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A History of British Poetry

Genres – Developments – Interpretations

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9. RELIGIOUS METAPHYSICAL POETRY: GEORGE HERBERT AND HENRY VAUGHAN

MATTHIAS BAUER

1. 'Thought Felt' and the Search for Truth in the Word

The term 'Metaphysical Poetry' goes back to a disapproving statement by the neo-classical poet and dramatist John Dryden, who in his 1693 essay on satire found fault with the fact that John Donne, in his love poetry, "affects the metaphysics" (Dryden qtd. from Gardner 1972: 15). This means that thought, wit and "nice speculations of philosophy" (ibid.) are introduced to a sphere where, in Dryden's view, the heart only should be engaged. It was the 20th-century poet T.S. Eliot, who, in his essay on "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), took up Dryden's criticism and turned it into praise by regarding the Metaphysicals as poets who "feel their thought [...] immediately" (1951: 287). Eliot in fact rephrased Herbert J.C. Grierson's statement in the introduction to his anthology of Metaphysical Poetry (1921), according to which the Metaphysical Poets succeeded in achieving a "peculiar blend of passion and thought" (xvi). Grierson's anthology, which Eliot reviewed in his essay, was the first to bring together love poems and divine poems under this heading. The fusion of metaphysics (as the intellectual and spiritual investigation of truth) with deep personal and emotional involvement can help us recognise the similarities between certain writers of love poetry and religious poetry in the 17th century, even though they never formed a homo-genous group with a common artistic programme. For instance, the subtitle of the most influential work of religious poetry in the English language, George Herbert's (1593-1633) *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (1633) evokes the con-nection of metaphysics and the engagement of the heart, especially when "Sacred Poems" is taken to address "the metaphysics of true belief", as Sir Thomas Browne put it (*Hydriotaphia* V; Browne 2001: 133).

Besides 'thought felt', the way in which thought and language are connected has served to define Metaphysical Poetry. Samuel Johnson, the 18th-century writer and lexicographer, used the term "Metaphysical Poets" when he alleged Donne, Abraham Cowley and John Cleveland with endeavouring "to be singular in their thoughts" (1905: 20) and saw their wit in discovering "occult resemblances in things apparently unlike" (ibid.), mainly through far-fetched metaphor and simile. Unlike later critics, Dr. Johnson thought that the desired effect of such a discovery, namely "which he that never found it, wonders how he missed" (ibid.), was only rarely achieved by the poets with whom he was concerned. Eliot (1951: 282) thought otherwise but did not regard the metaphysical conceit, i.e. the development "of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it", as a feature common to all Metaphysical Poets.

Accordingly, more recent criticism has gone beyond the focus on metaphor or conceit, and emphasised the identity of thought and verbal expression as a hallmark of Metaphysical Poetry (Leimberg 1996: 15), suggesting that the poets' search for truth finds fulfilment in the verbal sign whose audible and visible, medial and conceptual dimensions all contribute to its realisation. An example of this are the pattern-poems by Herbert, Francis Quarles and others, which take up a tradition familiar since antiquity but use the visual arrangement as a hieroglyph of religious truth, fusing it with personal experience. The first example explained below (Herbert's "Coloss. 3.3") belongs to this kind of Metaphysical Poetry.

The two characteristic features of Metaphysical Poetry – a deeply personal engagement with truth and a use of language strikingly expressive of that truth – can be found in a great variety of admixtures. Even though individual assignations may be difficult, these features help us distinguish religious Metaphysical Poetry from other kinds of religious verse, just as the love poetry of the Metaphysicals can be distinguished from other kinds of secular verse. Moreover, most writers of religious Metaphysical Poetry are connected by a deliberate act of claiming affinity with Herbert. The title pages of their collections of sacred verse evoke Herbert's book through imitation and allusion. Thus there are Christopher Harvey's *The Synagogue, or the Shadow of the Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (1640), Richard Crashaw's *Steps to the Temple: Sacred Poems, With other Delights of the Muses* (1646) and Henry Vaughan's (1622-95) *Silex Scintillans, or Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (1650).

The common element of all these titles is the expression 'sacred poems', which, before Herbert, had not been used (in the plural form) as the title of an English printed book. Its ambiguity – sacredness being a feature of the subject dealt with but also of the poems themselves – implies an aesthetic statement: the poems have a special status and a value of their own, even though and because they are religious poems. Though the Bible is constantly evoked, most of the poems are not meditations on biblical passages like the first printed English sonnet sequence, Anne Locke's *Meditation* (1560), which is *A Paraphrase upon the 51. Psalm of David*. They rather claim a certain kind of textual independence as the poets' precious gifts: works of art that are given by God but are nevertheless the poets' very own products; "my first fruits" offered to God, as Herbert put it in "The Dedication" of *The Temple*.

The idea of sacredness as a feature of the poems themselves is supported by the architectural metaphor which is also a recurring element in the book titles that link the religious Metaphysical Poets. The temple in *The Temple* is the book itself, which begins with a section called "The Church-porch", in which the reader is prepared in ethical terms for entry into "The Church", i.e. for the admission both to the mysteries of religion and to the sacred poems proper. Having crossed the threshold, marked by a poem called "Superliminare", the reader first comes upon a pattern-poem called "The Altar". In terms of spatial analogy this may be explained as the first object seen when entering a church, even though it is placed at the other end (Herbert 2007: 91; Rickey

1966: 10). The progress towards that end is marked by the final poem in the sequence, "Love (III)", which presents the celestial banquet the speaker is invited to and thus indicates both the advance to the communion table in the church and the taste of the "mysticall repast" of the poems themselves, which the reader is promised in "Superliminare" (l. 4; Herbert 2002: 44).

The second part of Herbert's subtitle, "*Private Ejaculations*", also points to another common dimension of religious Metaphysical Poetry, i.e. its personal and private nature, as well as the desired spontaneity and artlessness which goes together with the "utmost art" (an expression used by Herbert in his poem "Praise [II]") of sacred poetry. Donne's "Holy Sonnets" prefigure the poetry of Herbert in this respect. In Donne, the subject of death, which had loomed large in his love poetry (Leimberg 1996: 128-39), becomes the concern of a very personal drama of the soul, as when he envisages, in the Holy Sonnet "At the round earths imagin'd corners" (Donne 2005: 106), the resurrection of the dead, a meditation which inevitably takes him to his own present situation and what he is to do in it: "Here on this lowly ground, / Teach me how to repent" (ll. 12f.). The nature of this personal concern distinguishes the Metaphysicals from contemporary religious poets such as Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645), whose *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611; Lanyer 1993) is an extended meditation on the Passion of Christ which addresses "all virtuous Ladies and Gentlewomen of this kingdome" (l. 48) and in particular those to whom she writes a string of dedicatory poems, at least partly with a view to correct disparaging views of women in general. For example, she wishes to establish a different image of Eve, maintaining that she "Was simply good, and had no powre to see / The after-comming harme did not appeare" (ll. 765f.; Lanyer 1993: 84). The insistence of the Metaphysicals on a personal search for truth and their experience of language owe more to the development of subjectivity in the English adaptation (and rejection) of Petrarchan love poetry by Wyatt and others and its fusion with Augustinian notions of the inner self. A notable example of this development is the translation of the Psalms by Sir Philip Sidney and his sister Mary, Countess of Pembroke. The influence of this translation on English poetry in general and the Metaphysical Poets in particular, is only now beginning to be fully appreciated. An example of this is Psalm 40, in which the speaker describes the experience of God's attention, and which is much more personal than other translations: "He did himself to me-ward bend, / And hearkened how and why that I did cry" (ll. 3f.; Sidney 2009: 77).

2. The Way Up and the Way Down: George Herbert, "Coloss. 3.3" (1633)

Joseph Summers once complained that Herbert is all too often remembered for the poems which "resemble the subject in typographical appearance" (1954: 123). In fact, however, there are only very few poems (such as "The Altar" and "Easter-Wings") in which this is the case. At the same time, Herbert employs a multitude of ways to make us realise the poem as a "hieroglyph" (ibid.), i.e. a body of signs in which form and content become one. The arrangement of the lines, their lengths, rhythms and rhymes,

as well as the ratios of the various numbers involved, are functional even when they are not imitative. In Herbert, these devices are more than just ornamentally aesthetic, and if they are playful, they indicate a serious play: when the poet stresses, for example, that "Beautie and beauteous words should go together" ("The Forerunners", l. 30; Herbert 2002: 352) he shows that the appropriateness of form is part of his poetic concept. The fusion of matter and manner so as to make the manner contribute to the matter of the poem is expressive of a general concept of two-in-oneness: the poet's words are to agree with God's word, just as his life is to be an imitation of Jesus; word and spirit, word and thought, hand and heart, outside and inside are to go together. At the same time, this very emphasis on analogy and similarity between the formal, semantic etc. aspects of each poem leads to a high degree of individuality. With the exception of a few sonnets, each poem of *The Temple* has a form of its own; a feature for which Herbert, as far as I can see, could only find his model in the Sidney-Pembroke Psalm translation.

One of the most striking examples of this concept is "Coloss. 3.3", a poem which is only one of three in *The Temple* (besides "Ephes. 4.30" and "The 23rd Psalme") that has a biblical reference as its title. Its subtitle is a quotation from this biblical verse, taken from Paul's epistle to the Colossians. Herbert modifies it, however, by changing the addressee. Whereas the Authorized Version has "For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3), Herbert's subtitle, *"Our life is hid with Christ in God"*, does not primarily instruct others but addresses the speaker himself and the community to which he belongs. He also leaves out "For ye are dead" for reasons which will be clearer once we have become familiar with the poem itself.

> *My* words & thoughts do both express this notion,
> That *Life* hath with the sun a double motion.
> The first *Is* straight, and our diurnall friend,
> The other *Hid*, and doth obliquely bend.
> 5   One life is wrapt *In* flesh, and tends to earth.
> The other winds towards *Him*, whose happie birth
> Taught me to live here so, *That* still one eye
> Should aim and shoot at that which *Is* on high:
> Quitting with daily labour all *My* pleasure,
> 10   To gain at harvest an eternall *Treasure*.
> ("Coloss 3.3"; Herbert 2002: 164)

The first thing we notice is that this poem, even though its shape does not imitate an object, cannot simply be read but must be looked at as well; or rather, it must be read in two ways at once. The typography of the ten-line poem is remarkable for the words printed in italics, one in each horizontal verse line, which together form a diagonal line reading *"My Life Is Hid In Him That Is My Treasure"*. This is yet another version or transformation of the biblical verse, in which the pronoun is changed once more so as to turn this into the speaker's personal utterance. The notion of hiding is visualised by presenting a text hidden within another text; a practice known as *intextus* and reminiscent of the figured poems e.g. by Hrabanus Maurus (c. 780-856) in *De Laudibus*

Sanctae Crucis, which was reprinted in 1605 (Cook 1986: 23f.). The poem as a whole is a square of ten lines having ten syllables each (not counting the feminine endings in lines 1, 2, 9 and 10). The diagonal line divides this square into two triangles, which are equilateral: each has three sides of nine units (lines and syllables) length. This miraculous geometry is corroborated by the many representations of the ways in which one, two and three are shown to be related to each other and even to fuse. For example, the speaker and the divine "He" ("Him", l. 6), the two persons referred to in the diagonal line, become one. This transformation of two into one corresponds to the transformation of three into one or two into one or two into three as it is expressed by the biblical quotation which forms the subtitle of the poem: *"Our life is hid with Christ in God"*. Man, Christ and God are three-in-one, but the triad also forms united groups of two: "Our life" and Christ are hidden together in God; since "hid with" also means 'hidden by', however, the subtitle also implies that our life is enclosed by Christ-in-God.

When reading the poem line by line, we are first confronted with dichotomies: in the first line, about "words & thoughts" and in the second line about the "double motion" of the speaker's life which is similar to the motions of the sun. At first it seems that the two motions are clearly to be distinguished: a "straight" (l. 3) one, which is "our diurnall friend" (ibid.), indicated by the straightness of the poem's lines to be read in time, one after the other and a hidden one, which "doth obliquely bend" (l. 4), indicated by the line forming, at an oblique angle to the lines proper, the hidden words. Apart from our daily lives, Herbert seems to say, there is a life secretly enclosed in or by one who is above or beyond our quotidian existence. This is confirmed by the familiar pun on "sun" in the second line, where the speaker refers to the celestial body whose daily course from dawn to dusk appears to be a straight one from east to west, but which, during the year, follows an oblique or slanted course between the two tropics (or which, during the night, returns unseen to the east). It also refers, however, to the son who shared human life but who, in his divine nature, is hid in God. The parallel between *"with Christ"* in the subtitle and "with the sun" (l. 2) confirms this reading. To Herbert, the 'sun/son' pun was an example of language revealing truth (see his poem "The Sonne" [Bauer 1995: 108]).

Such a reading agrees with the view of most commentators that the diagonal line represents the "hidden life with Christ, which is said to 'obliquely bend'" (Wood 1979: 15; cf. Fish 1972: 203f., Cook 1986: 44). But when we look at the poem more closely, doubts arise about such an unequivocal identification. Is the motion which "obliquely bend[s]" (l. 4) to be identified with the one that "winds" (l. 6) and to be contrasted with the one that "tends to earth" (l. 5)? This seems possible, but it is equally possible to see a connection rather than a contrast between lines four and five since both refer to a life which is inside rather than outside, as it is *"Hid"* or enclosed by a body of flesh ("wrapt *In* flesh", l. 5). Line five would then continue the previous line, especially since the downward movement expressed by "tends to earth" (l. 5) perfectly coincides with the "obliquely" (l. 4) bent, downward motion of the hidden life or line. The syntactic parallel, however, between "The first" (l. 3) and "One" (l. 5)

and the repeated "The other" (l. 4, l. 6) contradicts this reading. If lines four and six refer to the same movement or life, the motion which "doth obliquely bend" (l. 4) and the one that "winds towards *Him*" (l. 6) must be identical. But here again difficulties arise: if the two movements are represented by the layout of the text, the one that is "*Hid* and doth obliquely bend*" (l. 4) corresponds to the diagonal line, whereas the winding movement is the one which follows the verse lines through the poem. A turning and winding movement is what 'verse' of course etymologically means, since *versus* originally denoted the furrow made by the turning of the plough (Isidore 2006: VI.xiv.7). Such a movement is pointed out by the enjambment of lines six to eight, in which the winding course is imitatively described. This obvious representation goes together with the more subtle one of syntactically and semantically blending the two movements: the straight line of our daily lives is a winding one, while the oblique line is of course also a straight one, whether it tends to earth or to heaven. The seed has to be lowered into the earth before the shoots (l. 8) may appear and follow that which "*Is* on high" (ibid.), i.e. the sun or son of line two, which is literally placed high up in the poem.

Now we also see the reason why Herbert deletes "For ye are dead" from the biblical verse he quotes; he corrects the Apostle Paul in so far as the Christian is not already glorified in death but has to "live here" (l. 7) a life of "daily labour" (l. 9). Only by such a life is an eternal harvest to be gained, a notion similar to Donne's "Here on this lowly ground, / Teach me how to repent". Herbert shares this humanist emphasis on teaching and right action: Christ's birth "Taught me to live here so, *That* still one eye / Should aim and shoot at that which *Is* on high" ("Coloss. 3.3", ll. 7f.). The daily labour must finally be quitted but first it must be done in order to repay or clear off ('quit') pleasure, which in turn has to be completed: that is, the poem itself, the "versing" that the poet elsewhere confesses to "relish" ("The Flower", l. 39; Herbert 2002: 332). The poet who likes to allude to the meaning of his first name ('George', from Greek *georgon*, 'farmer') here shows his work and his pleasure to be one and the same, just as "the first fruits" of his labour ("The Dedication", l. 1; Herbert 2002: 10) are considered gifts he has received and the treasure in which he finds his life to be hidden (cf. the field in which the treasure is hid, Matt. 13:44) is the thesaurus of language itself.

3. The Way Forward and the Way Back: Henry Vaughan, "The Retreat"

Happy those early days! when I
Shined in my Angel-infancy.
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
5   Or taught my soul to fancy aught
But a white, celestial thought,
When yet I had not walked above
A mile, or two, from my first love,
And looking back (at that short space,)
10   Could see a glimpse of his bright face;
When on some *gilded cloud*, or *flower*
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity;
15   Before I taught my tongue to wound
My conscience with a sinful sound,
Or had the black art to dispense
A several sin to every sense,
But felt through all this fleshly dress
20   Bright *shoots* of everlastingness.
O how I long to travel back,
And tread again that ancient track!
That I might once more reach that plain,
Where first I left my glorious train,
25   From whence the enlightened spirit sees
That shady city of palm trees;
But (ah!) my soul with too much stay
Is drunk, and staggers in the way.
Some men a forward motion love,
30   But I by backward steps would move,
And when this dust falls to the urn
In that state I came return.
("The Retreat"; Vaughan 1983: 172f.)

Vaughan's poem (1650) varies the trope of the wanderer or pilgrim on earth; this trope links many of the poems in *Silex Scintillans*. The speaker realises that he has deviated from his original track (or "train", l. 24), which contributes to turning the perennial metaphor of the journey of life into a metaphysical conceit: the speaker's awareness of his own state of sin leads him to a striking conclusion, in which he uses this metaphor not to conceptualise life as a "forward motion" (l. 29) but to reveal and express the longing for a "return" (l. 32). Childhood is recognised as a better state than adulthood; the latter is marked by the acquisition of learning and arts (l. 5, ll. 15-18) that injure the conscience and corrupt the senses.

"The Retreat" serves as an example of Metaphysical Poetry not only because a familiar metaphor is treated in a new way so as to question the idea of a personal progression. Two other features common to many Metaphysical Poems are varied in a characteristic manner: the structure of the poem and the use of language become part and parcel of what the poem is 'about'; and the search for truth is shown to be a personal one, even to the point of the speaker's setting himself off from what "Some men" (l. 29) do and prefer. The speaker does not make any statements about life as a journey in general but reflects on his very own course and the exclamation with which the poem begins – "Happy those early days!" – already shows that this reflection is suffused with emotion.

The speaker's temporal and spatial distance from a state of perfection in the past is marked by the repeated use of the conjunctions "when" and "before" in the first part

of the poem: "When I / Shined ..." (ll. 1f.), "Before I understood ..." (l. 3); "When yet I had not walked / A mile, or two" (ll. 7f.), "When on some *gilded cloud*, or *flower* / My gazing soul would dwell an hour" (ll. 11f.), "Before I taught my tongue to wound / My conscience" (ll. 15f.). Whereas at first we may not be quite sure whether we are told a story of successful intellectual growth in which the speaker has gained an understanding of his surroundings ("Before I understood this place", l. 3), we are soon to learn that the knowledge he has acquired has not improved him in any other way than being able to see that "this place" is full of evil. In contrast to what and where he is now, the "Angel-infancy" (l. 2) that he left behind was a state of happiness; the "white, celestial thought" (l. 6) fancied by the soul back then is contrasted with the "black art" (l. 15) with which he dispenses sins afterwards. There is a point at which things went wrong, when, in his personal re-enactment of the story of the fall, he first ate from the tree of knowledge: his childhood thus appears as a state of innocence like Adam's and Eve's (on this notion, see Bauer 2013, referring to John Earle's *Microcosmography* of 1628). In the poem, this fall is first clearly addressed in line 15, leaving the first 14 lines to the description of his earlier state. Even though the poem formally evokes the notion of simplicity by being composed of tetrameter rhyming couplets throughout, it subtly sets off the separate sphere of childhood by suggesting the closed form of the sonnet for its first section.

But before that point on his journey there is another one. We are not simply told the story of losing the paradise of childhood but learn that the speaker made a stop after a "short space" (l. 9) on the road: when the child "had not walked above / A mile, or two" (ll. 7f.) from his "first love" (l. 8) he looked back and caught "a glimpse of his bright face" (l. 10). This first love is obviously a transcendent one; life is called a "second race" (l. 4), which presupposes that there must have been a first one before life on earth. This goes together with the "celestial" (l. 6) thought: the speaker as a child is still so much of an angel that he can see the bright face of God when looking back. Thus the search for the face of God (cf. Ps. 105) is undertaken by retrospect and memory. Vaughan here makes use of the Platonic concept of *anamnesis,* according to which the soul remembers its pre-existence and endows it with a temporal and spatial dimension by attaching it to the earliest phase of human life, which is thus perceived as a privileged state of human existence (Martin 1967: 247). To put it differently, Platonic *anamnesis* is linked to the New Testament emphasis on children as the owners of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3f.). The connexion of the child with a celestial state before birth is expressed by the quality of light, which is a central feature of Vaughan's natural and religious mysticism (cf. poems such as "Regeneration" and "The Night"). The child shines (l. 2) and his thought is "white" (l. 6) while the divine face he sees is "bright" (l. 10). His glance goes back to the bright face which shines forward on his path, where it casts the "shadows of eternity" (l. 14) which he sees in the "gilded cloud, or flower" (l. 11). The child's meditation of nature as the shadow of God's eternal light is marked by a transcendence of his temporal existence – when the little child pauses on his way time becomes irrelevant, as he may "dwell an hour" (l. 12) on the objects of his gaze.

The fusion of nature and divinity – what even has been called Vaughan's pantheism – comes to the fore in the description of his childhood as a state in which he "felt through all this fleshly dress / Bright *shoots* of everlastingness" (ll. 19f.). This is a very special Metaphysical conceit in which metaphor is put upon metaphor: the fairly conventional metaphor of the "fleshly dress", which expresses the Platonic (but also much older) concept of the body as a dress of the soul (e.g. *Phaidon* 87b-e), is re-vitalised by the verb *felt*: the speaker remembers feeling as if from inside his body something was growing outward through his skin or dress. The soul, from where the everlastingness grows, is thus conceived in natural terms. The shoots that grow in the child establish another metaphor, namely that he becomes (like) a plant or tree: he is part of the nature in which "shadows of eternity" (l. 14) can be seen. The repetition of the adjective 'bright' furthermore identifies these shoots with the divine source of eternity. The expression "*shoots* of everlastingness" (l. 20) itself is yet another striking element of this multi-layered metaphorical cluster, in that it combines the abstract with the natural and concrete so as to form a paradox: what is by definition immaterial, unchangeable and inseparable, 'everlastingness', becomes dynamic when it defines the material quality and nature of (at least theoretically) countable 'shoots'. Moreover, 'shoot' is ambiguous, for besides the young branch or the action of sprouting (*OED n.*[1] 2.a. and b.) it may also denote an act of shooting (e.g. with a bow) or a "motion [...] as though shooting or being shot in a particular direction" (*OED n.*[1] 1.a. and 3.a.). In that case, the "*shoots* of everlastingness" may very well come from without and the child feels them permeate his dress, skin or body and reach his innermost self or soul. In his complex conceit, Vaughan fuses opposite movements so as to underline the relationship of child and eternity.

Between that time and the speaker's present he must have started corrupting his conscience. The "black art" (l. 17) by which he has done this is evocative of magic but it is more nearly defined by the verb "dispense" (ibid.), which is quite unusual in connection with "sins" (l. 18). Two fields of study emerge as a consequence, which both have a biographical connection to the poet: on the one hand, 'dispense' points to the art of the doctor and chemist who makes up and dispenses medicines. 'Dispensing sins', in this context, is heavily ironic; obviously they are drugs serving to debase the senses (that are part of the soul), which makes them impervious to "shadows of eternity" (l. 14). On the other hand, 'dispense' is a legal and religious term. It means to grant "relaxation of the strict letter of the law *in* a special case" (*OED* "dispense" *v.* 4. *intr.*) and in Early Modern English could also be used transitively (*OED* 5. cites "1591 *Troublesome Raigne Iohn* i. sig. E3[v], Our holy Father hath dispenst his sinnes"). The black art, in this sense, is a kind of religious hypocrisy or self-deception, in which the speaker obviously absolves himself (or his senses) from his sins. It goes well with this irony that there is Metaphysical verbal wit in the expression "to every sense" (l. 18), which is the punning opposite of the child's 'innocence' ('in no sense').

After the child's looking back, gazing on *"gilded cloud*, or *flower"* (l. 11), and after the adult's promulgation of sin, a third stage on the speaker's road is marked by his present desire, which now becomes his most urgent concern: "O how I long to travel back / And tread again the ancient track!" (ll. 21f.) The reflection on his own journey of life has fostered this ardent wish in him, which is already hinted at in the opening exclamation "Happy those early days!" Similar to the speaker in Vaughan's poem "Child-hood", he realises that childhood is "An age of mysteries! which he / Must live twice, that would God's face see" ("Child-hood", ll. 35f.; Vaughan 1983: 289). In "The Retreat", the desire to become a child again, modelled on Matthew 18:3 ("Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven"; Authorized Version), is literally conceptualised as a conversion, i.e. a turning back, even though the expression "tread again" ("The Retreat", l. 22) and, in the next line, the wish "That I might once more reach that plain" (l. 23), also suggest a repetition. He wishes for a second chance, to go back to the point of deviation and, this time, stay on the "glorious train" (l. 24). The point of deviation is now located on "that plain" (anticipatory of the plain in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* of 1668, where the pilgrim threatens to fall into the Slough of Despond); from that plain "the enlightened spirit sees / That shady city of palm trees" (ll. 25f.). This connects with the "shadows of eternity" (l. 14) spied when a child and alludes to the biblical subtext, for the "city of palm trees" is Jericho, the destination of the return of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt (cf. Joshua 6:1-27). This allusion serves to characterise the speaker's personal journey, or his desire, as being directed both forwards and backwards. It remains open whether the city is seen ahead of the traveller on the plain, or behind him.

To the speaker, the retreat remains a wish. Like the speaker in "Child-hood", who exclaims "I cannot reach it" (l. 1), he realises that his "soul with too much stay / Is drunk, and staggers in the way" ("The Retreat", ll. 27f.). This drunkenness of the soul that has dwelled too long in the knowledge of sin is the counterpart of the child's dwelling an hour in gazing at the "weaker glories" (l. 13) of nature. But the very difference also establishes the link between them. He is now twice removed from his "first love" (l. 8); what he remembers is the child remembering it. And this is another link: even though he cannot become a child again and cannot see the divine face anymore, the very act of looking backwards and remembering connects the adult at this stage of the journey with the child at the first. If the angel-like nature of the child consists in his power of *anamnesis*, the memory of this state is the first step away from the conscience-wounding art of the adult.

Even though the speaker's soul is infected by sensuality (it is "drunk" [l. 28] like the body), his will (the most supreme part of the soul) remains intact: he cannot move back to the child's track but he "would move" (l. 30) by "backward steps" (ibid.). Thus at last he considers the end of his journey: the conjunction 'when' appears again but now it refers to the future: "And when this dust falls to the urn / In that state I came return" (ll. 31f.). Unlike Thomas Traherne, who in his poetry claims to become a child

again, Vaughan does not go any further than memory and desire. But by the very utterance of both the art of speech, which at first only served to wound the conscience, is shown to serve a better end, and the "black art" (l. 17) becomes the black art of the printed letters on the page. The "enlightened spirit" (l. 25) that sees the journey's final aim is the shining child on which the light of the bright face is shining. But 'enlightened' in Vaughan is a multi-faceted word; it already participates in the sense that was to make it the key term of the Age of Enlightenment (*OED* 'enlightened' *adj.* 1. "Having greater knowledge, understanding, or insight"). In Vaughan the enlightenment of the adult, the greatest reason he can use, is the turning away from his corrupt state. The "enlightened spirit" is thus not just that of the child that the speaker was. When only the child is meant the past tense is used throughout the poem. The "enlightened spirit", however, "sees" (l. 25): Vaughan uses a generic present here. It thus represents a real hope for the speaker, albeit his staggering in the way.

4. The Impact of Religious Metaphysical Poetry

Religious Metaphysical Poetry represents both a new form and the apex of sacred lyrical poetry in English literary history. Its influence has been far-reaching and considerable, even beyond the immediate realm of poetry. An example is the fact that a great number of Herbert's poems were turned into hymn lyrics and thus became a feature of popular religious practice; John Wesley, for instance, adapted 49 poems from *The Temple* for his various collections of hymns, 42 alone for *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739; Schliebs 1970: 557; Leach 1952: 183). Thus the very age that was bewildered by the discovery of "occult resemblances" (Johnson 1905: 20) saw Metaphysical Poetry very much alive, even though formal experiments and surprising concepts were mitigated through adaptation. By contrast, 19th-century religious poets as different as Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins bear witness to the impact of the formal and conceptual unorthodoxy of Metaphysical Poetry. Before them, specific dialogues with the Metaphysicals, and in particular with Vaughan, can be noted, for example, in Blake's and Wordsworth's emphasis on childhood as a sacred state of human innocence. The opening lines of Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" (written c.1803, published 1863) – "To see a world in a grain of sand / And a heaven in a wild flower / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour" (ll. 1-4; Clements 1990: 174) – clearly echo both Vaughan's "The Retreat" and "The World" (Clements 1990: 174), even though he does not share Vaughan's religious outlook; both "Child-hood" and "The Retreat" have been identified as impulses for Wordsworth's "Immortality" ode (1802-04), even though Vaughan's longing for the state of childhood is, unlike Wordsworth's, never a nostalgic one (Lobsien 2010: 212).

As we have seen, in the 20th century it was, among others, Eliot who brought about a reappraisal of the Metaphysical Poets by recognising the coherence of intellect and sensibility which cannot be separated from their religious concern. Eliot's own development as a poet bears witness to this; when he writes, for example, in the third

section of "The Dry Salvages" (in *Four Quartets*), "And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back" (2002: 196), he rephrases the fusion of movements that is central to both poems discussed above and thus evokes the religious concepts expressed by them. The difference lies in the fact that for both Herbert and Vaughan and the other religious poets of their time divine salvation surely exists, however uncertain it may be for the individual who longs for it.

The impact of religious Metaphysical Poetry, however, is not only to be seen in specific influences and adaptations. It is also related to the fact that the religious poetry by Donne, Herbert, Vaughan and others helped establish certain features of poetry that we frequently take for granted. This was brought about by the transformation of secular modes and issues and in turn bears upon secular poetry. One of them is the secular idea of artistic creation which is transformed into a new concept of religious poetry that in turn influences the status of poetry in general: if poetry, for example, is conceptualised as an exchange of gifts with God, it is to a certain degree removed from immediate social processes of exchange (e.g. courtly patronage; cf. Schoenfeldt 1991) and thus gains autonomy, especially since the poems are neither prayers nor liturgical texts. The 'sacred poems' of Herbert and his followers can be said to have contributed to Romantic as well as modern concepts of poetry as a special, non-pragmatic form of utterance. Another example is the notion of poetry as individual, subjective expression, which is a feature of religious Metaphysical Poetry that was inspired both by secular love poetry and the Christian (in particular Protestant) emphasis on the individual's investigation of conscience. This feature also contributed to general notions that have become tacit assumptions about the nature of poetry. A case in point is the new way in which Herbert made the titles of his poems expressive of the individual concerns addressed by them (see Bauer 1995). Last but not least, the Metaphysical Poets' awareness of language, its potential and limitations, has substantially contributed to the way in which poets (such as Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, Wallace Stevens, and many others) have explored grammar and verbal expression as a source of meaning.

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10. POETRY AND POLITICS IN THE CIVIL WAR PERIOD: ANDREW MARVELL, JOHN MILTON, MARGARET CAVENDISH AND KATHERINE PHILIPS

INGO BERENSMEYER

1. Civil War and Revolution: A Brief Historical Introduction

17th-century England is characterised by an ongoing conflict between traditional values and new ideas, a conflict that intermittently burst out into violence and public slaughter until it was settled in the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. In the political arena, from the 1620s onwards, there was a growing tension between King and Parliament. This was partly responsible for the English Civil War, which broke out in 1642 and ended with the Battle of Worcester in 1651. This war split England's political landscape into Royalists and Parliamentarians. The Royalists, in support of the King, shared a traditional understanding of monarchy and were in favour of asserting the King's 'prerogative' (i.e. a more absolutist view of the King's role in government). Parliament, however, was responsible for allocating much-needed money to the King; so the Parliamentarians aimed to gain more influence on actual policy-making. Yet the divide was also a religious one: the Parliamentarians were mostly radical Protestants who opposed the established Church of England, which they regarded as being in dire need of further reformation and 'purification' from elements of Catholic ritual (hence the term 'Puritan'). The Royalists, on the contrary, were in favour of traditional 'High Church' practices; some of them also converted to Catholicism.

After a series of decisive military victories, the Parliamentarians (also known as 'Roundheads' for their short haircuts; the royalist Cavaliers wore their hair long) won the War; they abolished the monarchy and executed King Charles I in 1649. Charles's son and heir to the throne, later King Charles II, took his followers into exile first in Paris and later in the Netherlands. Until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, England was a republic, or 'Commonwealth', governed by a Council of State. In 1653, Oliver Cromwell rose to power as Lord Protector, installing a kind of dictatorship. But the republic had to face many enemies, both inside and outside England, especially the French and the Dutch. Since the Puritans ran the state according to their ideals of 'godly rule' – which involved closing all public theatres and condemning the celebration of Christmas and other 'superstitious' forms of festivity – they failed to win the hearts of the people. Moreover, the republic was far from a modern democracy but an oligarchy ruled by a small educated elite. When Cromwell (notorious for his bloody military exploits in Ireland) died in September 1658, its political foundations were already disintegrating, and the more moderate Puritans, especially in the army, agreed to a return of the King, which marks the beginning of the Restoration. The period