

Form miming meaning

Iconicity in language
and literature = [1]

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BIBLIOTHEK

GE 120.240

GE 200

GE 300

1999

JOHN BENJAMINS PUBLISHING COMPANY
AMSTERDAM/PHILADELPHIA

1974/01

Iconicity and Divine Likeness

George Herbert's "Coloss. 3.3"

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1. Introduction

The subject of this essay is the connection between formal and semantic aspects of language in George Herbert's poem "Coloss. 3.3", which will be examined from the perspective of 'iconicity'. This term, as distinct from other expressions which might be used for such a relationship (e.g. 'functionality'), fits particularly well the cultural and theological context in which Herbert's use of poetic language has to be seen, for it points to the concept of similarity or likeness which can be regarded as a common denominator of the pursuit of knowledge, artistic creation, and the search for religious truth in the early modern period.¹ It can be argued that Herbert is more obviously conscious of poetic form than, for example, Donne or Crashaw. One might even go so far as to say that in Herbert's *The Temple*, published in 1633, nearly every kind of iconic representation is to be found. Thus, to give only a few examples, thematic concerns may be reflected by the shape and outline of the printed text or the sound of its words, by the numbers implied in the structure of a poem, by syntactical patterns conspicuously employed, or by links made between poems through formal correspondence. This characteristic feature of Herbert's poetry, however, defies critical simplifications, and is only to be appreciated by means of closely reading individual poems. At the same time, the close reading of such a poem as "Coloss. 3.3" may contribute to making us more acutely aware of the iconic dimension of poetic language in general.

Joseph H. Summers once observed critically that Herbert is too often

remembered only for the poems which “resemble the subject in typographical appearance”, and is credited with inventing “the practice of writing poems in shapes such as wings and altars” (Summers 1954: 123). Among some 170 poems of *The Temple*, however, there are just two obvious pattern-poems, “The Altar” and “Easter-wings”. The shapes of both poems are traditional and could already be found in the Greek Anthology.² Summers points out that besides these two “visual hieroglyph[s]” (*ibid* p.140) *The Temple* includes a number of poems in which the “formal organisation of the subject [is] imitated by the formal organization of the poem” (*ibid* p.135), a way of representation which, in semiotic terminology, would be called diagrammatic. In these cases, the reading process involves discovering the hidden relationship between the subject matter of a poem and the sounds and letters of its words, as well as their grammatical and metrical order. While Summers himself mentions several examples of this kind, and some critical attention, notably by Martin Elsky, has been paid to “the materiality of language” in Herbert’s poems (Elsky 1983), many treasures remain to be raised. Furthermore, the function and intellectual context of Herbert’s iconic language have not yet been fully explored. One of the most perceptive contributions to this topic is still Rosalie Colie’s 1963 essay, in which she discusses “the shape of content” in *The Temple*, regarding the poet’s matching of form to matter as an imitation of the *logos*. For the greater number of Herbert’s poems, however, the question of what this imitation exactly means still remains unanswered. In spite of John Shawcross’s pointing out that it “is a cliché of criticism ... that the stanzaic form, structure, and metrics of the individual poems in *The Temple* have major significance for meaning within each poem and within the sequence” (Shawcross 1980: 211), it seems that we are only just beginning to see or hear on how many interconnected levels of Herbert’s poetry the medium is an image and part of the message.

For example, Inge Leimberg has recently shown that the “idea” of “Easter-wings”, namely that “faith in Christ’s resurrection is like a pair of angel’s wings carrying man out of ... his fallen existence upwards to be again with God” (Leimberg 1996: 480) is to be recognized not only in the outline of the poem as a whole but in the very shape of its letters. Thus in the lines “Till he became / Most poore: / With thee / O let me rise” and “That I became / Most thinne. / With thee / Let me combine”, the letters M and W, which mark the center and turning point in both parts of the poem, are given a position in which they become an image not only of the wings but of the complete reversal taking place at Easter, as they exactly mirror each other. The example already suggests that

in Herbert’s poetry iconic representation is not confined to the mimetic relationship between subject matter and auditory patterns or visual shape. Rather, as will be shown more closely in “Coloss. 3.3”, outer form itself may become an image of the connection between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’. Herbert’s concern with the relationship between God and man, spirit and matter, principle and realization, or meaning and appearance is, as it were, translated into the spatial and temporal relationship between the elements which constitute the ordered language of the poem. The distance and identity of both kinds of form — the outward shape of things and their inner pattern or archetype — is thus reflected by outer and inner, marginal and central, large and small, or plain and mysterious parts of the text. Regarding *The Temple* as a whole, this includes the relationship between such obviously iconic poems as “Easter-wings” and others in which the mirror of shape and structural order is darkened.

An intermediate position is held by Herbert’s “Anagram”, where the subject of Christ’s incarnation, of his being borne by Mary, in whom he “pitches his tent”, is not only visualized by the braces enclosing the MARY/ARMY anagram within the split-up word “*Ana-gram*” (cf. Leiter 1965: 543). It is also to be found in the subscription to this typographical emblem (cf. Elsky 1983: 254–55): “How well her name an Army doth present / In whom the *Lord* of *Hosts* did pitch his tent!” The Lord’s intent made manifest in his choice of Mary is visualized by the words *in* and *tent* between which the second line is stretched out. *Intentus* of course means “stretched out” and exactly fits the image of a tent upheld by stretched lines. Thus both space (the typographical arrangement of the words upon the page) and time (here implied by the “etymological” use of words)³ are seen by the poet as places where an original assumes outer form. If this is paradoxically realized by means of enclosure, the mystery of the divine person is all the more cogently pointed out, since he is, according to the traditional Hermetic dictum, a circle whose centre is everywhere, whose circumference nowhere.⁴

2. "Coloss. 3.3"

*Coloss. 3.3**Our life is hid with Christ in God*

My words & thoughts do both expresse 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.
 One life is wrapt *In* flesh, and tends to earth: 5
 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,
 To gain at harvest an eternall *Treasure*. 10

In "Coloss. 3.3" the subject of embodiment and enclosure is visualized by a diagonal *intextus* (or, and one should not put it past Herbert to have implied this pun, an *acros[s]tic*) reminiscent of the figured poetry by Porphyrius and Hrabanus Maurus. Elizabeth Cook has reminded us that Wimpfeling's 1503 edition of Maurus's *De Laudibus Sanctae Crucis* was republished in 1605, and that Herbert's sponsor and friend Lancelot Andrewes owned a copy (Cook 1986: 23–24). The poem is an exact square of ten lines having ten syllables each (not counting the feminine endings in lines 1, 2, 9 and 10). The diagonal *intextus* divides this square into two equilateral triangles, each having three sides of nine units length. Semantically, the notion of two seems to prevail. In line 1, the two-fold nature of "words & thoughts" is emphasized by "both", in line 2 a "double motion" is mentioned, and in lines 3–6 the syntax is structured by the contrasting pairs "The first" — "The Other" and "One" and "The other". Then, however, only one of a pair of eyes is mentioned, the one which "aim[s] and shoot[s] at that which *Is* on high". Mere opposition and dichotomy thus seem to be left behind when the speaker and the divine "He", 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 says

that our life is enclosed by Christ-in-God. The mystical mathematics of this theological statement is epitomized and reflected by the shape of the poem, which evinces a kind of miraculous geometry: a square which is formed of two equilateral triangles, so that the numerical length of its diagonal (10) is identical with the length of its sides (also 10). The unity of two and three is also to be found in the two equilateral triangles which remain when the diagonal line is taken out: each of it has three sides of nine units length; nine, however, is also the square of three.

Herbert's subject is the motion of human life which, like (or together with) that of the sun, is a double one. When he stresses the identity of "words & thoughts" in expressing this "notion",⁵ he implicitly points to the proximity of subject-matter and visual representation on the page. Notion and notation go together. (The musical connotations of "notion" should not be neglected, either.) But what exactly is expressed both semantically and iconically? At first it seems that there are two motions clearly to be distinguished: a "straight" one, which is "our diurnall friend", 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", indicated by the line forming, at an oblique angle to the lines proper, the hidden words, "*My Life Is Hid In Him That Is My Treasure*". 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 line 2. This line 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 tropics⁶ (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" in line 2 confirms this reading.)

Such a reading agrees with Chauncey Wood's view, shared by most commentators, that the diagonal line represents the "hidden life with Christ, which is said to 'obliquely bend'" (Wood 1979: 15; cf. Fish 1972: 203–04, Patrides 1974: 100, 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]" (line 4) to be identified with the one that "winds" (line 6) and to be contrasted with the one that "tends to earth" (line 5)? This seems possible, but it is equally possible to see a connection rather than a contrast between lines 4 and 5 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"). Line 5 would then continue line 4, especially since the downward movement expressed by "tends to earth" perfectly coincides with the "obliquely" bent, downward motion of the hidden life or line. The syntactic parallel, however, between "The first" and "One" in lines 3 and 5 and the repeated "The other" in lines 4 and 6 contradicts this reading. If lines 4 and 6 refer to the same movement or life, the motion which "doth obliquely bend" and the one that "winds towards *Him*" 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" 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.⁷ This movement is pointed out by the enjambment of lines 6–8, in which the winding course is imitatively described. This obvious kind of iconic device 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 identity of straightness and obliquity is further reflected typographically within the diagonal line. The words are all printed in italics, that is, oblique letters. But the initial letters of these words, emphasized by being capitalized, are all composed of straight lines: M, L, I, H, and T.

Thus, in spite of the seemingly clear-cut distinction between "The one" and "the other", it is impossible to tell the two movements apart. They are shown to be inextricably linked, a connection which is also visualized by the fact that the personal pronoun "*Him*" is the object both of the diagonal straight line and of the verse lines denoting the laborious, winding movement. The words "*In Him*" enclose the centre of the poem, no matter whether it is read diagonally or following the horizontal lines (where the marginal "earth" becomes the central word; it is the 42nd or 43rd word of 84 or 85 words in the poem, depending on whether the ampersand in line 1 counts as a word). Seen two-dimensionally, the centre of the square of verse lines is formed by the four words "*In* flesh ... towards *Him*". Thus the spatial centre of the poem enfolds the numerical or temporal one, "earth", which spatially belongs to the periphery of the printed text. This double aspect of the centre coincides with the mystical geometry of the poem. The 'solution' to the paradox of our life being on the one hand "wrapt *In* flesh" and, on the other hand, "*Hid In Him*" is of course that Christ himself is

made flesh ("whose happie birth") and is, as Herbert says in the next poem of the sequence ("Vantie [I]"), "Embosome[d] in us" (24). This mystery is literally "centred, and embowelled in the womb and bosom" of Herbert's text (Donne 1953–62: vol. 7, 302). The N-shaped appearance of the poem as a whole (a square with a diagonal line from the top left-hand corner to the bottom right-hand one) also points to the subject of "in-being", for the letter N, as Nicholas of Cusa has it, is an abbreviation of IN.⁸

The subject of mystical enclosure is further elaborated by the organic imagery of birth and death, sun and earth. These are again dichotomies which bear the seed of their transcendence in themselves. And again this is realized iconically in that the apparent dichotomies *between* terms are to be found connotatively *within* single words. Double "notions" punningly reflect the unified double motion of life. Let us read once more the central lines:

One life is wrapt *In* flesh, and bends to earth.
The other winds towards *Him*, whose happie birth
Taught me to live here so, ...

The syntactic order underlines that the first life is a movement from life to death, as "earth" marks the end of the sentence, while the second is a movement towards life, as "birth" marks the end of the line, and "live here so" the end of the relative clause. These movements are both confirmed and reversed by the predicates "is wrapt" and "winds". "Winds" of course here denotes a circular movement upwards but, in the context of life and death, it also connotes the winding-sheet, the cloth in which Joseph "wrapt the body of Christ" (Matt. 27: 59; cf. Mark 15: 46, Luke 23: 53). Accordingly, Christmas ("whose happie birth") already implies Good Friday (which in turn implies Easter). Conversely, "wrapt" in line 5, which primarily refers to the death-bound body in which man's soul is dressed, also points to the mystery of the incarnation and the birth of Christ, whose light, as Herbert says in his poem "Christmas", "Wrapt in nights mantle, stole into a manger" (10). Moreover, folded in the word "wrapt", so to speak, is the word *rapt*, which according to the *OED* (I.1.) primarily means "Taken and carried up *to* or *into* heaven (either in literal or mystical sense)". Together with another meaning of *rapt*, namely "Carried away *in spirit*, without bodily removal" (*OED*), this would make Herbert's expression sound like a contradiction in terms. But, one might object, doesn't "[w]rapt in flesh" rather imply a kind of bodily rapture, being "ravished" or "enraptured" (*OED* 3.) in and by a body, or even "raped" (*OED* 5.)? The answer is yes, of course, but this

again is the very point made: whatever is thought or said or done by man is located “in flesh”.

This is also emphasized by Herbert’s changing his biblical text, which in the Authorized Version reads: “For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God”. Herbert leaves out “ye are dead” and changes the more distant “ye” into the more personal “our” (further changed into the even more personal “my” in the diagonal line; cf. Bloch 1985: 36). Herbert here in a way corrects the Apostle Paul, in so far as the Christian is not already glorified in death but has to “live here” a life of “daily labour”. Only in and through such a life an eternal harvest may be gained. Herbert brings Colossians 3.3 visibly closer to other statements in St. Paul, for instance Philippians 1: 23–24: “For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you”. He also visualizes Isaiah 41: 4–5 or Luke 3: 4–5 (“make his paths straight”; “the crooked shall be made straight”) with its characteristic climax, “And all the flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3: 6). “... here on this lowly ground”, Donne’s speaker says in *Holy Sonnet VII*, “Teach mee how to repent” (Donne 1952: 8); 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”. 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” 39). As in “The Flower” the imagery of natural growth goes together with a reflection of the writer’s work.

William B. Bache (1982: 28) has pointed out that each horizontal line of “Coloss. 3.3” branches out from the italicized diagonal (e.g. “*My Life Is Hid In* flesh and tends to earth”). Herbert thus secretly inscribes his poem with an icon of organic growth. At the same time, the horizontal verse lines are the furrows in the field that has to be tilled by the poet — an image of great appeal to George Herbert, who time and again alludes to the etymology of his Christian name. The poet as a *γεωργῶν* indeed “tends to earth” in that he attends to it.⁹ He does not create but cultivate, tending carefully what language brings forth. Language itself points out this mimetic relationship between the farmer and the poet, who are both oriented towards the sun. As we have seen, *vertere* is the poet’s as well as the farmer’s occupation. In Latin, he who cultivates land and he who clads notions into words is said to *peragere*; at the same time, their lines both resemble the course of the sun, which also describes a turning movement.

As Joseph Scaliger has it in his commentary on Varro’s explanation of *solstitium* as the point on the sun’s path where it turns and recedes:

Versum siquidē vocabant rustici, cū sulco ad finem perducto iterum reditur eò unde arationis principiū suscipiebatur: quod versū, peragere dicitur Plin. lib. 18. Ab eo Græci, ut ait Pausanias, βουστροφῆδὸν γράφειν, dicebant, cū uno verso peracto in paginā, inde sumitur initium ad alium progrediendi, ut in arato. Quod nos contrā facimus. nā versu peracto, idem semper initium progrediendi teneamus. Sic igitur sol elegantissime à Varrone dicitur ad versum proximum stare cū regreditur. (Scaliger 1619: 73)

For indeed farmers used the word *versus* when the furrow having been drawn to the end [of the field] was returned again to the point from where the ploughing was first undertaken; this is why it is said by Pliny in Book 18 [of *Naturalis historia*] that one has to carry on with a verse.¹⁰ For the same reason the Greek, as Pausanias says, use the expression ‘to write like the turning of the oxen’: when one verse line is written down on the page; another start is made from there to proceed to the next line, as in the ploughed [field]. This is done contariwise by us, for once a verse is made, we always keep the same starting point from where to proceed. Thus the sun is most elegantly said by Varro to stand at the nearest verse before it returns.

Even if we do not read or write any more in the ancient Greek manner of *boustrophedon*, we have to return to the beginning before we can begin to “plough” through the next line.

With the coincidence of farming and verse-making once more the shape of the poem comes into view. The effect of the hidden line depends upon the “earth” in which it is embedded. George Puttenham, whose *The Arte of English Poesie* contains an extensive discussion of figured poetry, regards “the square or quadrangle equilater” as a sign of the earth. The relationship is not arbitrary or merely symbolic but iconic, as the square and the element of earth share the essential feature of “inconcussible steadinesse” (Puttenham II.xi [xii], 1936: 100).¹¹ The iconic reference of Herbert’s squarely arranged verse-lines is corroborated by the fact that in Varro’s *Res rusticae* (1.10) *versus* is a square measure of farmland (Varro 1978: 33). Even the diagonal or “oblique” line iconically points to the farmer’s work, since according to Pliny’s *Naturalis historia* (18.178), a field which has been ploughed in straight lines must be worked with oblique furrows as well.¹² Herbert’s poem may thus be regarded as an image of the field in which the treasure is hid (cf. Matt. 13: 44), which in turn encloses the speaker’s life. At the same time, the diagonal divides the poem

into two equilateral triangles, and this triangle, in Puttenham's discussion of geometric shapes in poetry, represents the air (100). This again coincides with the verbal imagery of the poem, since the downward movement towards the earth is complemented by an upward movement in the open air towards the sun. The seed has to be lowered into the earth before the shoots (cf. line 8) may appear and follow that which "Is on high", i.e. the sun or son of line 2, which is literally placed high up in the poem.

Herbert's connection between the square form of his poem with its openly hidden diagonal and the image of vegetative growth, however, is not only to be seen as part of a symbolical tradition but also as drawing on the *thesaurus* (or "eternall *Treasure*") of language and matter itself. The square is the prototypical geometrical form which leads to endless growth in that its diagonal is the side of another square which is double the size of the first one. This generative energy of the square is reflected in the terms *power* and *root*: the root is the first power (*OED* "root" 14.) and the second power is the square (*OED* "square" 11.a.). In accordance with the Pythagorean theorem, the diagonal of a square is the root of 2: "Like the vegetal root, the root of 2 contains the power of nature which destroys in order to progress (it severs the initial square) and it also contains the power which instantaneously transforms 1 into 2" (Lawlor 1982: 29). In the mystical geometry of Herbert's poem the diagonal or root of 2 not only multiplies the speaker's and the readers' motions; in this truly magic square, as we have seen, the diagonal has the same length as its sides. Accordingly, the one not only grows into two but also, at the same time, the two grows into one.

The growth of the one-and-double life may furthermore allude to the vine, which is a traditional emblem of life. The Latin paronomasia *vita* and *vitis* is similarly traditional. When Christ says "I am the true vine" (John 15: 1) he also stresses the mutual 'in-being' of Christ and the Christian: "Abide in me, and I in you" (15: 4); in Psalm 80: 8 God's people are the vine. The winding of the vine corresponds to the winding life described in line 6, an analogy which is borne out by the "eye" in line 7, which in a plant is the spot from which shoots develop.¹³ The eye directed at the sun finds its counterpart in it.¹⁴ The visual form of the poem, a straight line around which another line is wound, itself alludes to the vine; this spatial representation, which includes the sun in line 2 and "Christ" and "God" in the title on top of it, may seem blemished by the fact that the winding of the verse lines necessarily implies a downward movement towards the bottom. Not quite so necessarily, however. Puttenham, who has already proved helpful for the geometry of this poem, has examples of two

pattern-poems which are shaped like spires or obelisks, one of which represents the Queen who aspires "After an hier / Crown & empir" (Puttenham 1936: 96). Accordingly, this poem has to be read from the last line upwards while the other, which represents God's gift of grace coming from above has to be read in the usual way from top to bottom. We cannot read Herbert's poem upwards¹⁵ but in a winding, somewhat irregularly spiralling way we may do so with the hidden text: "My Life Is Hid In Him That Is My Treasure"; but also "My Treasure Is[,] That In Him Is Hid My Life". This upward movement with its apparent regressions looks like a spiral in perspective. It is a variant of the *versus retrogradi* quite common in figured poetry (and of course reminiscent of fugal retrogressions), which is not only a fitting emblem of man's struggling daily life with all its setbacks but also marks the "double motion" of the sun itself. Its daily movement from East to West taken together with the movement along the "Ecliptick line" ("The Church-porch" 137) from one tropic to the other results in an apparent spiral course.¹⁶ This correspondence between the vine and the sun coincides with the correspondence between the diagonal line and the subtitle, which also can be read, in a 'spiralling' way, as a kind of palindrome.

With this retrograde motion another iconic image comes into play, for the "double motion" of the sun may also refer to the famous sundial of King Ahaz (2 Kings 20 and Isaiah 38: 8) on which the shadow was both proceeding and receding, and which was often imitated or rebuilt during the Renaissance. It was a sign to Hezekiah that the Lord was with him and made him "to live" (Is 38: 16). The reference is further corroborated by the much discussed fact that in the Vulgate the sun recedes not ten degrees but ten "lines"¹⁷ — which is of course the exact length of Herbert's poem. The sundial makes the circular movement of the sun visible by means of straight lines, and since this movement and its reflection on earth is the subject of "Coloss. 3.3" we are justified in regarding the diagonal line as an icon of the gnomon or diagonally protruding index of a sundial.¹⁸

Another reference to the dial (as the sundial was usually called in the Renaissance, see *OED* 'sundial') is also made iconically. We have seen that the iconic technique of enclosure is employed not just in the poem as a whole but also in single words. Embedded in the "diurnall" movement of the sun is an "urn", pointing to death as the necessary complement to the daytime of life (most fittingly an urn is a container defined by its circular shape). What remains of "diurnall" if one takes out the enclosed "urn", is "di-all", another *memento mori* as well as a reference to the circular plane on which the shadow is marked.

Herbert uses the word “diurnall” nowhere else. Semantically and orthographically it is the exact counterpart of “eternall” in the last line. Both words, moreover, are connected by means of internal rhyme: while in our daily lives we may have hopes to ‘earn all’ (or at least yearn¹⁹ for all), we are gradually realizing that we shall “gain” a “treasure” rather than merely earn our deserved wages, or that we have to die in order to ‘earn all’. The very sounds of the words thus echo the relationship between human effort and divine grace, which coincides with the double motion of the speaker’s life. The linear movement towards death is complemented by or transformed into a winding, spiralling, circular one towards life. Accordingly, while “diurnall” visibly stresses everyone’s death, “eternall” audibly promises a ‘turn-all’, a final circular movement or conversion.²⁰

In Puttenham’s explanation of poetic shapes the circle is the most perfect form; as the square represents the earth and the triangle the sky, the “roundell or Spheare is appropriate to the heauens”. While the square is the most obvious visible icon of the poem and the triangle derives from it, the circle is more “*Hid*”. Herbert finds it once more in the smallest parts of language, the letters and their shapes, again confirming that understanding, *intellegere*, means *intus legere* (Cassirer 1987: 57, quoting Campanella). In the diagonal line paraphrasing the biblical text he chooses capitalized initials which are all linear. In his subtitle, to which one eye²¹ always glances up in comparison while the other is gradually discovering the hidden text, Herbert, as we have seen, also changes the original. He replaces “Your” with “Our” and thus not only stresses the common course of speaker and listener but arrives at the visual cipher of three capital letters which are all round.²²

3. Iconic poetry in an iconic world

In conclusion, let us return for a moment to our starting point, the fact that Herbert addresses the metaphysical relationship between outer and inner form, or spirit and matter, not just by drawing attention to the relationship between the form and the content of his poems, presenting the one as expressive of the other. Rather, the shapes and sounds of the words themselves in their relative positions to each other may represent the dialectic of center and periphery, truth and appearance. Iconicity is driven by Herbert to its limits. He does not simply give his poems the outward shape of its central image or its subject matter; there are no cross-shaped poems about the cross, for example (a well-established tradition

by Herbert’s time, see the examples in Adler and Ernst 1987). Neither does he confine himself to, let us say, an occasional chiasmus when the cross is mentioned. He rather makes the iconic image or iconic diagram part of a verbal texture where meaning is to be discovered in every aspect of the language used.

This iconic method is itself appropriate to the representation of a physical and spiritual world, which, in Sir Thomas Browne’s words, is full of “common Hieroglyphicks”,²³ i.e. visible and audible signs indicating their hidden meaning by their outward form. This implies the idea of an allegorical Book of Nature or *mundus symbolicus* and, more specifically, the concept of a world in which the significance of things is at one with their shape and structure. ‘Likeness’ in the sense of analogous relationship or similarity and in the sense of image or portrait²⁴ thus appears as a key concept both with respect to human existence in relation to the Creator and the religious poet’s work in relation to the Word. As the example of “Coloss. 3.3” indicates, it is because of the similarity of man and Christ that “words & thoughts” may “both” express the same “notion”, that is to say, outward and inward language may coincide and, accordingly, the linguistic form of the poem may be expressive of its idea. The poem also shows, however, that the relationship between ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ is mutual or dialectical rather than simply twofold: while the semantic meaning of a word is found ‘inside’ the shape and sound of its letters, the opposite is equally true since elementary formal (or geometrical) relationships may underlie the semantic content.

Accordingly, the form of a poem’s ordered language not only resembles or is subservient to the subject matter its words denote.²⁵ It may also represent or embody in a more direct manner the *res* of which the mental concept signified by the word is but an imperfect sign.²⁶ This can be seen, for example, in “Trinitie Sunday”, where the complex “thing” to which the abstraction denoted by the word “trinity” refers is more immediately realized by the all-pervasive interplay of threefold structures on the levels of syntax, rhyme, line and stanza numbers etc. In “Coloss. 3.3” the “double motion” in line 2 is more fully expressed by the spatial and syntactic form to which these words draw attention than by their literal meaning. This kind of paradoxical relationship is not unlike the one existing between literal and metaphorical signification, in which the apparently secondary or removed expression may be more directly expressive of the matter in question than the immediate or literal one (cf. Gombrich 1985: 167). Thus the study of iconic language in Herbert has to be pursued with a view to the history of poetic language in general, to which in turn it also contributes.

Inner form is not realized by means of a simply denotative outer correlative

but by means of an outer form which makes visible (and audible) the complexities (or the richness) of the concept or idea or subject-matter of the poem. For example, a chiasmus may serve to do so by suggesting a cross where it is not denoted by the words, as in the famous ending of "Affliction (I)": "Let me not love thee, if I love thee not."²⁷ Herbert and other Metaphysical Poets (in particular Henry Vaughan) seldom use established, basically non-iconic poetic forms such as the sonnet, nor do they choose blatantly iconic forms which delimit the reader's attention. Herbert's poetic method is, as it were, 'meta-iconic',²⁸ in that the expressivity of form, hidden upon the surface of each poem in a somewhat different manner, itself indicates a fundamental truth about the created world. With the exception of a few sonnets, Herbert never uses the same poetic form twice. Each subject, each moment, each place requires its very own order of language (the classical stylistic ideal of the *aptum* [Lausberg 1973: § 1055 ff.], but now made to include all formal aspects of language). In this respect, Herbert's poems are icons of the religious poet's most fundamental concern, the relationship between God and man. The human being, body and soul, who is created in the likeness of God, paradoxically shows this likeness by being like nobody else. Perhaps surprisingly, this concept has points of contact with what is discussed in linguistic studies of iconicity under the heading of isomorphism (cf. Haiman 1980, Givón 1995). This particular kind of iconic assumption "serves as the unspoken basis for the commonly accepted axiom that no true synonyms exist" (Haiman 1980: 516). Homonymity, which is often adduced as an exception to the isomorphic principle, in Herbert's poetry depends upon that very principle to be effective. Only if there is a distinctive verbal form for each individual content, inner resemblances may become apparent by means of phonetic or graphic similarity. By gradually discovering hidden resemblances, as well as tensions, between what is said and how it is realized in language the poet makes his readers aware of the relationship between inner and outer form, as well as between the speaker and his Lord. To Herbert, this relationship is a precarious and complex or even paradoxical one, but in the last resort it is to be taken for granted.

Notes

1. For the context see Leimberg (1996), esp. 15–18 and 56–64 ("Der Kunstcharakter des Buches der Natur"). As an example, cf. just one characteristic quotation from Sir Thomas Browne (1964: 58), to whom 'similitude' is the principle that makes individual existence possible: "And thus is Man like God, for in the same things that wee resemble him, wee are utterly different from him. There was never any thing so like another, as in all points to concur, there will ever some reserved difference slip in, to prevent the Identity, without which two several things would not be alike, but the same, which is impossible" (*Religio Medici* II.2).
2. Cf. Summers (1954: 140) and Cook (1986: 22). According to *Der Neue Pauly* (1996: 734–38), there were 331 translations of the *Anthologia Planudea* by the middle of the seventeenth century (s.v. "Anthologie").
3. This is confirmed by the etymological reference to John 1: 14 ("And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us"), where the Greek verb *σκηνώω* originally means "to pitch a tent", as was pointed out by Reiter (1966).
4. See Browne (1964: 10): "That allegorical description of *Hermes* [*Sphaera cujus centrum ubique, circumferentia nullibi.*] pleaseth mee beyond all the Metaphysicall definitions of Divines" (*Religio Medici* I.10).
5. *Notion* could also mean a "character, relation, form, etc., in which anything is conceived, mentioned, or exists" (*OED* 1.†c., with a quotation from a 1631 sermon by Donne as the first example). Taylor (1974: 61–62) sees a contrast between "words & thoughts" which corresponds to the difference between the words of the poem as a whole and the "ten-word cipher hidden among them".
6. Browne (1981: 466): "Thus may we discern the necessity of its obliquity, and how inconvenient its motion had been upon a circle parallel to the Æquator, or upon the Æquator it selfe" (*Pseudodoxia Epidemica* VI.v.).
7. See, for example, Isidorus (1989) VI.xiv.7: "Versus autem vulgo vocati quia sic scribebant antiqui sicut aratur terra".
8. In his *Triologus de possesset*, Nicholas of Cusa (1989: 334) regards the N graphically as generated by an I which is being led back to itself ("N primo omnium ex simplicissimo I in se ducto generatur"), while acoustically, IN and N are identical ("Unde si I additur ad N non plus vocis habetur").
9. Cf. *OED* 'tend' v.¹ 3.c., "To bestow attention upon, attend to; esp. foster, cultivate (a plant, etc.) ..."
10. The allusion is to *Naturalis historia* 18.177: "...in arando versum peragi nec strigare in actu spiritus." This is translated by H. Rackham as: "...when ploughing finish the row and do not halt in the middle while taking breath" (Pliny 1961: 301).
11. The proverbial steadiness of earth, together with the fact that "earth" is word number 42 of 84 words in the poem (not counting the ampersand) suggests the hidden paronomasia "forty-two" and "fortitude", especially when seen against the background of a statement like Elyot's in *The*

- Governor* iii.viii: "Fortitude ... is a Mediocrity or meane between two extremes" (quoted from *OED* 'mediocrity'). For a similar allusion to *fortitudo* in "Lent" see Leimberg 1996: 230. On the significance of the number 42 in Herbert see Christiane Lang-Graumann's discussion of "The Glimpse" (1997: 212–14).
12. Pliny 1961: 300 ("omne arvom rectis sulcis, mox et obliquis subigi debet").
 13. Cf. Virgil's "oculos imponere". *Georgica* II.73 and *OED* 'eye' n.¹ III.10.a.: "The axillary bud" and the quotation: "1615 LAWSON Orch. & Gard. iii.x. (1668) 26 Let your graff have three or four eyes for readiness to put forth".
 14. Cf. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* 1.3.4 ("the eye of heaven") and the topos of the sun-likeness of the eye going back at least to Plato's *Republic* (508b).
 15. Wood (1979: 24n10) refers to Puttenham's two-column poem. He does not locate the reversal of movements in the printed space of the poem but points out that "the verse leads us to a larger perspective in which we see that our earthly life is in fact upside down, and to ascend truly we must descend apparently" (Wood 20–21). This is taken up by McMahon, who identifies the daily movement of the sun from east to west with the horizontal verse lines and the diagonal line with the ecliptic (McMahon 1992: 65). As a consequence, he imagines a poet facing south. Following Aristotle's argument "that the southern hemisphere is really at the top of our globe" this, according to McMahon, would mean that "[t]hrough the eye descends the page as it reads, the poem directs our spiritual vision upward" (66). McMahon contradicts himself here. If the poem is regarded as an imaginary map or globe on which the east is on the left and the south at the top, the reader still moves *downward* or away from the south.
 16. See Freccero (1963: 343). Wood (1979: 20) points out that the movement of the eyes in reading the poem imitates "both the sun's daily motion and its annual, for the resolution of the two motions is, as Dante expressed it in the *Convivio*, a spiral like the turning screw of a great press". Such an implied reference to the wine (or printing) press perfectly agrees with the iconic representation of the vine. McMahon (1992: 62) speaks of "the spiral movement that 'winds toward' Christ as opposed to the life "whose motion is 'straight' and 'tends to earth'". As has been shown, the two motions are in fact intertwined.
 17. Cf. Browne, *Pseudodoxia* V.xviii (Browne 1981: 413–14). On the place of the Dial of Ahaz and the miracle of the receding sun in Christian (iconographic) tradition, in particular with regard to Donne, see Frost (1990, especially 65–66, 111–12, 121–22).
 18. See also the Latin poem "In Solarium", in which Herbert, punning on *sol* and *solum*, compares man to a sundial linking sun and soil. On this poem, as well as on the implicit image of the sundial in "Vertue", see Leimberg 1996: 224–29.
 19. Cf. *OED* 'earn' v.²
 20. Cf. *Paradise Lost* 5.496–97: "And from these corporal nutriments perhaps / Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit, / ..."
 21. I agree with Sidney Gottlieb (1981: 177) that the "one eye" of Herbert's poem may be inspired by emblematic representations of single eyes, which would further underscore the iconic dimension of "Coloss. 3.3". The example Gottlieb singles out, however, Thomas Jenner's *The Soules Solace* (1626), also shows a characteristic difference. To Jenner, "That eye must shut,

- that useth to survey / Honours, or praise of men, or worldly pelf" (Emblem no. 14, quoted from Gottlieb 177); while Herbert would certainly have agreed with this, he says nothing about closing our eyes to the world. We "live here" but should *all the same* ("still") keep one eye for heaven. Even though they were published only after Herbert's death, the two emblems from Henri Engelgrave's *Lux Evangelica* reproduced in Ong (1959: 427, plates II and III) are also quite suggestive. One of them, illustrating "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matt. 22: 39) shows two free-floating eyes looking in different directions; the other shows a single eye looking up at the stars by means of a telescope forming a diagonal line from the lower right to the upper left. What makes this visual representation particularly interesting for Herbert's poem with its emphasis on enclosure and hiddenness is its motto from the Song of Songs 4: 1: "Absque eo quod intrinsecus latet". At least in the edition I consulted (Antwerp 1652), the parallel is further enhanced by a subscription taken from Colossians 3: "*quæ sursum sunt querite: quæ sursum sunt sapite, non quæ terram*" (Emblema XL, p. 397); this is adapted from the verses immediately preceding Col. 3.3, in the Authorized Version: "seek those things which are above Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth."
22. Cf. Geofroy Tory (1973: fol. VIII^v) on the I and O as the letters from which all other letters are derived: "I. & O. sôt les deux lettres, desquelles toutes les aultres Attiques sont faictes & formees." Cf. fol. XXIX^v and XLVI^r.
 23. Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* I.16 (Browne 1964: 15), cf. Leimberg (1996: 70–71).
 24. Cf. Donne's sermons on Genesis 1: 26 (Donne 1953–62: vol. 9, no. 1 and 2).
 25. As, for example, in the sound-symbolism of "quick-piercing minde" ("Vanitie [I]"
 26. Cf. Thomas Aquinas' commentary on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, *Expositio Libri Peryermenias* I.2 (16a3): "uoces significant intellectus conceptiones immediate, et eis mediantibus res" (Thomas Aquinas 1989: 11).
 27. Cf. the dialogue in heaven in Book III of *Paradise Lost*, where the chiasmus is a characteristic figure in both the Father's and the Son's speeches; e.g. the Son's words in III.227–28 referring to the means of redeeming man: "...man shall find grace; / And shall Grace not find means, ..."; here *chiasmus* is blended with *gradatio*. As regards "Coloss. 3.3", McMahon (1992: 61) has drawn attention to the chiastic ordering of the related syntactic groups "My Life"/"Is Hid" and "That Is"/"My Treasure" around the central "In Him".
 28. Givón (1995: 68) uses the term 'meta-iconic' in a different sense (for the 'markedness principle').

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