title (in the Williams manuscript) was "Invention." Herbert's interest is in addressing the question "what style is appropriate to devotional poetry?", so although his conclusions do have a bearing on the plain style in general, it is important (though perhaps obvious) to keep in mind his starting point: following Augustine, Herbert begins with his purpose, and proceeds to seek a style for it, rather than beginning with the plain style and defining its uniquely appropriate purpose.

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,

Offring 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 lesse 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. (367)

Critical discussion about the argument of this poem can be roughly divided into two camps, those that read the poem's simple ending as inconclusive and perhaps contradictory, and those that read it as resolving the poem's problem. As with "Jordan (I)," a chief source of the difficulty in interpreting the poem's argument lies in "that it embodies its attack on the 'metaphysical' manner in the very style which it is criticising," without appearing to give a similar demonstration of the alternative it desires (Wilcox 366). The final lines do take on a lyrical grace that contrasts the "quaint words, and trim

invention” by which the poem describes itself, but a mere substitution of style is not enough for Herbert, the university rhetorician, so this observation alone cannot solve the poem's basic difficulty. Fish, among others, has pointed out the parallel between “Jordan (II)” and the first sonnet of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, arguing that in this similar search for invention the poet must draw inspiration from outside himself – perhaps from the waters of Jordan rather than Helicon (*Self-Consuming Artifacts* 198-199). Any satisfactory resolution for this poem must take into account that the “sweetnesse” Herbert is pursuing is a single quality of both form and content.

“Jordan (II)” gives its reader a series of wonderful images for the kind of poetic invention that Herbert is attempting to reject, beginning in the second half of the first stanza, but the ambiguous syntax of the introductory lines also presents the confusion that drives the tension at the heart of the poem: will it be the poet's lines or their heavenly subject that impress him with “their lustre”?¹⁰

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. (1-3)

Herbert's choice of adjectives in “quaint” and “trim” combine a reference to eloquent language with a negatively artificial slant, while in the curling metaphors and decked sense we can hear the same edge of mockery present in “Jordan (I).” Critics are quick to address the quaintness of Herbert's verse here. Philip McGuire points out the reference here to Cicero's recommendation concerning the plain style, that “all noticeable

¹⁰ Wilcox notes Fish's discussion of this ambiguity, and adds that it is absent in the Williams manuscript's earlier version of this poem, where line 1 read “verse” for “lines” (367).

ornaments, pearls as it were, will be excluded; not even curling-irons will be used . . . only elegance and neatness will remain,” the properties of the charming natural beauty of the poet's subject (71). Frank Manley highlights the negative connotations of these lines in discussing Herbert's use of metaphor: “his lines burnish, sprout, and swell with them – from a rank garden to a woman at her dressing table to a merchant or perhaps a whore, 'Decking the sense, as if it were to sell'” (209).

It is interesting to notice that Herbert is curling not some body of prose, but his “plain intention” itself, as if the burnished result is unfaithful to his original plan. Wilcox suggests that this is an ambiguous phrase, meaning “either an intention to be plain in style or manner, or a simple purpose in the poem (to speak of 'heav'nly joyes') – or both” (368). One implication is that the sense existed in some native, uncurled state, and Herbert's addition of stylistic flourishes changes its character, by weaving foreign material into the sense (as he describes in the third stanza). Another is that plainness or eloquence is a quality that begins as an organic aspect of the poet's intention – style is not something that is added in a later stage, except to its detriment. Herbert is not of the Sophist school of oratory, ready to give the same address in multiple styles to demonstrate his rhetorical skill, but a student of Augustine, where his purpose guides the expression of his matter. Elevating the poem's style through the addition of metaphors to his plain intention substantially changes the poem's message, because it affects its reader differently.

Augustine's divisions between the three levels of classical style are results-oriented:

In the subdued style he persuades his listener that what he says is true; he persuades in the grand style that those things which we know should be

done are done, although they have not been done. He persuades in the moderate style that he himself speaks beautifully and with ornament. Of what use is this to us? (162)

Herbert's plain intention, to truthfully describe "heav'nly joyes," is co-opted by his own invention, which effectually renders his poetry useless.

In the second stanza Herbert hits his stride, blending three fields of meaning in such a way that it is impossible not to notice how smoothly they flow together. Ironically, the halting invention that he is chronicling seems to have given him no difficulty here:

Thousands of notions in my brain did runne,
 Offring 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 lesse those joyes which trample on his head. (7-12)

This is Herbert curling for all he's worth, deliberately piling on metaphors until the stanza becomes an object lesson for a point of his argument, that excessive eloquence distracts attention from the sense it has supposedly improved. Herbert recognizes the folly of his original project in the eleventh line, where the familiar Renaissance pun on "sunne"/"(S)onne" takes the idea of burnishing the sun's lustre and deepens its absurdity by reminding the reader that since Herbert's original subject was "heav'nly joyes," here he proposes to make Christ more attractive by his eloquence. Wilcox points out the inappropriate nature of the attempt to clothe the sun, particularly since God is already

clothed with the sun, covered “with light as with a garment” according to the Psalms (104:2). However, there is another Biblical precedent for replacing the Son's simple clothing with more kingly attire: the purple robe that Roman soldiers mockingly forced on Christ before the crucifixion, which was accompanied by a crown of thorns referred to in the next line, “those joyes which trample on his head” (12). In his eagerness to honour his heavenly subject, Herbert risks not only concealing its real glory under a poor substitute, but identifying himself in the process with the worst kind of symbolic earthly dishonour offered to Christ.

Happily for the poet, all this is brought up short by the kind rebuke of the “friend,” who represents Christ elsewhere in *The Temple*. Herbert realizes retrospectively that this burnishing, sprouting, and swelling has been in his own service, a serious fault considering the implicit disrespect to his sacred topic, as well as a failure to use his poetry as he had committed himself to do in “The Quidditie” and “Jordan (I).”

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. (13-18)

The simple style of the friend's whisper is underlined for our attention by its contrast with the rest of the poem, a device we have already seen used by Herbert (as well as by Donne, in *Holy Sonnet 7*), but despite the simplicity of what he says, it is not obvious how it resolves Herbert's problems. Several critics have pointed out that the friend's advice cannot be read literally, as if the poet's task is to copy out the New Testament, since that

is where love is already recorded – however spiritually laudable that might be, the result would not be poetry. They do seem to be correct in implicitly suggesting that love's “readie-penn'd sweetness” is a sweetness of sense, rather than style, and that the injunction to “copie out” only that is not meant strictly literally. Jonathan Post is on a more persuasive track when he summarizes the poem as examining “matters of intention in attempting to distinguish a mistaken form of copia – narcissistic, self-involved, and showy – from true copy,” though this does not answer Herbert's problem of what properly sweet poetry ought to look like (14).

The resolution, I think, begins by paying attention to the chronology of Herbert's invention. His first lines were successful, excelling merely by making mention of heavenly joys; the flaws in his verse that the friend reproves are the result of the bustling that begins in line three. Incidentally, although the ambiguity mentioned earlier is certainly present, reading the second line's pronouns as referring to first “joyes,” then “lines,” allows for the first two lines to form a neat chiasmus:

When first my lines of heav'nly joyes made mention,
 Such was their lustre, they did so excell,
 That I sought out quaint words . . . (1-3)

The excellence of the lines is due to the natural lustre of the heavenly joys they mention. Herbert's fault is in attempting to imp his own brilliance onto that of heaven, but pridefully rather than humbly as in “Easter Wings.” The “sweetnesse readie penn'd” found in love is found not, as literal readers suggest, in the New Testament, but in Christ, and His highest expression of love was in His sacrifice, symbolized by the crown of thorns –

“those joys which trample on his head” (12). Those joys are so far beyond the capability of eloquence to express that they are even beyond the scope of the metaphor of clothing the sun, which breaks down as Herbert attempts to reach past his loftiest image.

Paradoxically, Herbert seems to be arguing that the highest sweetness and brilliance, even in poetry, come from the plain expression of heavenly subjects. Fish argues that the essential effect of this poem, like others in *The Temple*, is meant to be the realization that the real substance of Herbert's poetry is entirely derivative. To the problem of weaving himself into its sense,

Herbert's answer is to make it 'not mine' by making the experience of his poems the discovery of their true authorship. That is, the insight to which a particular poem brings us is often inseparable from the realization that its source is not Herbert, but God . . . Rather than affirming (and therefore denying) that God's word is all, these poems become, literally, God's word.

(190)

Only by keeping the focus of his poetry, plain or eloquent, on the truthful and persuasive communication of God's word and its heavenly joys is Herbert able to “weave himself out of the sense” (190). Since those joys are beyond the ability of language to comprehensively describe, any decking of the sense results only in obscuring their heavenly glory with the poet's vain attempts at eloquence, as he confesses in “The Forerunners”:

For, *Thou art still my God*, is all that ye
Perhaps with more embellishment can say. (32-33)

As in “The Quidditie” and “Jordan (I),” eloquent style is used to describe what God or true religious service is *not*, leaving it for the plain style to affirm what it is – though the redirection of the reader's attention to God's authorship implicitly refers the reader to God's actual word, to experience the struggle with it directly.

However, like “Jordan (I),” this poem should not be read as a kind of Christian Platonist anti-aesthetic. Herbert's fault is not that he is writing poetry, but in the manner he goes about doing it. Instead of preserving his plain intention, to communicate the excellence of his divine subject, he becomes distracted by the search for an accompanying brilliant style. The mere use of a brilliant style is not his real fault either, though; Augustine's rhetoric makes it clear that both the humble and the grand have a place in the Christian orator's style, since his matter itself is simultaneously humble and grand. I have already alluded to Augustine's understanding of the “lowly” style of the Bible, which is particularly applicable to Herbert's style here:

The purpose of this humility or lowliness of style is to make the Scriptures available to all . . . Yet Scripture is not always simple; it contains mysteries and hidden meaning; much of it seems obscure. [. . . Nevertheless,] there is no fundamental difference between the profound, obscure passages and those that are clear and simple; the former merely open up deeper levels of understanding. (Auerbach 50-51)

The difference even between difficult and simple passages is not a difference between what was understood as the eloquent and plain styles, since they both might be used to capture one or another aspect of the religious truths the author was attempting to express,

or to acknowledge that such truth is beyond complete knowing. The much more important distinction is in the author's intention, since, as Augustine states, "that the eloquence itself be pleasing, is not to be taken up for its own sake" (161). Succinctly put, the difference between plain and eloquent intention for a Christian poet is the difference between communication and performance.

That Herbert's poetry is a product of the consequences of this principle can be seen in the way Rickey characterizes Herbert's style in the concluding section of her book. She cites Coleridge's comment on "Love unknown," "that it conveys 'the most fantastic thoughts in the most correct and natural language,'" as indicating "a critical problem in Herbert which concerns every reader, that of the surprising combination of downright words and sophisticated conceptions" (163). This is due in large part to a "controlled generality of reference," so that Herbert's verse stands in contrast to Donne's in that its sense is readily understood, though it preserves a similar level of complexity in many places (165). Herbert uses style in such a way "that any reader can apprehend the principal subject, but so that the attentive reader . . . grasps the undertones of qualification sounded by the imagery" (165). Those undertones of qualification support and deepen the clear sense of the principal subject without obscuring it; even in heavily metaphorical passages such as "Prayer (I)," the imagery is not additional but essential to communicate the depth and sensitivity of the poem's subject. Thus, Rickey concludes that "verbal plainness for Herbert always was the vehicle of sincerity and sharpness of expression; its antithesis was not beauty or intricacy of idea, but pretension and imagerial clutter. . . . Nor, as he makes clear elsewhere, does he think that plainness of style

excludes wit" (173-174). It was not the golden that Herbert disliked, but the gilded; the sugared, but not the sweet. In his poetry he brings the sincere piety of the plain, moral style to give substance to the pleasant eloquence of the golden style, which in turn throws the depth of the plain style into sharp relief.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

The narrative of the preceding chapters traces the dichotomy of plainness and eloquence in Elizabethan style through the stylistic innovations of Jonson and Donne to its ultimate synthesis in Herbert's poetry. It must be acknowledged that there is an element of artificiality in this narrative, since each poet is represented by only a small selection of verse, poems that were deliberately chosen to display the way their authors tested the limits of stylistic conventions. Had different choices been made, Jonson and Donne may have seemed much more alike. The same question could be raised about the selection of Jonson, Donne, and Herbert in preference to others of their contemporaries. The arbitrariness of selection and the problem of exclusion is one faced by every critic, which is perhaps why epilogues to critical works so often gesture forward in an attempt to address the question "what comes next?" In the case of this thesis, the answer to that question would feature several of the most-admired poets in the English language, from Marvell to Milton, poets who had to respond in their own turn to the problems of style. Because of the rich variety of material available to draw from what C.S. Lewis called the "Golden Age" of English poetry that began with the Elizabethans and flowered with the arrival of "Donne and the Metaphysicals," I have chosen to look for the leading edge of

the innovation that characterized that flowering (Peterson 4). Thus, the overarching narrative that has emerged does not comprehensively describe the style of any of its three poets – a nearly impossible task – but traces a progression in their use of the plain and eloquent styles, recognizing that their stylistic innovations were not merely the result of classical or continental influences, but a response to the problems of style posed by the immediate English tradition. In “A Celebration of Charis” and the “Poems of Devotion” Jonson demonstrates that ornamental language does not necessarily obscure the truth, while Donne's *Holy Sonnets* use that eloquence to illuminate paradoxical truth, and in *The Temple* Herbert enlists delightful language alongside a plain style in his effort to offer all he has in the service of truth.

In the process of this development, increasing demands are made upon the reader. Although even in Herbert's work the simple meaning of the poem is readily available, its complexity challenges the reader to be attentive to his style to understand the nuances of his argument. Herbert's style is the best example of this quality, but the same can be said of Jonson's and Donne's work, that it requires an active response from the reader, and rewards such attention with a greater depth of meaning. Therefore, Augustine's description of Scriptural style applies most nearly to Herbert, but identifies a quality also shared by Jonson and Donne:

By its lowly speech it summons all men, not only in order to nourish them by its plain truths, but also in order to form them by means of its secret truth [*exercere* here means at the same time to form, to sharpen, to test], having the same truth both in its open and its hidden parts. (Auerbach,

50)

In “The Quidditie” and both “Jordan” poems, the plainest stylistic device Herbert employs to alert the reader to this depth is the contrast between eloquence and the plain language of each poem's conclusion, which reveal the poet's fault. This revelation of what lies beneath Herbert's eloquence also forms, sharpens, and tests the reader's response, as Fish points out in reference to “Coloss. 3.3,” that “as in so many of Herbert's poems, the moment of resolution, which is also a moment of revelation, retroactively illuminates the preceding lines, even to the extent of changing the direction of their meanings” (205). Jonson uses a similar effect in “A Celebration of Charis,” where Charis's real worth is not fully revealed until the ninth poem, which prompts a re-evaluation of her relationship with the speaker-poet, as well as of the poet's motivation throughout. Similarly, as I observed in the chapter on Donne, the final stanza of “A Valediction: Of my Name in the Window” prompts a reassessment of the relationship between the speaker and his beloved when he calls his eloquent appeal to her “this idle talk.” Herbert applies the potential of the contrast between plain and eloquent to use this device to great effect, so that “the reader is almost certain to turn back to the beginning of the poem and when he does so he will find that everything is different” (Fish 205).

This re-reading is a chance for Fish's imaginary reader to correct his or her mistakes, to get it right the second time “in the light of our new knowledge” (205). However, this focuses critical attention on the first reading of the text and its mistakes; according to Fish, what it means to read “Coloss. 3.3” is to progress from misunderstanding to understanding, since “these differences between the first and second

readings are exactly reflected in what is required of us as we negotiate the verse” (205-206). This understanding of what it means to read a Herbert poem supposes that the reader's unfamiliarity with the poem and consequent mistakes – particularly those Fish assigns – are an integral part of what Herbert set out to communicate. C.Q. Drummond objects that this is a wholly artificial approach to reading, pointing out that “Fish's pretending to have read *The Pilgrim's Progress* only once leads him to a number of mistakes about the actual content of the book, because he forbids himself the accurate expectation that derives from memory by feigning a sequential reading without consideration present with him” (“Sequence and Consequence in 'The Pilgrim's Progress,'” 234). Especially when reading such rhetorically controlled poetry as Herbert's work, it is necessary to pay close attention (as Fish does) to the effect of the poet's style on the reader, but the application of this attention needs the corrective that Drummond finds in Augustine's term, “consideration,” citing Augustine's description from *Confessions* of the act of reciting a Psalm:

I am about to repeat a Psalm that I know. Before I begin, my expectation is extended over the whole; but when I have begun, how much soever of it I shall separate off into the past, is extended along my memory; thus the life of this action of mine is divided between my memory as to what I have repeated, and expectation as to what I am about to repeat; but “consideration” is present with me, that through it what was future may be conveyed over, so as to become past. Which the more it is done again and again, so much the more the expectation being shortened, is the memory

enlarged; till the whole expectation be at length exhausted, when that whole action being ended, shall have passed into memory. (234)

The way that Augustine experiences the Psalm is not sequential, as is Fish's reading (even in its second, corrected version), but synthetic, since memory and expectation together bring the whole of the Psalm to bear on the "consideration" of the present moment, not simply to prevent misinterpretation, so that although reading happens in time, the reader experiences the entire Psalm or poem throughout the act of reading.

J.V. Cunningham quotes the same passage from *Confessions* in his discussion about the nature of a poem and the experience of reading it, observing that "our experience [with a poem] derives from and refers to an object that stays steady and persists" ("Poetry, Structure, and Tradition," 145). Cunningham characterizes this object, and so our experience of it, as having elements of both "externality" and "eternality" in it, so that "in the cumulative re-experience of a given composition, except insofar as habituation . . . deadens the impact, we may hope to come nearer and nearer to the norm of that experience which is ideally implicit in the work" (145). That such a norm exists is implicit in Augustine's Christian rhetoric, and so by extension in Herbert's poetry: the effects of style are reliable enough that an orator can be held accountable for his use of delightful language, and that a poet can employ them with precision to illuminate obscure truth. Also, this norm enables us to develop detailed critical readings, since "our experience is subject to verification and correction" (145). Neither the self (of the author or reader) nor the poem is consumed by the process of reading, but all remain, making a re-reading, and another re-reading, and another all possible. Herbert's all-important concern is that

he honestly and effectively communicate true “heav'nly joyes,” and we are delinquent as readers if we fail to match that effort; although our changing contexts inevitably change the way that we experience his poetry, as well as that of Jonson and Donne, in every case that experience is generated in response to the poet's words, by our effort to receive what they so earnestly sought to express. Thus, Augustinian principles of reading form a reciprocal activity to Augustinian rhetorical practice.

Both Drummond and Cunningham also quote the passage from *Confessions* that follows the one quoted earlier, where Augustine extends the process of reading to the way that we understand our lives:

And this which takes place in the whole Psalm, the same takes place in each several portion of it, and each several syllable; the same holds in that larger action, whereof this Psalm may be a part; the same holds in the whole life of man, whereof all the actions of man are parts; the same holds through the whole age of the sons of men, whereof all the lives of men are parts. (“Poetry, Structure, and Tradition” 144)

Cunningham observes that “in this precise analogy may be located the moral, or as we now say the emotional or educational, importance of literature: it is an exercise in the recollection, the gathering up, of the elements of personality and in their ordering” (145). As human beings, we make sense of our immediate experience in relation to memory and “the legitimate expectation that derives from memory” (“Sequense and Consequence” 239). However, particularly in the context of the authors read in this thesis and their concerns, the connection between these two quotations can be even stronger. The

process of reading is itself an act of consideration that only acquires its full meaningfulness as it is related to the context of the reader's life; receipt of Herbert's poetry is incomplete until we as responsive readers have made the connection between the experience of the poem and real life that fired Herbert's desire to communicate rather than merely perform. Paul Ricoeur develops a contemporary version of Augustine's extension from reading to life (which he calls the actions of "the same phronetic intelligence") in his essay "Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator," where he writes that

The meaning or the significance of a story wells up from *the intersection of the world of text and the world of the reader*. Thus the act of reading becomes the crucial moment of the entire analysis. On this act rests the ability of the story to transfigure the experience of the reader. [. . .] I know very well that literary criticism is much concerned to maintain the distinction between the inside of the text and its outside . . . I would say in this connection that the distinction between outside and inside is an invention of the method of textual analysis itself, and does not correspond to the experience of the reader. (italics original, 431)

This is perhaps the most challenging part of a genuine, active response to the style of poetry dealt with in this thesis, but it is an essential part of the reading that best respects the earnestness with which Jonson, Donne, and Herbert led their contemporaries in seeking answers to the problems of style that confronted them.

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