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A Gift for Our Times

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1. Auflage 2016. Buch. 245 S. Hardcover
ISBN 978 3 631 66152 9
Format (B x L): 14,8 x 21 cm
Gewicht: 420 g

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Małgorzata Grzegorzewska

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A Gift for Our Times

Transatlantic Studies in British and North American Culture

Edited by Marek Wilczyński



PETER LANG
EDITION

Preface

The idea of writing a book devoted entirely to George Herbert's *The Temple* came to me when I was working on a project on the use of poetic prosopopeia, a figure of counterfeit voice, as George Puttenham called it, in medieval and Early Modern English religious poetry. This study led me to think intensely about the different voices that inhabit *The Temple*, and the more examples I analysed, the more convinced I became that Herbert's poetry was the outcome of an artistic experiment which has not received sufficient critical attention. Nowhere before or after have I read poems so obviously shaped by the need for attentive and truly hospitable listening, rather than by the common desire to impress the reader with witty word-play, elegant form or apt metaphors. The focus in *The Temple* falls on accepting the Word rather than offering words of praise, despite the speaker's unswerving desire to be a servant of God. This, I came to realise, is not just a matter of Herbert's obvious indebtedness to sacred scriptures, visible in the numerous biblical echoes, references and allusions in his work that critics have repeatedly pointed out. These poems were distinctly different from other poetic prayers inspired by the reading of the Bible. The inherently dialogic nature of English metaphysical poetry in general, and Herbert's poems in particular, has frequently been stressed, but, once again, I thought I needed a formula which would allow me to adumbrate the difference between Herbert's poetic dialogues and the work of his contemporaries. To claim that he was a mystic might sound too presumptuous, for we tend to associate the texts of the mystics with accounts of elated visions and ecstasies of a kind that is certainly not to be found in *The Temple*. The emotional intensity of these poems derives from the all too common experience of physical pain and mental anguish. The moments of serenity and calm, on the other hand, are shaped into smoothly flowing, perfectly patterned musical pieces, more apparently fitting to courtly song than to expressions of divine rapture. Yet even the apparent simplicity of these unassuming "ditties" seemed to point to a sense of joy so profound that they could not simply be regarded as imitations of popular "verses of feigning love". Another key was needed to open the door of *The Temple*.

My book on prosopopeia, in which I included a chapter devoted to Herbert, was published in Polish, which gave me the opportunity to compare the texture of these poems with the effort of his Polish translators. In the case of "The Sacrifice", which had not been translated before, I had to provide a Polish rendering of the stanzas which I wanted to analyse in depth, and although I did not feel I could perform the task myself, I had the privilege of being involved in the process of translation

and commenting on the solutions suggested by a colleague of mine who kindly volunteered to help me with this challenge. The exercise of comparing Herbert's poems with their Polish renderings and the collaboration with the translator of the fragments of "The Sacrifice" was a wonderful lesson in using translation as a means of critical analysis. The struggle with the mutual opacity of two different language systems, with their distinct cognitive models, their specific semantic patterns and syntactic possibilities, their melodies based on different sounds and characteristic cadences of speech, was a great lesson in anatomising the poetic "body" of *The Temple*. It brought to light the essential "Englishness" of this sequence and made me ponder on the material weight of Herbert's poetry: its visual concreteness, its musical harmonies, its attention to human flesh made (English) word. In a more general perspective, it intensified the sense of what Michael Edwards has so aptly recognised and described as the "glory" and "misery" of poetic creation rooted in the dialectical interplay of the infinite possibilities and inevitable pitfalls of our fallen, and therefore wretched, yet aspiring, and therefore already exulting, human speech.¹

When I looked at the theological import of Herbert's poems, trying to determine, as so many other readers before me have done and so many after me will certainly do, whether one ought to regard them as unambiguously Protestant, either Lutheran or Calvinist, or whether perhaps some of their features should be perceived as evidence of the poet's residual Catholicism, I was amazed by the consistently sacramental and "incarnational" character of the entire sequence. The poet's "listening I", in contrast to the "speaking I" of other poets, is shaped by the Word made flesh. Time and again, the reader is also reminded of the fact that poetic speech must endure everything which the Word endured in the flesh: the inhospitality or outright hostility of unwilling hearers, the inarticulacy of human suffering, the opacity of imperfect human speech. Herbert does not speak about the eternal Logos who is the "unmoved Mover" of human words, to use the well-known phrase borrowed from St. Thomas Aquinas, but encounters the Word as dwelling among people and suffering death for their sake.

The concept of the kenosis of the Son helped me better understand the nature of Herbert's poetic experiment. Thinking about what I term the poet's *kenotic speech*, shaped in the image and likeness of God's kenotic Word, I also discovered the way to account for the phenomenon of Herbert's original poetics. I have always found it very hard to understand and explain to students how the author of such perfectly

1 Michael Edwards, *Towards A Christian Poetics* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 4–5.

designed visual poems as “The Altar” and “Easter Wings”, such witty poetic puzzles as the sentence “My Life Is Hid In Him That Is My Treasure”, running diagonally across the poet’s comment on Colossians 3.3. (“Our life is hid with Christ in God”), or the poetic tabernacle in the title of “Ana-MARY / ARMY-Gram”, as well as such complex metaphors as we find in “The Forerunners”, could be deemed the advocate and practitioner of *plain* style. There must be many readers for whom Herbert’s poetry appears anything but plain. The first and most important among them was Richard Crashaw, a Roman Catholic who found it natural to acknowledge the debt owed by his own extravagantly sensual religious poems to the complex patterns of *The Temple*. The widespread tendency to anchor Crashaw’s work in continental mannerist poetics overlooks that vital influence, which at the same time helps the reader discover the true character of Herbert’s style, too hastily deemed “plain” without a necessary explanation of what this adjective means in the context of Herbert’s work. For if we take plainness to be a synonym of stylistic transparency, we run the risk of misrepresenting the majority of the poems contained in *The Temple*. It is only when we refer to the humble and unassuming plainness of the Word made flesh that we can use this notion to describe Herbert’s enfleshed and therefore frequently opaque poetic idiom. The language of Herbert’s poetry is as much a part of our carnal nature as our flesh and blood, our veins and bones, and the inarticulate sound of strained human breathing or heavy groaning.

In investigating and attempting to describe this decisively “modern” trait of Herbert’s poetics (for is it not a sign of our times to ponder the inherent vulnerability or “woundedness” of speech?), I have sought appropriate concepts in contemporary philosophy, in particular in the works of the French post-phenomenologists Michel Henry, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Chrétien and Jean-Luc Marion. Some of them have been involved in initiating what we call today the “theological turn” in philosophy. The givenness of being and of language; the inherent aporias of the gift, which must efface its own givenness in order to be genuinely gratuitous; hospitality, which forces us to open the door to an unknown stranger who may change our life; the saturated phenomenon and the “dative subject”: these are concepts that provide a remarkably fertile context for reading Herbert’s poetry. Putting aside, although not neglecting, the question of Herbert’s adherence to one or another “school” of theology, of his loyalty to one or another denomination, I have chosen here to focus on the Word which informs his poems not by virtue of textual allusion or verbal echo, but by entering deficient human speech. This is the Word who once as an unknown traveller sought in vain a shelter in the inns of Bethlehem, but now dwells in the poet’s words. Although Herbert occasionally calls his visitor “a friend”, his poetic encounters with that friend nevertheless disclose the

visitor's disturbingly "foreign" accent and visage and are as much an occasion for uneasy apprehension as for joy. This must be so, since the aim of our journey along the paths outlined in the sequence is not to domesticate the unnamed stranger, but to recognise in this unexpected guest the lordly host of *The Temple*, who extends his invitation to each and every one of us: "You must sit down, and taste my meat".

While working on this project I have incurred many debts, most especially to my colleagues and graduate students at the Institute of English Studies of the University of Warsaw. I wish to thank Klaudia Łączyńska for sharing with me her passion for seventeenth-century poetry and Olga Włodarczyk-Elsbach for her attentiveness to poetry as a means of understanding human suffering. My students, Blanka Domachowska OCD and Beverly Vinall CSIC showed me the value of hospitable listening in poetry and prayer. Daniel Kaczyński did not spare his able assistance in preparing the index of persons. I also thank Krystyna Wierzbicka-Trwoga of the Department of Polish Language and Literature, whose comparative study of Herbert, Johannes Silesius and Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski, published in Polish, inspired me to review *The Temple* as a poetic sequence. I extend my gratitude to the coordinators of The Power of the Word project, begun at Heythrop College by Francesca Bugliani-Knox, and to the participants of three Power of the Word Conferences (in London, Gdańsk and Rome). The animated discussions at these conferences, always pointing to the ongoing dialogue between literature and theology, gave me yet another opportunity to look at Herbert's poetry from a wider, interdisciplinary perspective. I am also grateful to the participants of the workshops on poetry and meditation organised by the Benedictine monks of Tyniec Abbey. The hospitality and commitment of the Abbot, Szymon Hiżycki OSB, allowed us to experience poetry as a space where human words may reach out to the eloquent silence of the Word. I am forever indebted to Jean Ward of the University of Gdańsk for the time she has devoted to reading the manuscript, correcting my mistakes and asking probing questions, but above all, I thank her for her magnanimous friendship and understanding in moments of crisis.

The publication of this book was made possible thanks to resources provided by the Rector of Warsaw University, Professor Alojzy Nowak, and the Institute of English Studies.

I dedicate this volume to Fr. Norbert, with respect and gratitude.

Małgorzata Grzegorzewska