

Form and Spiritual Content in the Poetry of George Herbert and Henry Vaughan: A Response to Jonathan Nauman

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For further contributions to the debate on “Poetic form and function in George Herbert’s ‘Deniall’ and Henry Vaughan’s ‘Disorder and Frailty’: A Response to Jonathan Nauman,” see <http://www.connotations.de/poetic-form-and-function-in-herberts-deniall-and-vaughans-disorder-and-frailty>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de

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Abstract

Jonathan Nauman makes a fine job of demonstrating how Herbert sought to express the operation of divine grace in poetry by integrating meaning and form. I take issue, however, with his argument that Vaughan’s reliance upon *imitatio* prevented him from sustaining a similarly creative prosody in his own work. He devised original ways of matching form with content not only in simple quatrains and complex stanzas, but also in irregular organic structures that reflected the turbulent spiritual experiences that distinguish his poetry from the calmer narrative art of Herbert.

Jonathan Nauman begins by noting that much of the commentary on George Herbert’s collection of devotional lyrics has been preoccupied with two topics: the “articulation of an acute and searching Anglican Protestant spirituality” and the “unprecedented range of original and demanding poetic forms” (113). His initial project is to take further the more difficult task of “exploring some of the evident connections between the design of Herbert’s verses and their message”; and he acknowledges that this is complicated by the question of “God’s external influence over the poet’s verse” (113). It is useful to preface an assessment of Nauman’s accomplishment of this task by recalling that

Herbert himself was fully alive to these issues and approached them again and again throughout the *The Temple*. In "A true Hymne," for example, he tells how his "heart was meaning all the day, / Somewhat it fain would say" but could not get beyond the opening exclamation—"My joy, my life, my crown!"; and how he came to recognize that "these few words"—if "truly said"—could "take part / Among the best in art"; the second stanza ends by foregrounding the importance of sincerity: "The finenesse which a hymne or psalme affords, / Is, when the soul unto the lines accords"; and the third raises a specific aspect of poetic craft and admits that God—"who craves all the minde, / And all the soul, and strength"—may justly complain if "the words onely ryme," implying that verbal rhyme is inadequate without a deeper accord between words and soul. Furthermore, provided "th' heart be moved," even if "the verse be somewhat scant," God will supply the artistic "want," a process which is then demonstrated in the poem's closing couplet: "As when th' heart sayes (sighing to be approved) / O, could I love! and stops: God writeth, *Loved*" (Herbert 576). Herbert's belief that a "true" poem depends upon a vital relationship between the poet and God is expressed in a variety of ways. In "Dulnesse," he prays for a "quicknesse" that will enable his praise to be "brim-full," which can be granted only by the One who is to be praised: "Lord, cleare thy gift, that with a constant wit / I may but look towards thee" (Herbert 410-11); in "Love (II)," he implores the "Immortall Heat" of the Holy Spirit to "let thy greater flame / Attract the lesser to it," so that "true desires" may be kindled "in our hearts" and "our brain" may lay "all her invention" on the "Altar," "and there in hymnes send back thy fire again" (Herbert 191).¹ Several poems offer brief examples of the kind of utterance that such a relationship generates, like God's laconic "*Loved*" written in response to the sighing in "A true Hymne." "Jordan (I)" dismisses the "fictions," "false hair," and "winding stair" of contemporary verse in favour of something less "vail'd" or riddling: "Nor let them punish me with losse of ryme, / Who plainly say, *My God, My King*" (Herbert 200); and in "The Posie," invention, comparisons, and wit are all set aside for the biblical text that Herbert took as his motto: "*Lesse then the least / Of all Gods mercies, is my posie still*" (Herbert 632).²

the speaker's petition" (118). In his reading, the very "disposition towards grace is a sign of grace" and the "formal resolution"—which indicates independent and transcendent action by God—is a manifestation of that "divine-human collaboration" which makes possible a "true" poem (118-19).

"Deniall" was chosen to illustrate the operation of grace in Herbert's poetic practice not only because it is amenable to this kind of interpretation (more so, perhaps, than any other poem in *The Temple*),⁶ but also because of its direct connection with a poem that is used in the second half of the article to illustrate Henry Vaughan's quite different approach to poetic form. Describing "Disorder *and* frailty" as "a lyric meant to answer Herbert's formal strategy in 'Deniall'" (121), Nauman argues that it was rooted in the "habits" of "*imitatio*" absorbed by Vaughan during his "poetic apprenticeship" to the Caroline followers of Ben Jonson (119). When he appropriated "formal techniques" that "for Herbert" were "especially analogous to divine ordering," he merely turned from "classicist *imitatio* to sacred *imitatio*," so that—however much he desired to "merge his sacred devotion with Herbert's"—his "classicist eloquence and emphasis" were less "tentative and exploratory" than his master's "complex poetic experiments" (119). As a preliminary example, the "formal constraint" (Nauman 119) with which Herbert draws up a quasi-legal "deed" (Herbert 374) of self-dedication to God's service in "Obedience" is contrasted with Vaughan's "impassioned acceptance" (Nauman 119) of the challenge to set "hand / And heart" (Herbert 375) to the deed and pass on Herbert's inheritance in "The Match" (Vaughan 1:97-98). Nauman's verdict is that, unlike Herbert, Vaughan fails to match "a demanding form to his message" beyond the first stanza and so succeeds only in producing an "emulative and testimonial voice" that lacks the sustained appropriateness of Herbert's "inventive prosody" (120-21).

Vaughan's "effort toward *imitatio*" in "Disorder *and* frailty" is judged to be "more successful and wide-ranging" than "The Match," with each of the stanzas descanting on the thought and imagery of a different Herbert poem (121). Not only does the poem imitate Herbert's in frustrating the aesthetic closure of rhyme at the end of the first three of the

four stanzas, but it also leaves the fifth line of each fifteen-line unit unmatched until “perverse” is echoed by “verse” in a “rhyme-mending conclusion” that emulates its model in turning “from description of the speaker’s situation to a petition directed to God” (124):

But dresse, and water with thy grace
 Together with the seed, the place;
 And for his sake
 Who died to stake
 His life for mine, tune to thy will
 My heart, my verse. (Vaughan 1:110)

Nauman allows that the implication of grace being “already present” in “the speaker’s desire for grace” is similar to that at the end of “Denial,” but insists that it has been enabled by Vaughan’s “artistic experience of Herbert’s poetic forms,” which opened up to him “opportunities for *imitatio* higher than the earlier sort he had pursued, more intense in its formal demands and more admirable in its spiritual results” (124-25).

The perceptive analyses of two major instances of the relation of poetic form to spiritual purpose in this article offer new and valuable insights into the practice of sacred verse and into some of the differences between two major seventeenth-century practitioners. Such a small and carefully selected sample from each poet, however, tends to underplay the extent to which Vaughan inherited from Herbert an interest in the conditions necessary for the composition of what Nauman calls “a verbal emblem of authentic Christian devotion” (113). In “Anguish,” Vaughan reveals his acute awareness that the task of producing such an emblem went far beyond a mere facility with words:

O! ’tis an easie thing
 To write and sing;
 But to write true, unfeigned verse
 Is very hard! (Vaughan 2:615)

And he knew that *imitatio* was not enough, however holy the model and skilful the imitator. Only God could give his spirit “leave / To act

as well as to conceive," that is, to go beyond the idea of what a poem should be and create a truly devotional verbal emblem (Vaughan 2:615). The dedication of the 1650 *Silex Scintillans* to Christ humbly accepts that the heart's crucial role in the shaping of a sacred poem is dependent upon divine activity: "Some drops of thy all-quickning bloud / Fell on my heart; these made it bud / And put forth thus" (Vaughan 1:56). In the first paragraph of "Mount of Olives (II)," he describes how all his "pow'rs"—"soul," "heart," "bloud," "thoughts," and "eie"—were animated when he first experienced the presence of God (1:142). The shorter second paragraph makes it clear that the real subject of the poem—as its title implies and as the punning reference to "leafs" (leaves of paper) confirms—is his absolute reliance on the Creator for the gift of authentic sacred poetry:

Thus fed by thee, who dost all beings nourish,
My wither'd leafs again look green and flourish,
I shine and shelter underneath thy wing
Where sick with love I strive thy name to sing,
Thy glorious name! which grant I may so do
That these may be thy *Praise*, and my *Joy* too. (Vaughan 1:143)

Many of the images and phrases in this poem are derived from an array of poems in *The Temple*—the commentary in *Works* (3:974) cites "The Glance," "Jordan (II)," "The Odour," "The Morning-watch," "Affliction (I)," "Unprofitableness," and, in these last lines, "The Flower": "Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart / Could have recover'd greenesse" (Herbert 568)—amply demonstrating the contrast with Herbert, in whose poetry "there is no regime of formal emulation, quotation, or allusion" (Nauman 119). But in the final line-and-a-half, there is that sense of grace bestowed in the very act of requesting it that Vaughan shares with Herbert and that comes from personal conviction rather than *imitatio*.

The limited choice of poems for comparison in the article, which serves to set the "classicist eloquence and emphasis" of Vaughan against the "tentative and exploratory" (Nauman 118) nature of Herbert's "complex poetic experiments," overlooks a significant feature of

the later poet's art. It is true, as James Simmonds has convincingly shown, that Vaughan's "most basic, constant patterns" (44) are the couplet and the quatrain, which he handles with a virtuosity that varies from "formal symmetry" to an "organic unity of thought and rhythm" (Simmonds 58, 60). The latter is achieved in the simple octosyllabic quatrain that concludes "The Incarnation, and Passion":

O what strange wonders could thee move
 To slight thy precious blood, and breath!
 Sure it was *Love*, my Lord; for *Love*
 Is only stronger far than death. (Vaughan 1:78)

The awestruck bafflement of the first two lines is resolved in the repeated word "*Love*," which is given metrical emphasis by the two pauses in the third line; and the negative note struck by the concluding rhyme on "death" is overridden by the forward impulse created by enjambement. Some of Vaughan's most expressive effects are achieved by varying the length of lines in a rhyming quatrain, as in this stanza from "They are all gone into the world of light!"

And yet, as Angels in some brighter dreams
 Call to the soul, when man doth sleep:
 So some strange thoughts transcend our wonted dreams,
 And into glory peep. (Vaughan 2:568)

The sense of hushed and privileged wonder conveyed by the last short line depends on the longer sweep of the preceding lines and the syntax they orchestrate, which includes the twelve-syllable unit of meaning and rhythm that results from running the first line over into the second. Among Vaughan's finest devotional lyrics, of course, are ones written in more elaborate stanzas, some taken over unchanged from *The Temple* but more often of his own devising.⁷ Jonathan Post cites "Ascension-Hymn," from the 1655 *Silex Scintillans*, as evidence that Vaughan could "chisel out" stanza forms with a skill equal to that of the "master carver" of "The Altar" and "Easter Wings." In this case, he develops "his own 'hieroglyph' of ascension" from a quatrain made up of lines

of disparate length followed by an octosyllabic couplet (Post 85-86). The poem ends with a final triumphant repetition of a form designed to match the poem's spiritual subject matter in the steady lengthening of lines from three syllables to four to the soaring movement of the last two:

Hee alone
 And none else can
 Bring bone to bone
 And rebuild man,
 And by his all subduing might
 Make clay ascend more quick then light. (Vaughan 2:567)

There are also poems by Vaughan that are much more adventurous formally than the "classicist eloquence" that Nauman regards as characteristic of his reliance on *imitatio*. "Distraction" expresses—or rather embodies—a sense of disintegration and spiritual alienation that is both individual and a general aspect of the human condition:

But now
 I find my selfe the lesse, the more I grow;
 The world
 Is full of voices; Man is call'd, and hurl'd
 By each, he answers all,
 Knows ev'ry note, and call,
 Hence, still
 Fresh dotage tempts, or old usurps his will. (Vaughan 1:75)

Although it consists of seventeen pairs of rhyming lines, the unpredictable varying of line length, together with frequent caesuras and enjambments in this poem led Post to describe it as Vaughan's "most visually chaotic lyric," which reflects "in its own verbal disjointedness" the "spasms of living without God" (Post 176). Anne Cluysenaar valued the "immediate visceral impact" of a poem that demands to be read "as an event unfolding through time" and attributed its "emotional intensity" to unpredictable changes in the "inter-relations of metre and syntax" (Cluysenaar 98, 99, 104). Another example of what she calls

“organic” (105) development is “Affliction (I),” which distributes rhymes and line-lengths in no detectable pattern throughout its forty lines in a demonstration that “Vicissitude plaies all the game” in a world where affliction is God’s means of curbing and checking “the mule, unruly man.” This poem even enunciates an aesthetic justification for its refusal to fall into any regular pattern: “Beauty consists in colours; and that’s best / Which is not fixt, but flies, and flowes” (Vaughan 125).

Anne Cluysenaar’s description of “Distraction” as “an event unfolding through time” (99) points to another contrast with Herbert that can also be illustrated by reading “Deniall” and “Disorder *and* frailty” side by side. Herbert’s poem narrates a period of spiritual desolation, when God appeared to ignore his prayers: “My breast was full of fears / And disorder”; “My heart was in my knee, / But no hearing”; “Therefore my soul lay out of sight, / Untun’d, unstrung” (288-89). Only in the last stanza does the poet break through into the present with his plea for “favours” that will bring his “minde” into harmony with God (289). Nauman aptly glosses this with a biblical text—“Ask, and ye shall receive” (John 16:24)—but his statement that “the speaker’s *emerging* disposition towards grace is a sign of grace” (emphasis mine) is not quite true to Herbert’s poetic strategy or the reader’s experience. As R. A. Durr long ago suggested, Herbert’s “struggle to attain and hold his piety” had already gone through a “formulating discipline” before being recorded in poetry. As a result, the “texture of his poems” was “smooth” and their “curve of progression” was “simple and clear, though varied and rich” (Durr 11).⁸ There is a sense, then, that the resolution of “Deniall” was premeditated, the unrhymed line that “hung / Discontented” at the end of each stanza being deliberately placed in anticipation of the concluding “ryme” with “chime” (Herbert 73). Vaughan’s imitation of “Deniall” also begins in the past tense, with a brief account of how God first got possession of his “heart.” It quickly moves into a present tense evocation of his subsequent predicament, however, where his determination to love God “most” is a continual struggle:

[...] here tost
 By winds, and bit with frost,
 I pine, and shrink
 Breaking the link
 'Twixt thee, and me; and oftimes creep
 Into th' old silence, and dead sleep. (Vaughan 108)

The rest of the poem offers analogies for the failure of his attempts to restore that link, until he prays for divine assistance in the final stanza. Nauman notes that Vaughan's ambitious emulation of Herbert's "formal strategy" features a stanza form "much more complex and lengthy" than that of "Deniall" (121).⁹ What he does not acknowledge is that the effect of the variations of line-length, the missing rhyme for the fifth line, the rhyming of line 14 back to lines 6 and 7, and the frequent pauses and run-over lines is much more like the "organic" form in Vaughan's own "Distraction" than Herbert's more "constrained" five-line stanzas. The reader of "Disorder *and* frailty" is plunged into an experience—rather than offered a record—of grace perplexingly granted and withdrawn, in which he is touched by divine "fire" and "bloud," only to have his "leaves" blasted back to "the bare root" or his flight cut short, "Untill thy Sun again ascends" (1:108-109). The appeal for God's help, which alone can "tune" his "heart" and "verse," might more appropriately be said to "emerge" from the maelstrom of Vaughan's unresolved present than Herbert's more calmly contrived conclusion.

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NOTES

¹The dedication presents the entire collection of poems in *The Temple* to God as “my first fruits,” but immediately qualifies the claim to ownership: “Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came, / And must return” (Herbert 45).

²The motto is a conflation of Genesis 32:10 and Ephesians 3:8.

³A consort is a small group of musicians; a strain is a melody; and a reed, in musical terms, is a reed instrument like a shawm.

⁴Wilcox also notes that to consort is to play together in a small musical group; to twist is to interweave the parts in polyphonic music; to vie means both to increase and to be in opposition, since musical parts increase the sound by working against one another; and to multiply here is to repeat and echo the three parts in octaves and harmonic notes (Herbert 142n).

⁵Nauman cites the passage about rhyming verse in Hobbe’s *Answer to Davenant’s* preface, in *Sir William Davenant’s Gondibert*, ed. David F. Gradish (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1971) 47.

⁶Nauman also mentions briefly formal elements of “The Altar,” “Easter Wings” and “Repentance” (114-15, 122), “Home” (n5), “A True Hymne” (n6) and “Paradise” and “Heaven” (n13).

⁷Mary Ellen Rickey was among the first to recognize that Vaughan “derived a significant part of his conception of form” from Herbert (162); and Jonathan Post attributed to the influence of Herbert “the sudden burgeoning of stanzaic forms” in the 1650 *Silex Scintillans* (80).

⁸Durr had in mind the discipline of “church ritual,” but the discipline of poetic art was also involved. He adds that the effect of Herbert’s method is felt even in his most blatantly rebellious poem, “The Collar,” in which “[h]e tells us he pounded the board, but it was a long time ago and he smiles to think of himself then” (11).

⁹The scheme of the poem—8a8b8a8b4c8d6d4e4e8f8f4g4g8d4h (with a varied pattern of abba in the opening quatrain of the second stanza)—is much less easily held by eye or ear than the five-line structure of “Deniall.”

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