Herbert's Baroque: The *Passio Discerpta*

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Several years ago in the journal *Cithara*, Baird Whitlock called our attention to the large number of ways in which George Herbert's English lyrics conform to the standards of Baroque art. While not questioning Whitlock's showing that such Baroque techniques as unity-through-form, free modification of classical forms, illusory motion, and illusory use of materials are characteristic of Herbert's English lyrics,¹ I find that one important quality of Baroque art is absent from Whitlock's analysis. This Baroque quality is the tendency to reach beyond the visual and engage all the senses.

In fact, such typical Baroque effects as *trompe-l'oeil* and illusory use of materials (as well as the new importance of music) are only part of a larger tendency of Baroque art to announce that there is something in the artist's ideas which his medium is necessarily inadequate to render. Baroque art tends to this conscious expression of the inadequacy of the artist's rendering, an expression that in a religious poet or religious artist provides a natural analogue to the paradoxes of faith. Baroque art is thus almost fundamentally a school of religious art, though there are secular turnings and applications. But it is just here that we see a significant departure of Herbert from the ways of Baroque art, at least in the lyrics of "The Church." These poems are not sensuous even in the way that Donne's religious poems can be, and they are certainly never sensuous in the way that Crashaw's always are. The lyrics of "The Church" make no attempt to call our attention to the limitations of either our senses or our reason. We culminate sometimes in a paradoxical understanding; we reach often an impasse of faith. But we do not overreach our humanity. In Crashaw we do. The famous

Two walking baths; two weeping motions;
Portable, and compendious oceans

are impossible — not impossible to take seriously as we sometimes modernly misbelieve, but impossible to take sensuously. The image

overthrows our senses. Such a Baroque image leads us beyond our human ability to comprehend imagery. Crashaw, naturally, cultivates the elaborate profusion of imagery. Herbert (more naturally) does not; in his English poetry Herbert is the great maintainer of images among the Metaphysical Poets. He has more imagistic consistency within a poem than Donne does, clearly a great deal more than Crashaw does. The Baroque tendency to dwell in the sensuous we do not see in Herbert's English poetry. But in Herbert's *Passio Discerpta* we find just such an in-dwelling sensuous Baroque artistry.

The *Passio Discerpta* is a sequence of twenty-one sacred epigrams. The title means *The Passion in Sections*, and we may wish to interpret this as *Scenes from the Passion*. But it might be translated even more effectively as *Rendings from the Passion*, for indeed the epigrams render the physical details of scenes or vignettes from the Passion and Death of Christ with a good deal of passion of their own. There is personalized wonder at the physicality of Christ's suffering, an involvement that seems to go the Baroque step beyond what the subject itself naturally demands. In Epigram XIV on the nails, for example, Herbert writes as an enraptured butterfly collector:

Qvalis eras, qui, ne melior natura minorem
Eriperet nobis, in Cruce fixus eras;
Iam meus es: nunc Te teneo.

Christ on the Cross is thus addressed in lines which we may translate as follows: "How rare Thou art, Who, lest Thy better Nature rip from us Thy lesser, art fixed on the Cross. Now I have Thee; now I hold Thee."² This sort of intimate turn with a scene from the Passion is frequent in the series. Such treatment of the subject makes it clear that here it is that we find George Herbert in meditation. While Louis Martz's discussion of patterns of meditation in relation to the poems of "The Church" is illuminating,³ even a cursory reading of the *Passio Discerpta* shows how different the actual practice of meditation in verse is from the general influence of meditative technique on versifying.

We have no trouble, either, in identifying the Salesian bent of the meditations of the *Passio*. The somewhat haphazard selection of subjects and the vague chronology have made a very un-Ignatian meditative sequence out of what we might well have expected to find articulated as Stations of the Cross. Herbert by-passes Ignatian composition of place and goes directly to the more sensuous Salesian reading of the spiritual significance of the physical metaphors that Christ lived, of the signs of Christ's humanity in His life among us. Epigram XVI on the sun in eclipse, though ostensibly on a miraculous subject and though quieter than most of the others, provides good illustration both of Herbert's

personal mode and of his way of examining the physicality of the events of the Passion without particularly imagining a whole scene in the Ignatian way. This poem "Ad Solem deficientem" begins with almost amusing abruptness: "Qvid hoc?": "What's up?" What's up, indeed, the poem goes on to ask, when it is not merely light that goes out but the Producer of all light?

Qvid hoc? & ipse deficiis, Caeli gigas,
Almi choragus luminis?

True to the linguistic chauvinism he announces in his English poem "The Sonne," Herbert does not see in the sun of this Latin poem the traditional symbol for Christ. The sun is only a faithful porter (*fidelis clauiger*) in the house of the Lord. This domesticity marks the poem as Herbert's own. But the intensity that gives the poem its Baroque quality is provided by the need the speaker seems to feel to reassure this porter sun that the Lord will return. When the Lord does, the storehouses of the sun will overflow with rays of light to the joint benefit of the speaker and the sun:

Tunc instruetur lautiùs radijs penu,
Tibi supererunt & mihi.

Usually the Baroque intensity of the *Passio* is achieved not simply by more sensuous imagery than we find in "The Church" but by a significant tendency to dwell on this imagery. The meditative method of St. Francis de Sales requires just such a tendency. And the school of Baroque poetry that flourished in this tradition found a special fascination in liquidity. We might particularly note here the Crashavian liquidity of the first five epigrams, one on tears, two on sweat, one on Blood, and one on spit.⁴ Of the very first epigram, "Ad Dominum morientem," we must first notice the pointed vagueness of the scene: the sense is that the Lord is dying throughout the Passion, and the poem is the poet's preparation for meditation. This absence of any composition of place is an indication that it is Salesian and not Ignatian meditation that is indicated. In *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, Francis de Sales regularly begins his discussion of a topic of meditation⁵ with no more than the following:

PREPARATION

1. Place yourself in the presence of God.
2. Beseech him to inspire you.

I think that we can see that this is what Herbert is doing in the first of the epigrams of the *Passio Discerpta*.

Ad Dominum morientem

Cvm lacrymas oculósque duos tot vulnera vincant,
 Impar, & in fletum vel resolutus, ero;
 Sepia concurret, peccatis aptior humor,
 Et mea iam lacrymet culpa colore suo.

To the Dying Lord

Since wounds vanquish eyes and tears together,
 I am unequal to my task
 Though dissolved in tears.
 Let squid's ink — a humour more akin to sin —
 Join in the flow.
 And let my faults soon weep the proper colour.

But this poem is also especially a poet's preparatory meditation, since the inspiration for which the speaker beseeches God is that he may weep ink. And ordinary ink, *atramentum librarium*, is not enough; it must be the gushing ocean-stain of the squid. Sins and tears and ink all run together and seem to form a fifth bodily humour for the poet choosing to write on this old subject of eyes and tears.⁵

Further illustration of the physicality of the *Passio* is available in Epigram II on the Bloody Sweat and Epigram VIII on the slaps Christ received from his tormentors. In Epigram II "In sudorem sanguineum" we find Herbert decorously managing the difficult Metaphysical matter of wishing to be the Bloody Sweat dripping from Christ's Body. Herbert moves nicely *per sensum ad intellectum* as the speaker comes closer to God in Christ by seeing in the worthy (*dignus*) Sweat a foil for the unworthy (*indignus*) exercitant. The last lines of the poem are as follows:

Nam quantò indignior ipse,
 Tu mihi subueniens dignior esse potes.

The more unworthy I am,
 The more worthy Thou canst be
 In coming to my aid.

In Epigram VIII "In Alapas" we see the transition *per sensum ad intellectum* in a particularly compressed form.

In Alapas

Ah! quàm caederis hinc & inde palmis!
 Sic vnguenta solent manu fricari:
 Sic toti medicaris ipse mundo.

The Slaps

Ah! How Thou art cut then
 and now by the open palms!

In the same way are unguents
 customarily rubbed in by hand.
 And thus Thou salvest
 the whole world.

Even in this Baroque miniaturization we have the immediacy (*Ah!*) and sensuousness of Salesian meditation as slaps become unguents and unguents are described in process of physical manipulation. A poem that announces as its subject the slaps Christ received turns out in fact to be about the unguents we receive from Him — because hereafter (*inde*) the slaps have become unguents. The immediacy is not in an Ignatian composition of place but in the application to our lives. We are healed because Christ allowed the slaps to be delivered. Christ as Heal-All administering the salve of salvation is thus discovered in the emblem of the slaps suggested by the title. Epigram IX shows even the tempting subject "In Flagellum" treated in this healing fashion. The poem works toward the illumination: "Ipsaque sunt ferulae mollia corda suae"; "Meek hearts administer their own canings."

The poems of the *Passio* do not show the kind of witty reading of situation that we find in *The Temple*. That they do show a nice awareness of verbal wit, of the wit of explanation, I think has already become apparent. In the couplet, Epigram XI, on the Good Thief, we see the Thief illustrating his own devotion by the discovery of a sacred pun:

In pium Latronem

O nimium Latro! reliquis furatus abundè,
 Nunc etiam Christum callidus aggredieris.

The Good Thief

O thief too good, you've filched abundance
 From everyone, and now you creep up near to Christ.

This Good Thief does not so much give up his past way of life as learn from it how to sneak up on Christ (*aggredior* as "approach" rather than "attack" in the normal way of thieves).

Though works of different sorts, *The Temple* and the *Passio Discerpta* are complementary. On a much smaller scale than *The Temple*, the *Passio* is also an excellent work of its kind. It differs from *The Temple* by being Baroque in its stylistic sensibility while the Baroque of *The Temple* is, at most, organizational. The *Passio* also differs from *The Temple* in the nature of its devotionism, which is very explicitly based on Salesian meditative technique. In fact, the existence of the *Passio* suggests that Herbert may have made a conscious choice in eliminating explicitly meditative poetry from *The Temple*. Certainly he was capable

of writing such poetry. But perhaps he found it inappropriate to what he was doing in *The Temple* since even without Ignatian emphasis on composition of place meditation is still dependent on a text or scene from sacred history for a beginning. When his Friend told him to look into his own heart for devotional poetry, that poetry was freed to range over the subject matter that, in fact, we do find in "The Church."⁶ The *Passio Discerpta* is not, however, some sort of preliminary exercise for *The Temple*. It is a different experiment in devotion entirely. Even to the extent of having one poem spoken by Christ, it is another *Temple* — a chapel of ease perhaps and not a great cathedral, but clearly a finished, an exquisite work.

And in noticing that the *Passio Discerpta* is a work in the Salesian meditative tradition, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is still poetry and not devotional theology. Herbert's interests are aesthetic and not explicitly theological. There is, in fact, a danger of reductiveness in some religious readings of seventeenth-century poetry, for example, Barbara Kiefer Lewalski's *Donne's Anniversaries and the Poetry of Praise: The Creation of a Symbolic Mode*.⁷ Shared aesthetic sensibilities cannot simply be presumed to imply shared theologies. And even when a critic is careful to avoid this trap, as Ilona Bell is in her recent article "'Setting Foot Into Divinity': George Herbert and the English Reformation,"⁸ it is still little more than an academic exercise to hunt for theology in a lyric poem, even one written in Latin. In fact, the circulation of Roman Catholic works of devotion actually increased in England after the Reformation. The age itself did not treat such works as theological. They could be read, and imitated, by people of widely different religious views precisely because their purpose was pious and not theological or controversial.⁹

The concluding epigram is particularly interesting in the contrastive light of *The Temple*. The harmony of the world with Christ is clearly presented here as a resolution of the *Rendings from the Passion* on which we have been meditating.

In Mundi sympathiam cum Christo

Non moreris solus: Mundus simul interit in te,
Agnoscitque tuam Machina tota Crucem.
Hunc ponas animam mundi, Plato: vel tua mundum
Ne nimium vexet quaestio, pone meam.

On the World's Empathy with Christ

Thou diest not alone:
The world simultaneously
Loses itself in Thee,
And the whole divine machine

Acknowledges Thy Cross.
 In this Man, Plato, find
 The spirit of the world:
 Or, lest your questioning
 Vex the world too much,
 Find it in me.

Here we see a characteristic theme of Herbert's. It would be easier for Plato to see the Spirit of God acting in the Christian than to see It in Christ Himself. So much has the Grace of Christ done for man. The world collapsed itself into Christ, and Christ infused Himself into the world. And the Cambridge Platonists speak better than they know of an *anima mundi*. The Christian has not only been made one with Christ; for the ethical pagan, he has become the living, the visible Christ. The Passion, like a meditation, has moved within while it shines out.

Probably the *Passio Discerpta* is not longer than it is because it includes everything that Herbert wants to say in meditation. The sequence includes his one reintegrating theme, his persona's ecstatic discovery of union with Christ. Herbert does, of course, make some other scattered applications of the mode as he turns to Salesian meditation and Baroque sensuous imagery from time to time in the mixed bag of that Sacred Grove *Lucus*. Such poems there as Epigrams III "In Stephanum lapidatum" (a witty trope like "In pium Latronem") and VIII "In Lotionem pedum Apostolorum" (to be compared with the sun of *Passio Discerpta* XVI and the waters of *Passio Discerpta* I through V) are interesting in themselves and perhaps also interesting because they are not grouped with the *Passio Discerpta*. Clearly Herbert had in mind a treatment of the Passion as a closed unit. Other scenes from the life of Christ, the storm while Christ slept, for example, had to be deferred to the Sacred Grove. Even meditations on John leaning on Christ's Breast at the Last Supper and on Doubting Thomas putting his hand in Christ's Side had no place within the circumscribed limits of the *Passio Discerpta*.

The completeness of the *Passio Discerpta* is especially striking when we notice that the Baroque sensibility itself, though characterizing the sequence, is not given absolutely free rein within it. We know that Herbert restrained his sensuous imagination in the *Passio Discerpta* because we can see that he observed no such restraint in some of the odds-and-ends of *Lucus*. In at least one of these poems of *Lucus* we find more than just the Baroque sensuous demonstration of the limits of man's humanity. In the poem about John leaning on Christ's Breast Herbert uses a conceit that breaches modern taste quite as much as any crux in Crashaw when he imagines the Evangelist as sucking at the Breast of our Lord and has his speaker enthusiastically jostling for place to suck the milk laced with saving Blood. In the *Passio Discerpta* itself all

the senses are invoked, but the unity of the form as a whole is obviously a higher value to Herbert than any particular sensuous evocation.

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Notes

- 1 Baird W. Whitlock, "The Baroque Characteristics of the Poetry of George Herbert," *Cithara*, 7, 2 (May 1968), 30-40.
- 2 My text for Herbert is *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). Translations that appear in the text are my own, but I have consulted the translations of McCloskey and Murphy, Grosart, and Blunden: *The Latin Poetry of George Herbert: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Mark McCloskey and Paul R. Murphy (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1965); *The Complete Works in Verse and Prose of George Herbert*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (London: Robson & Sons, 1874), vol. II; Edmund Blunden, "George Herbert's Latin Poems," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, ed. D. Nichol Smith, 19 (1934 on title page; 1933 on spine), 29-39. My Crashaw text is *The Complete Poetry of Richard Crashaw*, ed. George Walton Williams (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970).
- 3 Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), pp. 249-287.
- 4 A useful attempt to define the Baroque sensibility is provided by René Wellek, "The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien*, 5 (1946), 77-108. See also Odette de Mourgues, *Metaphysical, Baroque, and Précieux Poetry* (Oxford: Folcroft, 1953). And Frank J. Warnke, ed., *European Metaphysical Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1961), "Introduction," pp. 1-86.
- 5 St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
- 6 In Herbert's secular poetry, which is not my subject here, we see a very different application of "this old subject" of eyes and tears as Herbert weaves Petrarchan dirges from classical posies to make a fitting public monument for his mother in the *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*. Such a work had to be published in Herbert's lifetime to do its job. For a fine appreciation of this work, see W. Hilton Kelliher, "The Latin Poetry of George Herbert," in *The Latin Poetry of English Poets*, ed. J.W. Binns (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 47-54.
- 7 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), especially pp. 73-107.
- 8 *Modern Language Quarterly*, 38 (September 1977), 219-241, especially 222, 224-225, and 236.
- 9 See Helen C. White, *English Devotional Literature [Prose]: 1600-1640* (1930; New York: Haskell House, 1966), especially pp. 79-81 and 131-149.