"A Careful Negligence": George Herbert and the Plain Style

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Abstract

My research project explores the plain style of writing and its paradoxical nature in the classical rhetorical tradition through its influence on George Herbert, a Christian devotional poet, who attempts to use such a style to praise God through his poetry. The relevant teachings of Aristotle, Cicero, and Demetrius as well as the writings of two later rhetoricians, Puttenham and Wilson, assist in defining the term “plain style” and what it means for Herbert as a poet trying to praise God. However, St. Augustine and his views on language intended for Christian purposes seems to most pervasively influence Herbert’s poetry. Through Herbert’s inward focus and denial of outward eloquence, the poet follows the tradition of the plain style while also crafting his own highly individualized version. In particular, I analyze Herbert’s stance towards his own poetry by applying the contemporary scholarship (among others) of Richard Strier, Stanley Fish, Leah Marcus, and Frank Manley. Taking a more personal, introspective look, I also delve into how Herbert views the benefits and downfalls of language in relationship to his hidden intentions as a Christian devotional poet. I have narrowed this analysis to three metapoems, “A True Hymn,” “The Forerunners,” and “Jordan (I),” to explore Herbert’s conflicting feelings toward language and to demonstrate where his positive perspective of poetry as his soul’s inward praise of God challenges his human deficiencies to communicate that praise as a poet.

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Introduction

George Herbert, an early modern devotional poet, brilliantly crafts his religious poetry with a colloquial, plain style that reflects his view on what his poetry should do, a view deeply rooted in his two identities as “Orator,” governed by a classical rhetorical tradition, and as Christian “Poet,” presided over by God and influenced by the demands of his art. In his poetry, Herbert humbly embraces—or, at times, attempts to embrace— the plain style as his only appropriate means of expression because of the holy, reverent nature of his subject matter. Herbert’s poetry transcends the pagan classical rhetorical tradition through its intention to not only please men but also God, and God foremost, as Herbert proclaims in “The Forerunners”: “If I please him, I write fine and witty” (12). Seeking to satisfy God, Herbert strives to make his words reflect the sincerity of his heart, whether it be an oration or a poem. By uniting the orator’s skills with the Christian’s purpose to praise, St. Augus-
tine, a seemingly influential figure for Herbert’s poetry, transforms pagan rhetoric so that it may serve spiritual ends. Augustine emphasizes the *verbum cordis* or “language of the heart,” explaining the source from which all words should flow (3.23). However, when Herbert seeks to present a successful offering of praise to God, the poet in him struggles to match the appearance of his words with the inner thoughts that create them.

Richard Strier, in his book *Love Known*, calls for further exploration into Herbert’s take on the plain style. I take up Strier’s torch, so to speak, and demonstrate how the “resources of plain-style poetry” may uphold or hinder Herbert’s objectives as a Christian poet (Strier 253). Arguably, the most fascinating points of tension in Herbert’s poetry arise from the friction between his two identities or influences as pagan orator and Christian poet. I argue that his perspective towards language exemplified in “A True Hymn,” “The Forerunners,” and “Jordan (I)” reveals a dichotomy of desires: the struggle to satisfy his God through worship as a Christian and the natural pull to produce successful and pleasing poetry as a poet.

**The Plain Style**

Herbert served many years of his life as the “late Oratour of the Universitie of Cambridge,” a distinguished office that testifies to the well-trained and recognized skill of Herbert as an orator (Hutchinson 4). Joseph H. Summers praises Herbert’s superior abilities by stating that his position as orator served as “general recognition that in an age and university of classicists Herbert’s knowledge and practice were among the best” (32). As an orator, George Herbert was ever-involved in the business of words. In the classical rhetorical tradition, speakers would often turn to the high style of rhetoric in order to craft speeches that were primarily focused on eliciting a certain emotion, rather than conveying a specific truth. These orators who employed at their leisure all the stylistic devices available to them did so with the purpose to move their audience. In order to stir the audience’s emotions, such orators embraced the high style of rhetoric not for clarity’s sake, but for passion’s sake. The high style was usually associated with political or social agendas, but not necessarily topics that needed to be transparently communicated.

Wesley Trimpi explains the difference between strictly communicating and persuading in his book *Ben Jonson’s Poems: A Study of the Plain Style*, stating that it is a “conflict between dialectic and rhetoric” or the “split between meaning and expression” (61). With regard to rhetoric, almost every classical writer in any common rhetorical manual views teaching and persuading as separate purposes of writing. Cicero, a classical orator, blames Socrates for the separation:

> This is the source from which has sprung the undoubtedly absurd and unprofitable and reprehensible severance between the tongue and the brain, leading to our having one set of professors to teach us to think and another to teach us to speak. *(De Oratore 49; III. xvi)*
The influential distinction that Socrates makes here “between the tongue and the brain” implies that spoken eloquence does not necessarily follow intelligent (or, for Herbert, holy) thought. The significance of Socrates’s separation is his acknowledgement that one thought can be communicated in a variety of ways, but for Herbert, it seems that the method of choice can drastically affect the nature of the thought itself.

In *De Oratore*, or *An Ideal Orator*, Cicero criticizes a style more preoccupied with “expression” than “meaning,” by stating that the ideal orator “should also avoid, so to speak, cementing his words together too smoothly, for the hiatus and the clash of vowels has something agreeable about it and shows a not unpleasant carelessness on the part of a man who is paying more attention to thought than to words” (77-78; III. xvi). The high style is not condemned based on its lack of attractiveness to its listeners, but he seems to view its luxurious smoothness as evidence of a misplaced focus. Even while such language may be persuasive in its pleasantness, it reveals a “carelessness” based on its preoccupation with words rather than with the actual thoughts being communicated. This misplaced focus or preoccupation with words exemplifies one of Herbert’s greatest anxieties as a Christian poet.

According to Cicero, the high style is not necessarily bad, but it signifies too much of a good thing. He sees it as excessive, which leads him to praise the plain style for its frugality:

> Propriety will always be the chief aim. Only one quality will be lacking, which Theophrastus mentions fourth among the qualities of style—the charm and richness of figurative ornament...He will be modest in his use of what may be called the orator’s stock-in-trade. For we do have after a fashion a stock-in-trade, in stylistic embellishments, partly in thought and partly in words. (79-80; III.xvi)

The way Cicero defines the high style as ornamented with “charm” and “richness” reveals its superficiality. “Figurative ornament” or “stylistic embellishments” are accessories or add-ons that are not necessary to the original thought. Thus, the plain style seeks to reject such frivolity in order to exhibit “propriety” and “modesty,” not discounting the power of words but paying due attention to the thoughts that create them. And with this intentional focus of the plain style, it is believed that the orator could most truthfully and most candidly communicate heartfelt emotions. Thomas Wilson in his rhetorical manual *The Art of Rhetoric* (1560) discusses the importance of communication:

> For what man can be delighted, or yet be persuaded with the only hearing of those things, which he knoweth not what they mean. The tongue is ordained to express the mind, that one may understand another’s meaning: now what availeth to speak, when none can tell what the speaker meaneth? (177; I.i)
Wilson makes clear that rhetoric’s ultimate aim should be to instill within the audience a clear understanding of what has been said. While the high style embellishes its ideas with an eloquence that may cloud the audience’s understanding, the plain style’s rejection of figurative ornament seems to allow the orator to convey his own thoughts and feelings with greater ease.

Cicero’s point follows that of the Athenian orator Demetrius’s *On Style*, which rejects the elaborate style and praises a more natural method: “Above all, the style should be lucid” (191). Trimpi paraphrases Demetrius, stating that such “lucidity is achieved by avoiding extreme disjunction within a period, ambiguity, excessive terseness, which ‘may give pleasure but…fails in clearness,’ amplification, long members or clauses, and peculiar figures, ‘since all eccentricity is unfamiliar and extraordinary’; the natural order of words should be followed” (Trimpi 8). Thus, both Cicero and Demetrius acknowledge the pleasure that the high style may give, but Demetrius elevates the plain style on behalf of its appropriateness. The word “natural” implies instinctive language or impulsive words that flow artlessly from the mouth of the speaker. While “natural” and “lucid” may characterize the plain style with an earthy coarseness, the first-century Roman philosopher Seneca infuses it with strong feeling and a divine purpose:

Let us say what we feel, and feel what we say; let speech harmonize with life…Our words should aim not to please, but to help…[Eloquence] and other arts are wholly concerned with cleverness; but our business here is the soul. (Ep. lxxv.1-6).

Seneca defines the plain style here as an emotionally charged experience which should “harmonize with life.” Thus, naturalness is invigorated with the speaker’s own emotion, communicating the speaker’s raw vulnerability. For Seneca as well as Demetrius, there is no need for stylistic tricks in order to be impassioned. When talking about his letters, Seneca states, “I should like to convince you entirely of this one fact, that I feel whatever I say, that I not only feel it, but am wedded to it” (Ep. lxxv.6). In this way, Seneca views language as not only an expression of his passionate feelings, but as his own wife. The intimacy of marriage applied to the relationship of language to its author demonstrates the importance of the author’s chosen method of communicating. The way in which an author (or poet) expresses his thoughts through words reflects positively or negatively on his character in the same way a wife was thought to be a reflection of her husband’s character. Herbert appears to construct his poems with this serious matrimonial bond to his words in mind.

Turning from the plain style isolated within the rhetorical tradition, George Puttenham in *The Art of English Poesy* (1589) traces the history of poetry and discusses its connection to the classical tradition of rhetoric: “the poets were…from the beginning the best persuaders and their eloquence the first rhetoric of the world” (1.4.98). Puttenham defines the plain style in relationship to poetry by saying that it is “most like nature herself, working by her own peculiar virtue and proper instinct and not by example or meditation or exercise as all other artificers do” (306). Puttenham seems to
take his direction from such classic authors as Demetrius and their writings in order to apply it to the art of poetry, which is seen here through his praise of naturalness.

In *De Doctrina Christiana*, or *On Christian Teaching*, St. Augustine does something similar with regard to Christian rhetoric; he takes the principles of secular rhetoricians and refines them for holy thoughts and purposes. One of the greatest examples of how Augustine impacts Herbert’s approach to the plain style is his emphasis on the heart:

What especially differentiates the grand style from the mixed style is that it is not so much embellished with verbal ornament as inflamed by heartfelt emotion. It has room for almost all those ornaments, but if they are not there, they are not missed. (137)

Here, Augustine seems to argue that, whether the orator’s words be elaborate or restrained, the focus of the speaker should be on his inward thoughts and feelings. This proper focus would create a humble, heartfelt eloquence that was self-perpetuating:

[Eloquence] is borne along by its own momentum, and it derives its beauty of expression, if indeed this emerges, from the power of its subject-matter, and not the pursuit of elegance. It is sufficiently equipped for its purpose if appropriate words follow not from a search for elaborate vocabulary but from the promptings of a passionate heart. (137)

Augustine defines “eloquence” as “borne along by its own momentum,” viewing eloquence as an inner commitment to the “power of its subject matter” rather than an outward show of adornment or “expression” (137). Therefore, Augustine views language as deriving its power from the heart.

From Socrates, Cicero, and Demetrius to Wilson and Puttenham, the plain style emerges from antiquity as the most appropriate form of language for Herbert, while Augustine seems to highly influence Herbert’s quest for sincerity based on their shared audience, the Christian God.

“*A True Hymn*”

Now, Herbert’s personal application of the plain style in his poetry appears most prevalent in particular poems that discuss the art of poetry itself; these poems are identified as meta-poems or “anti-poems” according to Frank Manley (202). Throughout Herbert’s collection of poetry in *The Temple*, he creates poems that effortlessly follow his train of thought, recording his mental and emotional twists, turns, and self-corrections. Herbert’s self-awareness in his poetry consistently displays the classical characteristic of naturalness in the plain style. Yet, in his anti-poems such as “*A True Hymn,*” “*The Forerunners,*” and “*Jordan (I),*” the hidden complexity and conscious
craft of Herbert’s plain style instigates a marvelous tension between expression and the poet’s intent.

“A True Hymn” demonstrates Herbert’s artistic and religious struggle of a Christian to convey the sincerity of his heart as well as an orator’s prerogative to express it well:

My joy, my life, my crown!
My heart was meaning all the day,
Somewhat it fain would say:
And still it runneth muttering up and down
With onely this, My joy, my life, my crown. (1-5)

The words, “My joy, my life, my crown,” appear to express Herbert’s *verbum cordis*, the language of his heart. If these words originate from his heart (which they appear to do), they should satisfy Herbert as a Christian who desires to be sincere before his perfect God. However, Herbert does not seem completely satisfied, as evident in his frustration as a poet when he says “My heart was meaning all the day / Somewhat it fain would say.” Even while Herbert’s names for God plainly speak to the inspiration of his heart, he describes the expression of his heart as “onely this,” viewing it as lacking in something. Could what he lacks as a poet be verbal ornament? Thus, the plainness of the very first line does not seem to sit right with Herbert, even though Herbert fulfills the criteria for the Augustinian principle of “heartfelt emotion.” In this first stanza, the two identities of Herbert emerge and conflict, which he seems to purposefully elucidate for the reader to follow. Then Herbert picks the winner with two words: “And still” his “[heart] runneth…” (4). Even while Herbert makes evident his poetic desires to embellish, his heart cannot be silenced or dissuaded but continually overflows with meager “mutterings.” Through the constancy of his heart’s language, Herbert encourages his Christian identity to govern his words over his artistic inclinations as a poet. Thus, the inexpressible rhythms of Herbert’s heart move his poem forward, maintaining the plain style and its apparent naturalness.

Rather than viewing Herbert’s ambivalence toward the phrase “My joy, my life, my crown!” as his own inward struggle between pleasing God as a Christian and pleasing himself as a poet, Richard Strier in his book *Love Known* argues that Herbert intentionally characterizes his heart as “muttering” to portray it as “childishly naïve and silly” (202). He does this, according to Strier, not to belittle the value of the heart but to coerce the expected response of “scorn” from the reader (202). The focus that Strier places on the audience rather than on the poet himself is supported by Joseph H. Summers in *George Herbert, His Religion and Art*: “In the poet’s and the preacher’s experiments, the chief consideration was not how to convey personal experience honestly but how to use language most effectively for the subject, the aim, and the intended audience of specific compositions” (95).

Strier goes on to explain that Herbert here is not “making a mistake;” but that he
wishes to “educate” his “readers” by using their own value systems and then turning them on their heads (202). Strier views the first stanza as an outward engagement with the reader, which points to an aspect of Augustine’s teaching on Christian rhetoric. According to Strier’s reading, Herbert would seem to follow Augustine’s guidelines “to instruct, delight, and move,” but not necessarily in that order (117). For instance, for Strier, the first stanza moves the reader by inspiring a negative response of scorn towards Herbert’s simple lines, yet the poet later instructs his readers by condemning the emotion that he originally inspired. This instructive quality of Herbert’s may reflect his role as Parson, as noted by Herbert’s twentieth-century editor F.E. Hutchinson: “Catechizing is the first point, and but by Catechizing, the other cannot be attained,” referring to the “delighting” and “moving” elements of what a sermon should do (489).

The second stanza does seem to fully account for the poet’s “want,” as Strier argues, yet it appears to do so through an inward reprimand rather than a public rebuke. In the second stanza, Herbert appears to be addressing himself, convincing his own mind that the promptings of his heart actually can produce an “art” that satisfies because its sincerity pleases God:

> Yet slight not these few words:
> If truly said, they may take part
> Among the best in art. (6-8)

Instead of an inward self-correction, Strier argues that these lines serve as an outward rebuke, which, again, points to an Augustinian teaching on Christian rhetoric: “He turns and solemnly rebukes the attitude he knows he has created” (Strier 202). In slight contrast to Strier’s argument, Herbert does seem to reprove the scorn present in the first stanza, but he does this not only with an awareness of the public perception that might “slight” him but with a personal pang of sensitivity when it comes to the bare plainness of “My joy, my life, my crown!” (1). Though Strier views these lines as possibly the musings of an orator or a parson who would be conscious of an audience, these lines seem to espouse the highly self-conscious yet intimate thoughts of a Christian poet towards himself.

While God may receive the poet’s praise without censure, it seems that Herbert must still correct himself by saying “slight not” (6). But for what purpose? Strier sees the purpose as “to teach,” which is, again, a very Augustinian claim to make (Augustine 117). Ironically, Strier is hesitant to align Herbert with Augustine’s soteriology in *Love Known*, although Strier repeatedly invokes Augustinian ideas and values throughout his analysis of Herbert’s poetry. In regards to these lines, Strier explains how Herbert now instructs his reader: “He is putting his claim for the value of the heart’s few words in the form most outrageous to those who value eloquence and art” (202). By flipping the reader’s value of art upside down, Herbert, according to Strier, teaches his reader to view art in an “outrageous” way, in order to eventually make such a humble form of art acceptable. Therefore, Strier views the second stanza as a teaching tool for the reader,
aligning Herbert to Augustine’s prescribed purpose for writing, yet Herbert may not be so outwardly focused as Strier claims. “Slight not” may serve as an inner dialogue with himself, which redefines the conventions of art for Herbert rather than an outside audience; however, both readings of the stanza employ Augustine: mine in Herbert’s attempt to view sincerity as the only necessary requirement for eloquence and Strier’s in the poem’s ultimate purpose of instruction.

Importantly, this stanza works on another level when combined with the last two lines:

The fineness which a hymne or psalme affords,
Is, when the soul unto the lines accords. (10-11)

The important emphasis on the inward sincerity of the “soul” here contrasts the public command to “slight not these few words,” revealing the tension that arises between Herbert’s actual sincerity and the public perception or appearance of his soul’s sincerity. Here, Herbert defines “fineness” not based on clever, showy wording, but on the simple piousness of the soul, resulting in a hidden fineness. Yet, where is the success for a poet if his soul’s hidden fineness is not understood by others as fine or eloquent? In light of this paradox, Augustine explains the importance of communication: “Even if he has said what he himself understands, he should not yet think that he has communicated with the person who fails to understand him; but if he has been understood, then, no matter how he has spoken, he has communicated” (118). Thus, while Herbert does end his stanza on “art” by defining “fineness” as only the feelings of his soul, Herbert’s definition inspires the vital question of whether poetry truly can be “fine” based only on the promptings of his heart or “soul” (11). Herbert’s Christian identity prevails in his value of poetry here yet again, but the poetic tendency to produce an outward eloquence hovers on the periphery with the ambivalent tone of the first stanza. Consequently, even while these two lines demonstrate Herbert’s definition of art as the sincerity of his soul, his poetic identity remains preoccupied with not only the presence of truth within his soul, but with the outward perception of his soul as truthful and sincere. Thus, even if Herbert surrenders his office as poet to God’s glory, he is still conscious of the need to communicate, given his background in rhetoric and preaching.

The fourth and final stanza includes a line that is the crux of the entire poem; however, Herbert’s important recognition of God’s intercession has been interpreted differently by scholars such as Richard Strier, Stanley Fish, and Helen Vendler. The third line “God doth supplie the want” functions as this controversial line, but, first, it seems necessary to get there chronologically by looking at Herbert’s preceding dependent clauses:
Whereas if th’ heart be moved,
Although the verse be somewhat scant,
God doth supplie the want.
As when th’ heart says (sighing to be approved)
O, could I love! And stops: God writeth, Loved. (16-20)

In the first two lines here, Herbert describes his plain style by reengaging the Augustinian “promptings of the heart” and the creative purpose “to move” one’s listener. A “scant verse” that “moves the heart” directly contrasts the verse in the previous stanza that contains “words” that “only rhyme” (16, 13). With this juxtaposition of external ornateness and inward eloquence, Herbert espouses his Christian rejection of the superficiality of language by explaining that appearances can be deceitful. Frank Manley also argues this when he quotes “The Forerunners”: “Beautie and beauteous words should go together” (30). As Manley explains, “Herbert knew they do not. It was the same old platonic delusion: physical beauty is not a reflection of virtue in the soul” (205). This incongruity between the outward appearance and the inward state of the ideas themselves goes back to the classical rhetorician Cicero and his comparison of the plain style, or subtilitas, to “a woman’s attire,” essentially saying that its attractiveness depends on its “diligent negligence” (77). As a Christian poet, Herbert must diligently neglect outward beauty because it most frequently works to distort rather than reflect the “virtue of the soul” (Manley 205). While Herbert’s “verse be somewhat scant,” the scantiness of his lines allow for the truth of his words to reach his reader’s heart unencumbered. Cicero’s famous metaphor explains the purity and naturalness of the plain style:

Just as some women are said to be handsomer when unadorned—this very lack of ornament becomes them—so this plain style gives pleasure even when unembellished: there is something in both cases which lends greater charm, but without showing itself. (Orator 78; III.xvi).

The “greater charm” that does not “show itself” lies in the Augustinian idea “not to love words but the truth in words” (117). To paraphrase Cicero: love the woman, not her pretty dress. Herbert seeks to uphold the plain style throughout this poem because it does not need to conceal a lack of beauteous thought (just as the pretty dress should not distract from the natural beauty of the woman), but it should be “borne along by its own momentum, and…derive its beauty of expression, if indeed this emerges, from the power of its subject-matter” (Augustine 137). Thus, with the constant return to this Augustinian perception of the plain style, Herbert dispels his poetic desire for “beauteous words” to accompany beauty and devoutly accepts the “greater charm” of the plain style: simple words that derive their power from the heart.

Now, this praise of the plain style does still express itself with a word that may be taken negatively: “scant,” which suggests the “want” or “need” that God must address
in the next line of the stanza, the line long awaited: “God doth supplie the want” (18). Stanley Fish, in *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, reads the line as God supplying “not only the want of a scanty verse, but the want of a scanty heart. His love for us is so great that He makes up the deficiency of our love for Him, moving us to praises which He then graciously accepts” (202). However, why does Herbert’s heart have to be scanty? Throughout the poem, Herbert clearly considers verses that “only rhyme” as no more than superficially beautiful and, following Cicero, implies that the beauty of his own verses derive from his “diligent negligence” of outward ornament (77; III.xvi). Thus, Fish seems slightly mistaken but, strangely, in the exact sense that Herbert explicitly warns against: judging the appearance rather than the promptings of the poet’s heart. A heart that is divinely moved to say all the day “My joy, my life, my crown” does not seem constrained or lacking in spiritual fervor for God. When Strier reads “God doth supplie the want,” he stops short from condemning Herbert’s heart as scanty:

Every critic writing on the poem has taken “supplie the want” literally, as asserting that whenever Herbert felt himself “moved” but incapable of artistic expression, he could rely on God to provide the inspiration that would lead him to artistic success. But the whole point of the poem has been that religious success—God finding an utterance “fine”—is independent of artistic success…” (204)

Strier’s distinction between “religious success” and “artistic success” complicates the simple intervention of God to fill in the artistic weaknesses in the poem. With this distinction, Strier argues that God does not provide Herbert with what he wants at all. And what Herbert seems to desire is the infusion of divine eloquence into his simple language of “My joy, my life, my crown!” Strier explains Herbert’s need in contrast to God’s answer with the help of Helen Vendler:

In the example of God supplying the want, God does not supply the heart with what it wants and lacks. He does not give the heart the ability to love, to fulfill the commandment paraphrased in stanza 3. Instead, as Vendler notes, He “changes the soul from subject to object and writes ‘Loved.’”…God, on the other hand, grants the heart what it wants without supplying what it lacks. He takes the will for the deed. (205)

To extend Strier’s point, Herbert seems to reveal a subtle sense of guilt in his desire for only a “semblance of artlessness,” as Dionysius of Halicarnassus defines the plain style (44). Herbert as poet desires the appearance of his words to be corrected by God and to match the intense promptings of his heart. In this sense, Fish’s reading of the first stanza that “The muttered litany of ‘My joy, my life, my crown’ has too little of the poet woven into its sense to satisfy him” seems accurate and supported by the rest of the poem (200). While God “takes the will for the deed,” as Strier explains, Herbert still remains a poet and must wrestle with a poet’s sensibilities. Thus, a gentle rebuke
from God appears when Herbert “changes the soul from subject to object” (Vendler 28). Herbert cries out in desperation, “O, could I love!”, but he does not seem to refer to his ability to love God. Herbert’s love for God is quite evident in his inspired phrase, “My joy, my life, my crown!” at the beginning of the poem. Rather, Herbert’s cry of desperation seems to work on another level, reading more accurately: “O, could I express this love!” Therefore, “sighing to be approved” Herbert recognizes that, as a poet, he must accept God’s criticism of the creative “mentality that can think only in terms of accomplishment” (Strier 205). Therefore, Herbert ends the poem with an emotional appeal for God to give him the means to produce “beauteous” words that please both his artistic desires and God’s need for praise. However, Herbert the Christian, realizing that his own words will never satisfy stops, and in this caesura, in this pause that halts all the poet’s struggles over his craft: “God writeth, ‘Loved.’” For Herbert, God answers his appeal by rejecting it, by refusing to supply his want. In this sense, Herbert submits his creative goals to God, accepting God’s rebuke with the understanding that he is a Christian praising God first and foremost and that he should not ask God to make his poetry anything other than the result of a righteous “desire to love God perfectly (a want which God supplies) and to have this desire accepted for the deed” (Strier 205). And in this way, the plain style functions as the appropriate model of praise to which Herbert repeatedly conforms his poetic self.

“**The Forerunners**”

While “A True Hymn” demonstrates Herbert’s submission to God as his humble servant that usurps his role as poet, Herbert again takes up the struggle between his creative desires and his humble purpose in the anti-poem “The Forerunners,” seen in the first stanza:

The harbingers are come: see, see their mark;  
White is their color, and behold my head.  
But must they have my brain? Must they dispark  
Those sparkling notions which therein were bred?  
Must dullness turn me to a clod?  
Yet have they left me “Thou art still my God.” (1-6)

Here Herbert attributes the whiteness that marks the coming of royalty to his “head,” signifying his old age; however, the plain “white” color may also speak to Herbert’s ideal plain style. Herbert shows the risk of growing old when he asks, “But must they have my brain?” (3). The degeneration of his mind from age scares Herbert because of the “sparkling notions which therein were bred” (4). He greatly values his intellect and what he can do with language, as appears in the penultimate line of the stanza: “Must dullness turn me to a clod?” (5). His inward questioning seems to reveal a possible motive for why Herbert chooses the plain style to express his fleeting,
undependable thoughts. He knows that he might lose them, and so he demonstrates his dependence on God’s wisdom and favor by attempting to give up elegant language and present to God his thoughts in their most truthful, humble form. On another level, the pale plainness of the “white” of the harbingers may point to Herbert’s plain style as publicly perceived by others. Even though Herbert’s ultimate objective is to please God, he is still human and may be torn by his love of elegant language and his desire to “communicate” to his reader (Augustine 118). Herbert’s doubts in regards to the plain style may relate to his human concern with the earthly opinion of being viewed as “a clod.” In the last line of the stanza, Herbert attempts to resolve his doubts by quoting Scripture: “Yet have they left me ‘Thou art still my God’” (6).

As in “A True Hymn,” Herbert redirects his attention from himself to God as his primary audience, seen in the last three lines of the second stanza:

So “Thou art still my God” be out of fear.
He will be pleased with that ditty;
And if I please Him, I write fine and witty. (10-12)

In these lines, Herbert may be attempting to disregard his vain doubts about the plain style and focus instead on his all-knowing, heavenly audience. In many of his poems, Herbert struggles with a distraction that carries his focus away from God, arising from his anxiety about language, the very device meant to focus him on God. As Herbert expresses in “A True Hymn,” God’s omniscience should dissuade such anxieties over how he expresses the pureness of his heart because God “takes the will for the deed” (Strier 205). However, Herbert appears to see an interactive relationship between thought and language, as if his choice of superficial words could taint or purify the promptings of his heart. Frank Manley, in his exploratory article on the irreconcilable tensions between Herbert’s holy aim and his “deceitful” craft, describes Herbert’s strong desire for simplicity and straightforwardness, sometimes undermined by the poem’s inner complexity (206):

Throughout The Temple Herbert evinces an intense desire to get out of the complications of self as he knew it—sophisticated, intellectual, introspective, and above all else subtle, complex, and self-divisive—into what he conceived of as the simple, straightforward life of the country parson or, more distant, the early Christians, clothed in the homespun language of the gospels. (205)

Thus, as Manley explains, Herbert may associate his poetic desires to craft his poetry as evidence “of the complications of self as he knew it,” which ultimately leads him to reject such vexed tendencies for “the simple, straightforward life of the country parson” who praises God without the need for external beauty. In his own words, Herbert defines his religious purpose as first and foremost “Holiness,” explaining that a true religious poet “is not witty, or learned, or eloquent, but Holy” (Hutchinson 367). For
example, the last line of the stanza supports this view when Herbert says, “And if I please him, I write fine and witty.” As in “A True Hymn,” Herbert again seems to reject the need for his words to say what he wants them to say, devoutly accepting that his eloquence depends on God’s pleasure instead of his own artfulness.

Leah Marcus, in her insightful article on how the Anglican church influences the set forms and attitudes of Herbert’s poetry, expresses God’s pleasure as grace: “In Herbert’s poetry, poverty of language, like its opposite, is cured by an infusion of divine grace, the same grace that confers order on the Anglican church” (190). And for Herbert, this grace is extremely active in his creative process, as explained by Marcus:

When Herbert cannot find words, or when his words threaten to run away with him, he often discovers ‘set forms’ of language, echoed from the Bible or the liturgy, to fall back on; insofar as these forms of language are fused with his own experience, they can never become hollow and meaningless. (190)

Consequently, two elements breathe life and meaning into the plain style of Herbert’s poetry: the earthly element of Herbert’s individual experience and the “divine grace” of God that brings about order and clarity. This two-part creative process may further explain Herbert’s struggle over being a Christian and a poet. While Marcus attributes Herbert’s chosen form of poetry to the order and structure of the Anglican church, Stanley Fish, among others, points out that the content of his poetry reveals a more Calvinistic or Lutheran attitude toward God. Herbert’s words “If I please Him” demonstrate the anxiety of whether God will uphold his end of the creative partnership. Marcus states that “Herbert learns again in ‘The Forerunners,’ as he has at other crucial points in The Temple, that he does not have to be a good poet to be a good Christian” (191). However, in “The Forerunners” as well as many other of his meta-poems, Herbert resists his inward anxieties and struggles and holds fast to poetry because he claims that “My God must have my best, even all I had” (17). Poetry (the creative result of God’s divine grace on Herbert the earthly sinner) is Herbert at his best. While poetry, of course, is not required for his salvation, it does play a critical role in the expression and testament of it, which explains the amount of meta-poems in The Temple that elucidate Herbert’s struggle as a Christian poet. It seems Herbert identifies himself as a poet on God’s errand, and his successful execution of his errand does importantly comment on the state of his soul. Therefore, Herbert’s emphasis as “not witty, or learned, or eloquent, but Holy,” displays his divine calling as a poet (Hutchinson 367). Herbert’s heartfelt devotion to his holy task and his recognition of his poetic abilities was attached to his “Sonnet I” and “Sonnet II” in which he confesses to his mother that “my poor Abilities in Poetry shall be all, and ever consecrated to Gods glory” (Walton 447).

The last stanza of “The Forerunners” culminates the spiritual conflict for Herbert, ultimately reinforcing his inward focus while also subtly exhibiting his poetic artistry:
Yet, if you go, I pass not; take your way.
For “Thou art still my God” is all that ye
Perhaps with more embellishment can say.
Go, birds of spring; let winter have his fee;
Let a bleak paleness chalk the door,
So all within be livelier than before. (31-36)

In the first line, he dismisses his “sweet phrases” from stanza three and his “lovely enchanting language” found in stanza four, telling them coldly to “take your way” (31). The time of wrestling with what he knows to be his highest aim of pleasure to please God and the satisfaction of writing witty verse is over, and Herbert now deftly resolves the conflict within the confines of the poem. In the second line, Herbert explains his reason for his harsh treatment, saying that elegant verse is only mere “embellishment” (13, 33). He denounces elaborate expression as simply extra frills because they add no substance to the ultimate, humble message of “Thou art still my God” (32). However, Herbert significantly gives an imperative in the third line, “Go, birds of spring,” allowing the bittersweet tone of the rest of the poem to seep into his “farewell” (34). His use of metaphor here displays a subtle beauty of phrasing that retains a sense of his agency as a poet, even as he is seen rejecting such forms. Finally, the last two lines of the poem highlight perhaps the most significant element of Herbert’s plain style, the focus of inwardness. The poem ends: “Let a bleak paleness chalk the door, / So all within be livelier than before” (35-36). This is a perfect example of what Michael Gallagher explains as a “dimension behind the scenes, as it were, in his writing, not one that is easy to show actually at work in the verse” (513). This dimension is what Herbert understood as the “simplicity of intention” and his “inner commitment which calls forth all the poet’s skill in art” (Gallagher 509). Yet, the paradox exists in that this focus on the inward intention cannot be conveyed without a deft handling of language itself.

“Jordan (I)”

Herbert’s bittersweet tone towards his “sweet phrases, lovely metaphors” contrasts with his effusive confidence in the plain style in another metapoem, “Jordan (I),” which is manifest through his verbal attack on the high style. For example, he begins the poem with a rhetorical yet assertive question: “Who says that fictions only and false hair / Become a verse? Is there in truth no beauty?” (1-2). The question of whom Herbert is speaking to here does not seem to be a mystery as it was in “A True Hymn.” The audience appears to consist of other poets who choose to write about secular love and also employ the more eloquent style of writing. For Herbert, this represents two wrongs: one against the aesthetics of poetry and another against the specific desires of God. First, it deviates from his own self-proclaimed purpose, seen in his dedication of his talents early on in his life to God and God alone. However, as Manley argues, there remains in poetry a “deviousness” or “a form of deceit,” which taints poetry for
Herbert because he wishes above all for life to be “simple, straightforward, directed in all things toward God” (203). In “A Wreath,” an introspective and subtly crafted poem, Herbert ironically expresses his desire for simplicity:

Life is straight,
Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,
To thee, who art more far above deceit,
Then deceit seems above simplicity.

Manley applies the usage of “deceit” here to his discussion of poetry and Herbert’s perception of it as “duplicitous” (204). Herbert does seem to view poetry as a threat to the simple life that God desires for him, requiring that he surrender it to God’s grace if he is to practice the art as a Christian at all. Herbert confidently states that “Life is straight / Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,” which discriminates against the high style that is censured in the second stanza of “Jordan (I): “Is it no verse, except enchanted groves / And sudden arbours shadow coarse-spun lines?” (6-7). The high or eloquent style (specifically elaborate metaphors and tropes) disturbs Herbert to his core because, in his eyes, it seems to represent the farthest extent that poetry can go in its duplicitous potential. Herbert uses the metaphor of “enchanted groves” to describe the high style, and by comparing it to a natural, God-created “grove,” he may cling to his idealistic idea that poetry can function in a natural, God-pleasing way. Yet, he describes elaborate literary devices as “enchanted,” which implies that something natural and intended for God’s praise has been bewitched. For Herbert, perhaps the spell befalls the natural entity of poetry from the pride and idolatrous attention placed on words themselves by the poet, which Augustine warns against. Seen in Sonnet II, one of the two sonnets that accompanied this letter to his mother, Herbert writes “Each Cloud distills thy praise, and doth forbid / Poets to turn it to another use” (4-5). In these two lines, Herbert even goes so far as to say that God “forbids” poets to use poetry for any other subject than for “thy praise”; yet, even Herbert himself does not perfectly follow this.

In “Jordan (I),” it is evident that Herbert balks at mystery because he does not think it points the reader to God but rather acts as a sinful distraction from his all-mighty subject. One of the most often quoted lines from Herbert’s poetry expresses his perspective on the nature of poetry and his reason for choosing the plain style and is found in “Jordan (I): “Must all be veiled, while he that reads, divines, / Catching the sense at two removes?” (9-10). The high style is “veiled” according to Herbert, which for this plain style poet, seems synonymous with a guilty or ungodly intent. The Bible uses the word “veiled” with a negative connotation as well: “Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Corinthians 3:15-16). In this way, Herbert seems to so strongly criticize the high style because its hidden, mysterious, complicated syntax acts as a veil that “covers” the poet’s “heart,” which distorts the verbum cordis that Augustine espouses for a good Christian speaker. Herbert chooses to conclude “Jordan (I)” in the consistent
confidence that he began the poem with: “Nor let them punish me with loss of rhyme, / Who plainly say, My God, My king” (14-15). The directed dialogue towards the high-style poets, or those who use devices characteristic of that style, seem to have disgusted Herbert to such an extent that he rejects even a basic characteristic of poetry, evidenced in his lack “of rhyme.” Thus, Herbert reduces poetry to a bare plainness in “Jordan (I)” by condensing his offering of praise to four words: “My God, My King.” “Jordan (I)” as well as “A Wreath” both express Herbert’s contempt of the metaphors and tropes that characterize the high style, deriving from his values as a Christian rather than a poet. Herbert, as a Christian, views himself as lowly when compared to God, and because of this, he embraces the “homely” style of writing to convey his humility to God.

Conclusion

Simply put, Herbert’s spiritual life affects his poetic decisions and his poetic decisions reflect the state of his soul. From Herbert’s reluctant recognition that God does not desire eloquence in “A True Hymn” to his position of humility gained from the focus of inwardness in “The Forerunners” to his defiant dismissal of literary devices in “Jordan (I),” Herbert’s attitude toward the plain style exposes many tensions when confronted with a Christian agenda to praise God. Throughout these poems, however, Herbert masterfully employs the plain style to divulge the inner struggle of his soul and to unify the unseen currents of his heart with the perceptible words of his poetry, attempting to satisfy God’s desire for sincere praise while subtly crafting “plain” words that “instruct, delight, and move [his] listeners” (Augustine 117). The great irony that exists in Herbert’s poetry lies in the fact that nothing about Herbert’s poetry can be described as mere “mutt’rings” of his heart; there always endures a strong anchor of intention and “diligence” (Cicero 77) in the midst of his flames of “heartfelt emotion” (Augustine 137) producing poems, such as the ones explicated here, that communicate to the reader and communicate well. As Augustine argues, “After all, we do not want what we say in a restrained style to be despised, and so we want to be listened to not only with understanding but also with pleasure” (141). In the selected poems and arguably throughout The Temple, Herbert seeks to elicit pleasure by diligently neglecting that which he desires to ultimately produce: beautiful poetry that praises God. It must be concluded that Herbert resolves his struggle as a poet. With paradoxical eloquence, he sets God over himself, his Christian soul over his poetic mind, and the truth of words over words themselves, a series of hierarchies that for Augustine signals “the nature of a good mind” (Augustine 117). He takes the inexpressible and, with invocation to God, bends the rivers of his emotions into a poetic form that unifies and binds the Christian to the poet, his heart to words, and Herbert to his God.


