

"Yet I love thee": The "Wayes of Learning" and "Groveling Wit" in Herbert's "The Pearl"

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Article:

The word "yet" is a sharp little monosyllable. Like the arrow pointing on the highway, it signals a sudden turning away, or across, or back. Especially if repeated, the word "yet" adds a certain dynamic tension, a touch of interior drama, to any statement, whether it be the tension of a considered contrast between differences, or the drama of an outright conflict between opposites. So we should attend closely when George Herbert, Cambridge scholar, repeats three times in his poem, "The Pearl," this adversative formula: "I know . . ." he insistently assures his auditor, "Yet I love thee" (emphasis mine).¹ If we were to ignore for a moment the questions of *what* and *how* Herbert claims to *know*, and the question of *whom* he nevertheless claims to *love*, that which remains is a remarkable, and rather worrying, opposition: an opposition between knowledge and love.

Here speaks the immensely learned Mr. Herbert, Fellow of Trinity College and former University Orator; here also speaks the holy Mr. Herbert, composer of three poems entitled simply "Love"; and Mr. Herbert seems to be saying that he loves his beloved in spite of what he knows. The connotation of a romantic rivalry, carefully considered and then rejected, is palpable. He sounds a little like the speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets, telling his dark lady that he loves her anyway, despite everything.

Of course, in "The Pearl," Herbert's immortal beloved – that is, the one whom he loves in spite of what he knows – is not a dark lady, but God; and the potential rivals to God whom Herbert considers in the poem's first stanza are not literally sexual (those wait until stanza 3) but rather "the wayes of Learning." These ways of intellectual and scientific knowing include logic ("What reason hath from nature borrowed, / Or of it self, like a good huswife, spunne"), civil law ("laws and policie"), astronomy and astrology ("what the starres conspire"), natural philosophy and physics ("What willing nature speaks, what forc'd by fire"), cosmography ("Both th' old discoveries, and the new-found seas"), and chronicle "historie" (ll. 3-8). There may be a hint of sexual connotation in the references to a feminized "nature," who, whether because she is "willing" or because she is "forc'd," is standing "open" to his expansive curiosity. "Yet," insists Herbert, despite these siren calls of learning, "I love thee" (ll. 9-10).

My reason for teasing out these intimations of a rejected *affaire du coeur* is that George Herbert was heir to an Augustinian Christianity which, particularly in its Calvinistic forms, has always had a lovers' quarrel with learning. Like both Augustine and Calvin, Herbert was classically trained and deeply read, so it would seem absurd to call him anti-intellectual; yet from some angles and to some interpreters, Herbert, like his spiritual forbears, has appeared hostile to the ways of learning and of reason. A generation ago, Stanley Fish laid this charge influentially in his readings of "The Holdfast" and "The Pearl," arguing that these poems end with a stark renunciation of all human knowledge, and indeed all human agency.² Kenneth Alan Hovey also has noted Herbert's apparent scorn for natural philosophy in the poem "Divinitie," but has defended Herbert from charges of obscurantism by noting Herbert's close association with Sir Francis Bacon, and by claiming that Herbert rejected not Bacon's "new science" of nascent empiricism, but only the speculative "Epicycles" and "spheres" of medieval cosmology ("Divinitie," ll. 25, 26).³

Richard Strier has taken a mediating position, stating a more nuanced view of "The Pearl" and other Herbertian lyrics on learning. Unlike Hovey, Strier sees Herbert in friendly opposition to Bacon, rejecting Bacon's merely cumulative and instrumentalist program of empirical inquiry because it falls short of full divine knowledge. But unlike Fish, Strier claims that Herbert's attack in these poems is on what we would call rationalism, not on reason itself.⁴ Nevertheless, all three of these critics, and a good many more, have noted how often Herbert disputes the value of human knowledge. And they are right, because he does.

Already I have claimed that Herbert's quarrel with learning is a lovers' quarrel, and I wish to reassert the love implicit in this quarrel. Herbert, far from rejecting the rightness of reason and learning, is instead rejecting notions of their autonomy or sufficiency. Herbert's abundant mentions both of book-learning and of "natural philosophy" (in *The Country Parson* and in other poems like "The Church-porch," "Man," and "Providence") make it clear that he cherished the fruits of human inquiry – this side idolatry. Still, for anyone harboring a Cartesian or Baconian trust in reason or experiment alone, "The Pearl" brings a two-fold corrective: first, that learning, though powerful and effective, is but one way of knowing, co-equal with the social ways of honor and the sensory ways of pleasure; and second, that like these social and bodily ways, the intellectual way degenerates to "grovelling wit" when it presumes to know independently of being divinely known.

But let us return to the first stanza of "The Pearl." I must leave to wiser heads the precise meaning of those opening lines about the plumbing – "the head / And pipes that feed the presse, and make it runne." Still, we should note in passing that H.C. Beeching sees this imagined hydraulic contraption as a printing-press, squeezing learning into books; that F.E. Hutchinson sees it more as an oil-press, squeezing those books into the Oxford and Cambridge library book-presses; and that Kathryn Walls sees it as a wine-press, with the reader squeezing learning out of those books again.⁵ Whatever our position on the pipe-work, it is clear throughout this stanza that our speaker claims to be profoundly connected to all the "heads," sources, and methods of intellectual inquiry that I have itemized above. And indeed Herbert flowed in learning: Lord Herbert of Cherbury wrote in his *Autobiography* about his younger brother's excellent scholarship "in the Greek and Latin tongue, and all divine and human literature"; Bacon dedicates his translation of some Psalms to Herbert, praising him as exemplifying the ideal of "Divinitie, and Poesie, met"; and at Bacon's admiring invitation, Herbert translated Bacon's *Great Instauration* into Latin.⁶

This last fact is crucially important in establishing Herbert's intimate familiarity with the ways of experimental inquiry. As a translator he would have had to think through in the most painstaking manner not only the particulars of Bacon's empiricist program, but also, and especially, its rationale: that is, the advancement of human understanding, by human means, for human good, of the entire natural world. Although Herbert was one of the defining voices of what Bishop Joseph Hall in 1614 called "experimental divinity," a religion of authentic feeling and experience, Herbert was alive to the emerging empirical mentality of "experimental" science as well (*OED* "experimental" def. I.1.c).

In turning from the Baconian laboratory to the scholar's library, Herbert's love of book-learning needs little further demonstration. "The Countrey Parson is full of all knowledg," Herbert writes in chapter 4 of his pastoral manual (p. 228). In divinity, this reading includes above all the Scriptures, then the Fathers, also the Schoolmen, and then "later writers" of reformation, such as those fellow-Protestants of Wittenberg and Geneva, as well as reform-minded Catholics like Juan de Valdes, Savonarola (as Elizabeth Clarke has so ably shown), and Bugensis (as demonstrated by Chauncey Wood).⁷

Yet Herbert generously praises human learning as well: "The Countrey Parson desires to be all to his Parish, and not onely a Pastour, but a Lawyer also, and a Phisician" (p. 259). These words come from the pastoral manual's twenty-third chapter entitled "The Parson's Completenesse," and this chapter's title strongly suggests that human learning completes and indeed fills out the form of divinity, incarnating eternal truth practically in this world. Standing on the parson's shelf is Michael Dalton's legal manual *The Country Justice* (its title perhaps an inspiration for Herbert's *The Country Parson*?) (p. 260), cheek-by-jowl with Jean François Fernel's *Universa*

Medicina (p. 261), a treatise particularly recommended by Herbert's brother Edward (see Hutchinson's note, pp. 560-61), and perhaps also with Luigi Cornaro's *Treatise of Temperance and Sobriety*, translated into English by Herbert himself (pp. 291-303).

Next to these handbooks are an unnamed "Anatomy" and an "Herball"; in the latter case Herbert cannot resist inserting a supplementary "Herball" of his own into the chapter, itemizing enthusiastically a wide array of simples and grasses and worts to cure the bodies of those within his spiritual cure. Nor is Herbert lacking a theory for this all-inclusive practice of learning: the parson's reading of Anatomy and Physic and of Herbals imitates "our Saviour [who] made plants and seeds to teach the people: for he was the true householder, who bringeth out of his treasure things new and old; the old things of Philosophy, and the new of Grace; and maketh the one serve the other." In other words – and the other words are Herbert's own – the watchword for his approach to human learning is "Nature serving Grace" (p. 261).

"Nature serving Grace" – a fine harmonious hierarchy it seems, where, as the speaker rhapsodizes in Herbert's poem "Man,"

More servants wait on Man,
Then he'l take notice of: in ev'ry path
He treads down that which doth befriend him,
When sicknesse makes him pale and wan.
O mightie love! Man is one world, and hath
Another to attend him.
(ll. 43-48)

As a similar speaker enthuses in the poem "Providence," "Of all the creatures both in sea and land / Onely to Man thou hast made known thy wayes" (ll. 5-6).

Yet there's the rub: we hear in these laudatory lines a creeping suggestion of human negligence, of our potential for intellectual arrogance and thoughtless exploitation, our treading down the friendly servants – in other words, a suggestion of our ungracious forgetting that Nature serves Man so that Man may serve Grace. To return to these same implications in the first stanza of "The Pearl," what if the "wayes of Learning" lead us cruelly to force unwilling nature by fire, or to "conspire" with the stars? What if Herbert wonders, with Doctor Faustus, "what a world of profit and delight, / Of power, honor, and omnipotence / Is promis'd to the studious artisan!"⁸ George Herbert, the translator of *The Great Instauration*, would know that after all, Francis Bacon's purpose is not only mental understanding of, but technical control over, the created order – and that often one must murder to dissect. And in "The Pearl," Herbert's speaker wants us to know that he knows the pull of this longing for a power that may rival God's – yet that he loves God nonetheless.

This reminder of the believer's first love is the prime antidote that Herbert presents for the disorder of intellectual over-reaching; I will turn now to the succeeding stanzas, which together provide another antidote to scholarly arrogance. These latter stanzas are no doubt important in themselves because they present other potential rivals to the love of God, but at the moment they are of interest because they present rivals to the "wayes of Learning" – that is, they present the rival "wayes of Honour," and the "wayes of Pleasure." In other words, despite the pretensions of the intellect to be the master means of knowing, social and sensual ways of knowing are given an equal opportunity for consideration – and then for eventual rejection.

No doubt, Herbert splendidly praises honor and reputation elsewhere in *The Temple*, specifically in the Solomonic and prudential lines of "The Church-porch," and also in the pastoral manual where he carefully parses the parson's duties to his own office and dignity. Herbert came by his *amour propre* honestly; raised in an old warrior family, he was younger brother to the aforementioned "Black Ned," serial duelist and one of the most easily-insulted men in England. Herbert knew and loved, as he says in "Affliction" (I), "The way that takes the town." In fact, the "wayes of Learning" appear in "Affliction" (I) as a most unconsoling consolation prize;

he complains, quite significantly, that God did "*betray* me to a lingring book, / And wrap me in a gown," condemning him to merely "*Academick* praise" (ll. 38-40, 45, emphasis mine). Similarly, in "The Pearl," the "wayes of Honour" are presented quite tellingly as a spectator sport, like tennis, with "quick returns of courtesy and wit," and with the speaker as a kind of umpire who urbanely discerns who's up and who's down "In vies of favor whether partie gains, / When glorie swells the heart" (ll. 13-15). This stanza also registers the potential deadliness of courtly bloodsport, as the speaker claims to know "How many drammes of spirit there must be / To sell my life unto my friends or foes" (ll. 18-19). This voice speaks as one who has walked the dangerous soul-stealing corridors of power, and has lived to tell the tale. No simpering academic he, this is a cool-eyed hard-headed man of the world, who nevertheless has a soft spot for God – "Yet I love thee," he reiterates.

Having established his *bona fides* as courtly veteran, the speaker, in the third stanza, now wants us to know something of his passions. Suddenly the voice of a closeted sensualist throbs to life in a passage that flows with sudden desire:

I know the wayes of Pleasure, the sweet strains,
The lullings and the relishes of it;
The propositions of hot bloud and brains;
What mirth and musick mean; what love and wit
Have done these twentie hundred yeares, and more:
I know the projects of unbridled store:
My stuffe is flesh, not brasse . . .
(ll. 21-27)

Here, abruptly, like a forced hothouse flower in winter, the erotic potential that has been present since the opening stanza erupts with an immediacy of language that eclipses everything that has come before. "Knowing" acquires, indeed asserts, its famously "biblical" and sexual sense, as if scholarly or experimental knowledge and social courtly knowledge were merely pale parodies of carnal knowledge. The speaker's persona of carefully controlled discernment begins to slip, partly revealing a face of deep and frustrated longing, for "my senses live / And grumble oft, that they have more in me / Then he that curbs them, being but one to five" (ll. 27-30). Like the more violent penultimate moment in "The Collar," as that speaker "rav'd and grew more fierce and wild / At every word" (ll. 33-34), this is a moment for some restorative intervention. In "The Collar" that intervention comes as the outside divine voice calls "Child!" (l. 35); here it is the return of the speaker's own adversative refrain, "Yet I love thee."

Following immediately after such a grumbled complaint, this third reassertion of God's love against yet another kind of knowledge feels the most abrupt, and seems to cost the speaker the most emotionally. Though the speaker has been presenting himself as the self-assured master of all these ways of knowing, his quest for knowledge seems nonetheless to have followed the same sort of degenerative pattern traditionally attributed to King Solomon, and followed by Faustus in his tragedy: the devolution from intellectual pride, to worldly glory, to sensual indulgence. What began in the library or the laboratory as a search for a master science, and then moved to kingly courts in a quest for secular power, has ended in the houses of pleasure or in the bedchamber, groping with unfulfilled longings – and perhaps with impotence. The speaker knows that he must again contain his impulses, and perhaps recoup his losses, so he returns in the last stanza to language which at first appears to restore control and full self-awareness:

I know all these, and have them in my hand:
Therefore not sealed, but with open eyes
I flie to thee, and fully understand
Both the main sale and the commodities;
And at what rate and price I have thy love;
With all the circumstances that may move . . .
(ll. 31-36)

Speaking like a man of business with his contracts in hand, his figures fully in mind and his costs entirely counted, he presents himself for the last time as "A Man Who Knows," a man whose erected wit, and whose *savoir faire*, have brought him to the foot of God's altar, where of course any reasonable man would want to be.

But then comes the final "Yet," which gives away the whole game. For this time the "Yet" turns not on how a learned, worldly-wise and self-directed man could still deign to love a perhaps unprepossessing deity; instead, this "Yet" turns on how a patient and generous God has stooped to love, seek, and find a would-be wise man who is both bewildered and debased:

Yet through these labyrinths, not my groveling wit,
But thy silk twist let down from heav'n to me,
Did both conduct and teach me, how by it
 To climbe to thee.

(ll. 37-40)

As it turns out, the speaker has been bluffing all along, whistling in the dark. He has not really been striding confidently down well-known pathways, but lost in a maze; his "wit" has not actually raised him up above the common lot, but brought him "groveling" low. Like a bragging little boy lost in the wilderness, his ways of knowing have led him astray, and he needs a lifeline – perhaps even a leash – to lead him up towards home.

If the ways of learning, followed by honor and pleasure, have like false lovers abandoned the speaker for lost, is Herbert then rejecting the ways of the scholar as worthless? Or rather, as Kathryn Walls writes, does "learning [turn] out to be the first of three as it were *lesser jewels*, which are sacrificed for the sake of union with Christ"?⁹ Walls is of course invoking, as does Herbert's own title, Jesus' parable of the Pearl of Great Price in Matthew 13:45, in which a man sells something of real value to purchase something of surpassing value; but one might also hear an echo of St. Paul's claim in Philippians 3:8 that "for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord . . . I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung." So which of these terms describes the relative value of learning? Is it a "lesser jewel" or is it "dung"? And is reason really, in the end, mere "groveling wit"?

As with all measures of relative value, the best answer seems to be "It depends." Whether learning is a lesser jewel or dung would depend, for Herbert, primarily on whether learning has first learned its own limits. It is clear that for this poem's speaker, human learning has at most only a relative, not an absolute, value. For many modern and secular folk, and for not a few religious ones, the subordination of human knowing to some invisible heavenly Logos is a truly alarming proposition – for Reason too can be a jealous god. But if Herbert intends to devalue learning in a poem like "The Pearl" – not to mention in others like "The Agonie," "Vanitie" (I) and "Divinitie" – then learning is in good and perhaps surprising company.

For if Herbert was a devoted scholar who nevertheless distrusted scholarship, he also had something of a lovers' quarrel with much else that he truly admired and deeply relished: with poetry, with the customs of the countryside, with laughter itself, and even with his "dearest Mother," the English Church. Reread the "Jordan" poems and "The Forerunners" and hear him warn against the seductions of his own enchanting language; review *The Country Parson* for his advice about maintaining a constant demeanor both of "mirth" and "sadness," and about "paring" and "cleaning" the old country customs that he admires (chapters 27 and 33, pp. 267-68, 283-84); and listen to this devoted builder of holy Anglican buildings dismiss their Solomonic temptations in two stunning lines: "All Solomons sea of brasse and world of stone / Is not so deare to thee as one good grone" ("Sion," ll. 17-18).

I have written elsewhere about Herbert's complex attitude towards church buildings and rituals: that any particular poem or passage will praise or denigrate some robe, rite, or collect depending on the speaker's rhetorical stance in response to a perceived threat; that the worshiper who sees these externals of worship as mere means to the end of an inner spiritual life can use them with a clear conscience and with joy; but that if

these externals become ends in themselves – that is, temptations to idolatry – Herbert waves them away as the mere figures and shadows that he has always believed them to be.¹⁰

In this connection that other, earlier Cambridge scholar, Christopher Marlowe, provides a useful comparison, and his Faustus's fiendful fortune still exhorts the wise. As the last half-hour strikes for Faustus's soul, what the learned Doctor craves is not more knowledge but less, not an increase of reason but its extinction: that "This soul should fly from me, and I be chang'd / Unto some brutish beast" (5.2.100-01). Having coveted all knowledge, the necromancer finally comes to loathe it, to desire nothing more than blank animal oblivion.

In contrast, the lesser jewels of learning continue to earn Herbert's admiration and devotion, but only as long as they know that their price is not priceless, and insofar as Herbert finds Nature truly serving Grace, not merely serving groveling human desire. For Herbert, the fault or virtue of learning lies finally not in Nature herself, nor in the seeker's wit, but rather in the seeker's will – not in what he would know, but why.

Endnotes:

1. George Herbert, *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (1941; corr. rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 88-89. All further references to Herbert's works are from this edition and will be indicated in the text of my essay by line numbers for poems and page numbers for prose.
2. Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 173-79.
3. Kenneth Alan Hovey, " 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met': The Baconian Context of George Herbert's 'Divinity,'" *English Language Notes* 22 (1985): 34.
4. Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 41, n. 32; 42, n. 34; 87-93.
5. For the interpretations of Beeching and Hutchinson, see Hutchinson, ed., *Works of George Herbert*, p. 507, note on lines 1-2 of "The Pearl"; Kathryn Walls, "Learning as Wine-Press in George Herbert's 'The Pearl,'" *Notes and Queries* 45 (1998): 43.
6. All these references to Herbert are in Hutchinson, ed., *Works of George Herbert*, p. xl.
7. Elizabeth Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: "Divinitie, and Poesie, Met"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 27-70; Chauncey Wood, "Herbert's 'The Pearl' and the *Commentary* by Francis Lucas Brugensis," in this issue of the *George Herbert Journal*.
8. Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 1995), 1.1.54-56.
9. Walls, "Learning as Wine-Press in George Herbert's 'The Pearl,'" p. 41.
10. Christopher Hodgkins, *Authority, Church, and Society in George Herbert: Return to the Middle Way* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), p. 179.