

# Connotations

*A Journal for Critical Debate*



Volume 33 (2024)  
Connotations Society



# *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*

Published by *Connotations: Society for Critical Debate*

## **EDITORS**

Inge Leimberg († Münster), Matthias Bauer (Tübingen),  
Burkhard Niederhoff (Bochum) and Angelika Zirker (Tübingen)

Secretary: Eva Maria Haag

Editorial Assistants: Céline Beck, Nele Berger,  
Nadine Libal

Online Editing: Eva Marek, Vera Yakupova

## **EDITORIAL ADDRESS**

Professor Matthias Bauer, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen,  
Department of English, Wilhelmstr. 50, 72074 Tübingen, Germany  
Email: [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de) <http://www.connotations.de>

## **EDITORIAL BOARD**

Paul Budra, Simon Fraser University

Lothar Černý, Fachhochschule Köln

Eleanor Cook, University of Toronto

William E. Engel, The University of the South

Bernd Engler, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

David Fishelov, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

John P. Hermann, University of Alabama

Lothar Hönnighausen, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn

David Scott Kastan, Yale University

Frances M. Malpezzi, Arkansas State University

Holly F. Nelson, Trinity Western University

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, Fordham University

Martin Procházka, Charles University, Prague

Michael Steppat, Universität Bayreuth

Jayne Thomas, Cardiff Metropolitan University

Leona Toker, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Nathalie Vanfasse, Aix-Marseille University

John Whalen-Bridge, National University of Singapore

Joseph Wiesenfarth, University of Wisconsin-Madison

*Connotations* is a peer-reviewed journal that encourages scholarly communication in the field of English Literature (from the Middle English period to the present), as well as American and other Literatures in English. It focuses on the semantic and stylistic energy of the language of literature in a historical perspective and aims to represent different approaches.

*Connotations* publishes articles and responses to articles, as well as to recent books. As a rule, contributions will appear within six months after submission so that discussion can begin without delay.

Articles and responses should be forwarded to the editors. Articles should not exceed 12,000 words and follow the MLA Handbook. Responses should be limited to 4,000 words. All contributions should be submitted by e-mail; they should be in English and must be proofread before submission.

Articles and responses are published continuously on [www.connotations.de](http://www.connotations.de). They are collected in an annual volume, digitally available at the end of the calendar year.

Authors and readers are welcome to join the *Connotations Society for Critical Debate*. Members receive invitations to the *Connotations* symposia. The suggested annual fee is € 40; reduced rate (e.g. for students) € 20.

© *Connotations: Society for Critical Debate*

*Connotations* is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0

E-ISSN 2626-8183

DOI: 10.25623/conn033-full

<<https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-full>>

*Connotations* is a member of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.

Contributions are indexed, for example, in the *MLA Bibliography*, the *World Shakespeare Bibliography* and the *IBZ/IBR*.

# Connotations

*A Journal for Critical Debate*

Volume 33 (2024)

The Yellow Leaf: Age and the Gothic in Dickens FRANZISKA QUABECK	1
Literary Anthologies: A Case Study for Metacognitively Approaching Canonicity WILLIAM E. ENGEL	18
From Rivers to Fountains: Henry Vaughan's Secular and Sacred Inaugurations JONATHAN NAUMAN	48
Anthologizing Shakespeare's Sonnets THOMAS KULLMANN	63
The Ghost Story in Spenser's <i>Daphnaïda</i> KREG SEGALL	98
And This Gives Life to Baby Shoes: Textual and Other Reasons for Canonicity DAVID FISHELOV	121
And This Gives Life to Baby Shoes: Textual and Other Reasons for Canonicity. A Response to David Fishelov LOTHAR ČERNÝ	137

<p>“It’s Exactly Like That”: Bearing Resemblance in Alice Oswald’s  <i>Memorial</i>—A Response to Linne/Niederhoff and Hahnemann  CHLOE WHEATLEY</p>	140
<p>Kinship and the River Cam:  George Herbert’s Anthropocentrism Reconsidered  SARAH CROVER</p>	159
<p>Color and Memory in <i>David Copperfield</i>:  A Response to Georges Letissier  ANNETTE FEDERICO</p>	181
<p>Lost and Found: Textual and Intertextual Retrieval in Dante Gabriel  Rossetti’s Exhumation Letters and the “Willowwood” Sonnets  CARL PLASA</p>	190
<p>“Vancouver Walking”: Contemporary Canadian Urban Poetry  CECILE SANDTEN</p>	226
<p>The Providential Rose: Herbert’s Full Cosmos and  Fellowship of Creatures  PAUL DYCK</p>	259
<p>Herbert and Gerson Reconsidered: Mystical Music and the  Conciliarist Strain of Natural Law in “Providence”  ANGELA BALLA</p>	285
<p>A Response to Franziska Quabeck:  “The Yellow Leaf: Age and the Gothic in Dickens”  ROBERT L. PATTEN</p>	328

# The Yellow Leaf: Age and the Gothic in Dickens

FRANZISKA QUABECK

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 1-17.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-quabeck-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-quabeck-1)

---

This article is a contribution to the debate on “Dickens and Colour” <http://www.connotations.de/dickens-and-colour/>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by the [Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

---

## Abstract

Dickens was a fashionable writer, and from what we know he was also a very fashionable person, but the use of the colour yellow in his works differs surprisingly from the fashion of his times. He hardly uses canary yellow for his materials, and he abstains from the use of yellow as an indication of brightness and symbol of optimism and hope, too. Yellow in Dickens is not a gay or illuminating colour, and it seems that Dickens creates his own logic of colours, in which he uses yellow predominantly not as a primary colour but as a tinge, a *discolouring* of that which was formerly white, or conceived of as white. This does not mean, however, that the use of the colour in his works is not heavily invested with symbolism—quite the opposite. Dickens uses his own colour code, and yellow signifies both the literal and metaphorical imprisonment in and of old age.

## 1. Introduction

Early in 2023, *The Guardian* published a feature on the colour yellow as a distinctive fashion emblem of Gen Z. Introduced, apparently, as a “post-pandemic” flash of brightness and analysed as a representative of hopefulness and optimism for this particular generation, yellow has begun to colour the fashion choices of people in their early twenties (see Demopoulos

2023). In fashion, in particular, the phrase “history repeats itself” is, of course, very true. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the colour yellow may be “it” once again today, although it was already “it” in the nineteenth century. The Victorian invention of synthetic dyes gave yellow a prominent place in nineteenth-century fashion, when it was apparently also used for its general brightness. In both these centuries, yellow plays a role as an illuminating, as a hopeful colour, and it seems that the reasons that make it fashionable now also made it fashionable then. While there is no doubt that yellow played a role in Victorian fashion, it is remarkable that Dickens does not, in any way, participate in its fashionable use in his works—although he was not averse to the colour in his own wardrobe. In fact, in Dickens’s novels, yellow is not a positive colour, but quite the opposite, and thus contrary to contemporary fashion. As a colour of nineteenth-century clothes, yellow signifies two different, though not unrelated, ideas. For one, the colour yellow tends to evoke a certain association with frivolity. The number of yellow fashion items in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848) alone is an obvious indicator of the morally ambiguous preference of the upper classes for the colour. Lady Fuddleston’s yellow hat is an object of Becky Sharp’s desires and envy; yellow liveries and yellow shawls abound in this world that tends towards the insincere and immoral. Significantly, yellow also became Thackeray’s chosen colour for the title pages of his publications, presumably, because it was both fashionable and attracted attention. In Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), M. Paul sneers at yellow and other ostentatious colours: “‘Pink or scarlet, yellow or crimson, pea-green or sky-blue; it was all one: these were all flaunting, giddy colours [...]’” (419). In Victorian fashion advice, yellow is equally associated with “outward show” and discarded as “objectionable” (Matthews David 187). At the same time, yellow signifies a certain wealth, because it is a new industrial colour that substitutes the cheaper vegetable dyes (see Nunn). Thus, Mrs Boffin imagines a yellow chariot as a symbol of her and her husband’s new wealth in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), and Miss La Creevy tends to implement yellow in her slightly eccentric wardrobe to mask her poverty in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39).

In theoretical contexts, yellow often evokes brightness. In his *Theory of Colours* from 1810, translated into English in 1840, Goethe elaborated on the

distinction between the primary colours yellow and blue as a distinction between brightness and darkness: "Next to the light, a colour appears which we call yellow; another appears next to the darkness, which we name blue" (Goethe xliii). Moreover, he postulated with unequivocal historical influence that "every colour produces a distinct impression on the mind, and thus addresses at once the eye and feelings. Hence it follows that colour may be employed for certain moral and aesthetic ends" (350). Generations of studies on the symbolism of colours and the basic distinction between light and dark in literature have shown that this is indeed true. According to Goethe's theory, yellow is a positive colour: "In its highest purity it always carries with it the nature of brightness and has a serene, gay, softly exciting character" (307). The positive association that Goethe ascribes to yellow as a colour changes quite drastically at the end of the century, but this is a symbolic shift in British culture that Dickens would have been more or less unaffected by. While there are several references in his works to Yellow Jack, the yellow fever most commonly associated with the West Indies, and Nemo, in *Bleak House* (1852-53), has turned yellow with opium use, also associated with the East, the racist association with the colour yellow that would dominate the nineties, is luckily not to be found in Dickens yet.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Faded and Yellow

Dickens was a fashionable writer, and from what we know he was also a very fashionable person, but canary yellow, the colour so popular at his time, is curiously absent from his works.<sup>2</sup> He does not use yellow for frivolous fashion, but neither does he use yellow as an indication of brightness and as a symbol of optimism or hopefulness in general. Yellow in Dickens is not a gay or illuminating colour, and it seems that Dickens creates his own logic of colours, in which he uses yellow predominantly not as a primary colour, but as a tinge, a *discolouring* of that which was formerly white, or conceived of as white. This does not mean, however, that the use of the colour in his works is not heavily invested with symbolism—quite



the opposite. Dickens uses his own colour code, and yellow signifies both the literal and metaphorical imprisonment in and of old age.

In *Great Expectations* (1860-61), Pip observes that Satis House is deeply tinged with colour as a discolouration of white: "I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow" (*GE* 50). Annette R. Federico has pointed out that, at Satis, "the predominant color is yellow, the atmosphere hazy, the hour twilight, the season winter, the courtyard abandoned, the gates always locked" ("Satis House" 66). At Satis House, one of Dickens's most famous prisons both in the literal and metaphorical sense, the colour yellow is inextricably linked to time and age. The house appears like a timeless space to young Pip, yet all that he sees is a remnant of the past, and while time seems to have stopped there, it has worn away both the house and its inhabitant:

So unchanging was the dull old house, the yellow light in the darkened room, the faded spectre in the chair by the dressing-table glass, that I felt as if the stopping of the clocks had stopped Time in that mysterious place, and, while I and everything outside it grew older, it stood still. (*GE* 100)

The fact that everything associated with Satis House is yellow symbolises that, tragically, time does not stand still, because time grinds away unmercifully at a wasted life. The colour is significantly linked to a deathliness Pip perceives in and around Miss Havisham that is the result of her incarceration. Looking at Dickens's works in general, it becomes apparent that he uses the colour yellow for prisons of different kinds. Thus, it occurs in the actual prisons, such as the Fleet, the Marshalsea and the Bastille as well as the "prison-like homes" which Monika Fludernik has identified in his works (225).

Mr Pickwick peers into the individual rooms along the corridors of the Fleet, where "some solitary tenant might be seen, poring, by the light of a feeble tallow candle, over a bundle of soiled and tattered papers, yellow with dust and dropping to pieces from age [...]" (*PP* 536).<sup>3</sup> One of those solitary tenants is, of course, an old acquaintance, for Pickwick encounters here a shadow of the formerly so spirited Mr Jingle. His imprisonment has deprived him of the comic spirit that is crucial in the early chapters of the

novel. Now, a prisoner for debt at the Fleet, Jingle is destitute, seemingly only biologically alive and that but barely:

[I]n tattered garments, and without a coat; his common calico shirt, yellow and in rags; his hair hanging over his face; his features changed with suffering, and pinched with famine; there sat Mr Alfred Jingle: his head resting on his hand, his eyes fixed upon the fire, and his whole appearance denoting misery and dejection! (PP 555)

His incarceration has drained Jingle of his former colour in both the physical and the psychological sense, for he is no longer able to brighten up the novel.

As it turns out, characters who experience incarceration in Dickens's novels are all symbolically marked by the colour yellow in some form or another. Dr Manette has turned yellow all over in the Bastille to the extent that he becomes indistinguishable from the materials covering his body. In effect, there seems to be almost no perceptible difference between the animate and inanimate:

His yellow rags of shirt lay open at the throat, and showed his body to be withered and worn. He, and his old canvas frock, and his loose stockings, and all his poor tatters of clothes, had, in a long seclusion from direct light and air, faded down to such a dull uniformity of parchment-yellow, that it would have been hard to say which was which. (TTC 46)<sup>4</sup>

Yellow marks the prison's devouring of life's spirit, and the colour code is therefore not exclusive to the real prisons in Dickens. Yellow marks not just institutional incarceration but, more importantly, those oppressive conditions that imprison the mind. Florence Dombey grows up in such conditions, in which the material "prison" is turned yellow from the wasteful passing of time that marks an unlived life:

Florence lived alone in the deserted house, and day succeeded day, and still she lived alone, and cold walls looked down upon her with a vacant stare, as if they had a Gorgon-like mind to stare her youth and beauty into stone. [...] Through the whole building, white had turned yellow, yellow nearly black; and, since the time when the poor lady died, it had slowly become a dark gap in the long monotonous street. (DS 297)<sup>5</sup>

It is no coincidence, therefore, that in the lawyers' offices from Snubbins in *The Pickwick Papers* to Mr Vholes in *Bleak House*, the blinds at the windows are "yellow with age and dirt" (PP 403), for they keep out the air that would be needed desperately not only to reform the law but also to turn those representative of it into decent moral beings.

The use of the colour yellow in these examples not only indicates confinement and closeness, resulting from the general lack of light and air, but it also symbolizes the incarceration of a human spirit. Yellow is anathema to light, air, and freedom. Thus, imprisoned in the Marshalsea, Arthur Clennam in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) cannot see the sun but only an uncanny replica in yellow, which signifies that the dawn he has been waiting for does not in fact bring a new day. It is a weary repeat of the one before. He can no longer see the break of day as a new beginning but only as an uneventful passing of time that repeats the day before and signifies, again, an un-lived life:

With an aching head and a weary heart, Clennam had watched the miserable night out, listening to the fall of rain on the yard pavement, thinking of its fall upon the country earth. A blurred circle of yellow haze has risen up in the sky in lieu of sun, and he had watched the patch it put upon his wall, like a bit of the prison's raggedness. (LD 904)<sup>6</sup>

What transpires through Dickens's use of yellow, hence, is a general opposition between this particular colour and natural light; the brightness typically associated with the colour code is substituted for oppressive conditions, and the result is a contrast between a negative inside and a more positive outside. London's streets outside the Marshalsea may not brim with happiness, but the leaving of the yellow space mostly indicates a sense of liberation. The physical confrontation between the eponymous protagonist and Sir Mulberry in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), for example, is also tinged in yellow, like the rooms associated with the latter's debauchery:

What a contrast, when they reached the street, to the scene they had just left! It was already daybreak. For the flaring yellow light within, was substituted the clear, bright, glorious morning; for a hot, close atmosphere, tainted with the smell of expiring lamps, and reeking with the steams of riot and dissipation, the free, fresh, wholesome air. (NN 620)<sup>7</sup>

Things, rooms, materials, and human minds turn yellow where there is a lack of human freedom, where there is the tinge of immorality, whether only perceived, as in Arthur's case, or real, as in the case of Sir Mulberry. Far from a bright or gay colour, yellow in Dickens colours spaces in the widest sense that are oppressive. Thus, yellow is an uncanny colour.

### 3. Yellow and the Gothic

Dickens uses the colour yellow to enhance the Gothic atmosphere in several of his novels through the uncanny. As pointed out above, the use of different colours creates a variety of associations, and a particular colour, as Goethe reminds us, "may be employed for certain moral and aesthetic ends" (Goethe 350). This end in Dickens is contrary to the fashion of his time and contrary to many uses of the colour yellow as indicating brightness, hope, or optimism. This becomes even more significant in reference to the generic cues he employs that belong to the tradition of the Gothic novel. Dickens may not be a paradigmatic Gothic author, but his contributions to the genre mid-century are undisputed: "[I]n terms of innovation and influence (not to mention the mere volume of content that can be characterized as 'Gothic'), no writer has a greater claim to importance in the history of the Gothic during its supposed sabbatical than Dickens" (Mighall, "Dickens and the Gothic" 82). Such "content" often transpires in Dickens in the shape of his Gothic mansions.

Florence Dombey lives, not unlike Miss Havisham and Mrs Clennam, in a decidedly carceral Gothic space. Like many conventional Gothic subjects, these women are mentally and physically imprisoned at the same time. In her seminal study of the Gothic convention, Eve Sedgwick emphasises the genre's "psychological model of the self": "one with an inside and an outside and with certain material ('the irrational') on the inside that could or should pass to the outside" (140). Dickens uses the Gothic mode to indicate that there is another story brewing underneath, making use of the uncanny, in the classic Freudian sense, to indicate "something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (Freud 833). The yellow tinge in

his Gothic mansions is such a manifestation of the uncanny. The deterioration of whiteness, the very fact that everything in sight has visibly aged, plays on the reader's repressed fear of death although the material is inanimate. Faded colours are a common staple of the Gothic novel, because they "emblemize[] the temporal" (Sedgwick 161), and the visible decay suggests to the reader's subconscious that something is wrong with the human condition at this point in the novel.

Pip's observation of the dressing-table at Satis House is a perfect example:

I glanced at the dressing-table again, and saw that the shoe upon it, once white, now yellow, had never been worn. I glanced down at the foot from which the shoe was absent, and saw that the silk stocking on it, once white, now yellow, had been trodden ragged. Without this arrest of everything, this standing still of all the pale decayed objects, not even the withered bridal dress on the collapsed form could have looked so like grave-clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud. (GE 52)

The basic horror of decay that surrounds Pip is enhanced by the yellow colour of everything that was formerly white. The faded colour indicates not only the inevitable passing of time towards death but the eruption of horror into the everyday. After all, Pip visits a living person, yet death is uncomfortably visible. It has come to light in an extremely unwelcome reminder that everything is fleeting and that a life must be lived, not wasted. The yellowness at Satis House is, therefore, an almost conventional example of the Gothic horror that disrupts a story; a vestigial past, uncannily encroaching on the present. As C. C. Barfoot writes, the Gothic is "an invasion of the known present by the hidden past, an encroachment of the closed past onto the open present, a disturbance of the apparent daylight of today by the dark of yesterday" (161). Through the use of the colour yellow, Dickens shows his own variation of such Gothic tropes as the disturbance of the visible and mundane, for all objects that are discoloured in *Great Expectations* are perfectly ordinary items of everyday life, yet extraordinarily uncanny due to their discoloration. The combination defies language, for things are literally not what they seem. Dickens's colour code thus adds to the list of those techniques he employs that somehow answer to and yet circumvent the Gothic tradition (see Mighall, *A Geography* 104).

In this sense, Mr Jingle's and Dr Manette's shirts are also Gothic items, for they stand for the mind's decay at work in both characters as a result of their unfair structural oppression. The imprisonments of both those characters and others—such as Miss Havisham, Florence Dombey, and Arthur Clennam, who waste away in prisons although they have done nothing wrong—play on the readers' fears of death and remind them of the brevity of life. The yellow objects invoked in the scenic descriptions of these themes relating to death thus correspond directly with the physical decay that happens to the human beings in the picture underneath. This is taken very literally in the case of Dr Manette, because he “and his old canvas frock, and his loose stockings, and all his poor tatters of clothes, had, in a long seclusion from direct light and air, faded down to such a dull uniformity of parchment-yellow, that it would have been hard to say which was which” (*TTC* 46). As pointed out earlier, the impossibility to distinguish between the animate and inanimate here adds to the uncanny aspect of the incarcerated spirit, for if the animate, i.e. the body, can turn yellow like the rags it wears, the human being's mortal end is certainly not far behind. Accordingly, Dickens does not delimit his Gothic use of uncanny yellow to materials such as clothes and furniture but uses it with even more significance for his design of character. Catherine Waters reminds us that, in the novel and beyond, clothes are “symbolic expressions of identity” (29), and the yellow shirts of Mr Jingle and Dr Manette signify threateningly that life has almost left their bodies. They have undergone a significant change of identity that is the result of oppression and incarceration—they have literally been deprived of the air to breathe. Thus, it is not the fact alone that they have aged that makes them pitiable, but the fact that their age and their physical decay is a direct consequence of the experienced oppression. This is why Dickens uses the colour yellow not just in clothes, but also in faces.

#### 4. The Yellow Leaf

In Dickens, jaundice seems to be not a medical but a mental condition. It must have been a common enough picture in the streets of Victorian London, for it was not a rare disease. As a sign of liver disease or pancreatic

cancer, it coloured a population as of yet not quite in control of medical insight or curative measures. As a realist marker of Dickens's demographic, the colour yellow therefore also spreads to faces, but it is only rarely referred to as a visible signifier of an invisible medical condition. In fact, yellow faces in Dickens primarily indicate old age, but, more importantly, the old yellow faces signify the social and psychological conditions in which aging takes place. Sometimes the depiction is sympathetic, as is obvious in the case of Dr Manette. Oppressive conditions that cause yellow aging are not limited to punitive institutional incarceration, however. Dickens makes it implicitly clear, for instance, that the workhouses do not stand at a great contrast, as is obvious in the little yellow old man in *Little Dorrit*, aka Old Nandy, at the beginning of the chapter that is tellingly titled "Spirit":

Anybody may pass, any day, in the thronged thoroughfares of the metropolis, some meagre, wrinkled, yellow old man (who might be supposed to have dropped from the stars, if there were any star in the Heavens dull enough to be suspected of casting off so feeble a spark), creeping along with a scared air, as though bewildered and a little frightened by the noise and bustle. (*LD* 433)

This yellow old man is on his way to or from the workhouse, the cynical Victorian solution to old age in poverty. Dickens deliberately makes the yellow man a mundane picture in the streets of London, a normal occurrence in its appropriate space. The street is merely an extension of the workhouse, a shared social space for the poor and aged, but predominantly, the aged. By 1851, "one of three people living in the workhouses was elderly" (Chase 5). Thus, one can perceive a general association of old age with poverty and a widespread marginalisation of elderly people, who were "imaginatively and literally" relocated to workhouses and hospitals (Mangum 100).

However, the association of old age with poverty is also inextricably linked to the aspect of visibility. Only poor old age is visible to the spectator, who observes the streets of Victorian London and spots Old Nandy; wealthy old age, or at least old age above the working classes, remains duly hidden behind closed doors. Simultaneously, not all old people in Dickens are yellow like Nandy: Dickens's symbolic tinging of faces in yellow has a moral signification—old age is therefore not uncanny per se, but enforced

aging through an incarceration of body and mind is. The difference between turning old and turning yellow is fairly obvious with regard to characters who are notably aging or aged but just as importantly untainted. Martin Chuzzlewit Senior, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Mr Peggotty upon his return from the colony, and Wemmick's father—they are all portrayed as significantly advanced in years, and yet none of them is described as of an unnatural or sickly hue. The important difference is, of course, that these characters age in relative freedom and self-determination, capable agents of their own lives, or at least competently aided by others such as Trooper George and Wemmick himself, to live their lives in dignity. It is also important to note that this is not an exclusively male prerogative: while old women may be fewer, they still exist, and the difference again shows in the measure of control they have over their own lives. Miss Betsey Trotwood is obviously located at the top end of self-determination and, accordingly, she is neither imprisoned nor yellow. Even Betty Hidgen, who is notably low on the scale of personal fortune, both financially and socially, is not marked by the yellow hue—presumably because she is determined to live out her life on her own terms and stay away from the workhouse. Old age is yellow whenever it is the result of an imprisoned mind, which is most clearly pointed out in Dickens's *Dombey and Son*.

In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens places two yellow-faced personifications of Death at opposite ends of his social hierarchy: Good Mrs Brown at the very bottom and Mrs Skewton at the very top. One might assume that their contrary position on the social scale of the novel makes only one of them yellow, for Mrs Brown lives in squalor and misery. Her yellow colour is therefore visible to the world, who can see her "munching with her jaws, as if the Death's head beneath her yellow skin were impatient to get out" (*DS* 354). It is not her poverty alone that makes Mrs Brown yellow, however; it is her single-minded obsession with turning her real or any substitute daughter into money. This is the ostentatious parallel that Dickens creates between her and Mrs Skewton at the top end of the hierarchy. It is unnecessary to point out that the portrayal of Mrs Skewton, at least, is far from sympathetic, but she is just as imprisoned by her own desires as is Miss Havisham.<sup>8</sup> Mrs Skewton's lifelong attempt to use her daughter in order to secure her financial fortune and standing in society has made her an



equally devouring vampire, whose greed has turned her yellow like Good Mrs Brown. The difference in social standing merely means that Mrs Skewton has the material means, in the most basic sense of that term, to hide her yellow features as becoming her class:

The pained object shrivelled underneath her hand; the form collapsed, the hair dropped off, the arched dark eyebrows changed to scanty tufts of grey; the pale lips shrunk, the skin became cadaverous and loose; an old, worn, yellow, nodding woman, with red eyes, alone remained in Cleopatra's place, huddled up, like a slovenly bundle, in a greasy flannel gown. (*DS* 365)

Shut up in her rooms, Mrs Skewton's yellow colour is only visible to the reader, for her financial means keep her from the streets. And yet, she has the same jaundice as her counterpart Mrs Brown, who has to make herself visible in the public space. The similarity between the two characters thus indicates that yellow old age is not always a marker of sympathy, as it is in Old Nandy, and that the yellow face signifies an oppressed mind. These women are truly Gothic subjects, in the sense that the uncanniness of their roles in the novel as witches that threaten to eat young women shows on the surface. The desires that ought to be hidden have broken out on the surface. As Gothic subjects, their irrational insides have passed to the outside.<sup>9</sup>

Aging characters could be read as manifestations of the Gothic uncanny per se, considering the reader's more or less conscious fear of death. As Federico argues, "images of the body's deterioration, decay, or, worse perhaps, sudden disposal force readers to contemplate their corporeal existence" ("*Dickens and Disgust*" 150). As I have pointed out, however, it is not old age per se that is uncanny in Dickens, and his use of the colour yellow underlines the difference. Aging in dignity and hidden from view is obviously a completely different story than aging in public and as a result of oppressive conditions. This view once again leads back to *Great Expectations*, for it unites all of these aspects of Gothic yellow. Satis House is yellow through and through, because it harbours an incarcerated spirit: "I am yellow skin and bone," says Miss Havisham to an already horrified Pip (*GE* 70). Miss Havisham's incarceration in Satis House, which is both voluntary and involuntary, because she is also the agent of her imprisonment but has

obviously no control over the trauma that has destroyed her psychological balance in the first place, is not only of the body, but in her case, most obviously of the mind. Her uncanny desires are no longer hidden at all, and she stages herself as a Gothic spectre; Robert Mighall hence argues: "Miss Havisham is both subject and object of the Gothic spectacle she enacts, acutely aware of its effect on her audience" ("Dickens and the Gothic" 92). She makes herself ostentatiously visible, which seems to be the most unforgiveable aspect of her torture for young Pip.

The yellow tinge at Satis House creates a house of horrors, because the decay of both, the material and the human body inside it, is all too graphic for Pip. The most offensive element of it all seems to be that Miss Havisham makes her old age visible for him. He marks with barely concealed disgust that the image of her age is accessible to him although, according to her social station, it should not be. The yellowness of old age belongs in the urban streets, not the country house, he implies. He tells us with specific emphasis that this is an image he should not have access to:

It was not in the first moments that I saw all these things, though I saw more of them in the first moments than might be supposed. But, I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young women, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone. (GE 50)

The almost obsessive reiteration of the verb "to see" brings home the terror Pip feels at being exposed to something he does not want to see, but which he can now never unsee. As is conventional for the Gothic mode, the novel juxtaposes at this crucial moment what is visible and what is not, but it is very like Dickens to bend the rules by not making this moment of horror about what Pip *cannot* see, but what he can see. Typically, the Gothic subject is "massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally have access" (Sedgwick 12), which causes a great deal of the terror it experiences. Pip is terrified, because he has access to something he expects to be shielded from ordinarily. He has encountered a woman yellow with age

that he would never see in normal circumstances, as Mrs Skewton's masquerade with wigs and lashes and make-up indicates. This lack of "fashionable" disguise in Miss Havisham thus makes him see her as barely human:

Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly wax-work at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state. Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, wax-work and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out, if I could. (GE 50)

As is so often the case in the Gothic novel, the terror Pip experiences defies all language. As is less often the case in the Gothic novel, it is the colour yellow that induces the terror. It is the yellow wax-work, the yellow skeleton, that is the most frightful for Pip. By describing Miss Havisham as having no brightness left, Dickens could not make it any clearer that his use of yellow differs significantly from all the associations and uses the Victorians had of this particular primary colour.

In *Bleak House*, Mr Turveydrop claims, "I am falling into the sear and yellow leaf, and it is impossible to say how long the last feeble traces of gentlemanly Deportment may linger in this weaving and spinning age" (294). The loose quotation from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (5.2.22) underlines his vanity and enhances the comedy, but the reference has more significance to it. Macbeth announces his end in act 5, scene 3:

I have lived long enough; my way of life  
Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf,  
And that which should accompany old age,  
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have; (Macbeth 5.3.21-26)

The tragic hero stresses that he is fallen "into the sere, the yellow leaf" of age rather than enjoying what old age *should* have. In Shakespeare's image, as in Dickens's, the "sere and yellow leaf" stands in contrast to honour and the rest, and it turns out that, in Dickens, the lack of dignity is the be-all

and end-all of yellow characters. Dickens clearly conjures up dignified images of old age, only to indicate that aging in oppressive conditions brings about a very undignified aging in yellow. Mr Jingle, Dr Manette, Miss Havisham, and even Mrs Skewton age in oppression. The lack of air in both a literal and a metaphorical sense turns them yellow, which is a visual marker of the fact that they are not free to age with dignity. Their yellow faces are windows into imprisoned souls, and the tragedy of their lives is that they are helplessly exposed to the grinding away of time. The opposition between yellow and light is a distinction between the negative inside and the positive outside in Dickens, but this does not just pertain to physical spaces and real prisons. It also pertains to the prisons of the mind, to those souls trapped in dire conditions who are fundamentally unable to free themselves.

Universität Münster

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Towards the end of the century, the negative connotations with the colour yellow begin to infiltrate the racist discourse around Asian people. Yellow now signifies the “alien” and “frightful” as colour coding fully infiltrates racist stereotyping. As David Scott Kastan points out, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* first stipulated at the beginning of the twentieth century that Chinese people had a decidedly yellow skin tone: “The Chinese and other East Asians had slowly but unmistakably become yellow in the Western imagination, so much so that the most authoritative encyclopedia in the English language could make its carefully calibrated claim as a seemingly neutral assertion of fact” (Kastan 64-65). The use of yellow for fin-de-siècle racism seems to have developed too late in the century for Dickens to be aware of it.

<sup>2</sup>In fact, Dickens hardly uses that “canary” yellow, except for the real canary on Boythorn’s head. A notable exception is the “boy in boots” Pip employs in Barnard’s Inn, a “monster,” “in bondage and slavery to whom” Pip passes his days. This creature is dressed in a “canary waistcoat” (169). All references to *Great Expectations* are to the following edition and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *GE*: Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Edgar Rosenberg, in the Norton Critical Editions.

<sup>3</sup>All references to *The Pickwick Papers* are to the edition by David Ellis and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *PP*.

<sup>4</sup>All references to *A Tale of Two Cities* are to the Penguin edition of 2012 and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *TTC*.

<sup>5</sup>All references to *Dombey and Son* are to the edition by Karl Smith and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *DS*.

<sup>6</sup>All references to *Little Dorrit* are to the Penguin edition of 2021 and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *LD*.

<sup>7</sup>All references to *Nicholas Nickleby* are to the edition with an introduction by Tim Cook and will be given parenthetically, abbreviated as *NN*.

<sup>8</sup>As a character, Miss Havisham displays many similar characteristics as the much earlier Mrs Skewton; see Slater.

<sup>9</sup>See also Sedgwick 140.

## WORKS CITED

- Barfoot, C. C. "The Gist of the Gothic in English Fiction; or, Gothic and the Invasion of Boundaries." *Exhibited by Candlelight. Sources and Developments in the Gothic Tradition*. Ed. Valeria Tinkler-Villani and Peter Davidson. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995. 159-72.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Villette*. Ed. Mark Lilly. London: Penguin, 1985.
- Chase, Karen. *The Victorians and Old Age*. Oxford: OUP, 2009.
- Demopoulos, Alaina. "Gen Z Yellow: Will Young People Ever Embrace the New 'It' Color?" *The Guardian* 24 Jan. 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2023/jan/23/gen-z-yellow-fashion-millennial-pink>. 7 Feb. 2024.
- Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. Ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod. New York: Norton, 1977.
- Dickens, Charles. *Dombey and Son*. Intr. and notes Karl Smith. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002.
- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Ed. Edgar Rosenberg. New York: Norton, 1999.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Life & Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. Intr. and notes Tim Cook. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000.
- Dickens, Charles. *Little Dorrit*. London: Penguin Books, 2021.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Pickwick Papers*. Intr. and notes David Ellis. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000.
- Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. London: Penguin Books, 2012.
- Federico, Annette R. "Dickens and Disgust." *Dickens Studies Annual* 29 (2000): 145-61.
- Federico, Annette R. "Satis House." *Literary Imagination* 21.1 (2019): 63-76.
- Fludernik, Monika. *Metaphors of Confinement: The Prison in Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy*. Oxford: OUP, 2019.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent Leitch. New York: Norton, 2010. 824-41.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Theory of Colours*. Trans. Charles Lock Eastlake. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1982.
- Kastan, David Scott; with Stephen Farthing. *On Color*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2019.
- Mangum, Teresa. "Growing Old: Age." *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*. Ed. Herbert F. Tucker. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999. 97-109.
- Matthews David, Alison. "Elegant Amazons: Victorian Riding Habits and the Fashionable Horsewoman." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30.1 (2002): 179-210.

- Mighall, Robert. "Dickens and the Gothic." *A Companion to Charles Dickens*. Ed. David Paroissien. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. 81-96.
- Mighall, Robert. *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares*. Oxford: OUP, 1999.
- Nunn, Joan. *Fashion in Costume*. Edinburgh: A & C Black, 2000.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1980. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. New York: Methuen, 1986.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Ed. Kenneth Muir. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Slater, Michael. *Dickens and Women*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1983.
- Waters, Catherine. "'Fashion in undress': Clothing and Commodity Culture in *Household Words*." *Journal of Victorian Culture* 12.1 (2007): 26-41.

# Literary Anthologies: A Case Study for Metacognitively Approaching Canonicity<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM E. ENGEL

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 18-47.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-engel-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-engel-1)

---

This article is the first entry in a debate on “Literary Anthologies and Canonicity” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/literary-anthologies-and-canoncity>).

If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

---

## Abstract

Anthologies promote and perpetuate what amounts to a canon. The roots run deep in the Western tradition, with the *Anthologia Graeca*, a collection of Classical and Byzantine Greek literature modelled on Meleager of Gadara (first century BCE), using the term “flower-gathering” (ἀνθολογία) to describe this literary exercise. Mixing his own works with those of forty-six others, Meleager arranged “a garland” that ended up establishing a paradigm for the ages. The trope reached a kind of apogee in Tudor England, buttressed with criteria for critical assessment and instructions for the proper way to enjoy, for example, Isabella Whitney’s *A Sweet nosgay, or pleasant posye contayning a hundred and ten phylosophicall flowers*. The “anthology,” as such, raises important questions about the curation, preservation, and even the prefigured afterlife of literary works notwithstanding shifts in aesthetic sensibilities and once-novel stylistic inventions. The decisions underlying the culling and arrangement of material for anthologies—most notably those produced and disseminated by corporate titans who impose their imprimatur on a wide range of “anthologies” and thus set standards for a generation at least—warrants closer scrutiny. As editors of two such anthologies (*The Memory Arts in Renaissance England* and *The Death Arts in Renaissance England*, both with Cambridge University Press), our team experienced periodic crises of conscience when confronting the reality that our determinations implicitly were setting the canon for a period-specific collection of literary excerpts. We therefore sought intentionally to foreground our deliberations concerning canon formation and to articulate our principles for proceeding, resulting in a metacognitive approach to producing—as duly is reflected in the subtitle: “A Critical Anthology.”

Plucking for you the flowers of Helicon and clipping the firstborn blooms of the famous Pierian forests, reaping the ears of a newer page, I have in my turn woven a garland to be like Meleager's. You know, noble Camillus, the famous writers of old; learn also to know the concise expression of more recent ones.

*Greek Anthology* IV.2 (181)<sup>2</sup>

## Reviewing the Historical Terrain of Literary Anthologies

Anthologies—by their very nature—promote and perpetuate what amounts to a canon. The roots run deep in the Western literary tradition, most notably with the master-text at the heart of the earliest canon conclaves, the Bible (see McDonald 431-38); and with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which the Roman poet carefully curates, narratively interweaves, and successfully preserves over 250 ancient stories (see Gildenhard and Zissos 48-52). Later, the influential collection of Classical and Byzantine Greek literature known as the *Anthologia Graeca* (*Greek Anthology*) took as its model Meleager of Gadara (first century BCE) who had referred to the poems in his book as carefully gathered flowers. The Greek word ἀνθολογία (anthology), denoting an assemblage of blossoms, came to describe this literary exercise insofar as Meleager published his epigrams along with those of forty-six other authors as “a garland” (GA xvi). Owing to subsequent editions and continuations (most notably the tenth century compilation by Constantine Cephalus which served as the basis for Renaissance manuscript versions), the term anthology, understood as a garland of poems taken from a number of different authors, was applied to any such collection.

To whom, dear Muse, do you bring these varied fruits of song, or who was it who also wrought this garland of poets? The work was Meleager's; he produced this gift as a keepsake for the illustrious Diocles. He wove in many red lilies of Anyte, and many white lilies of Moero; a few of Sappho, but they are roses [...] He also wove in the blossom of a barb-haired thistle from Archilochus' fodder [...] Then he inserted Polystatus' marjoram, blossom of songs [...] He wove in Posidippus and Hedylus, wildflowers of the field [...] (GA 175, 179)

Thus the idea of the garland established a literary paradigm that has persisted through the ages.



The anthological trope reached a kind of apogee in Tudor England. In large measure this stems from Richard Tottel's much-reissued *Songes and Sonettes* (1557), among the first of the printed anthologies of English lyric poetry, and the one that subsequently served as a prototype for all manner of anthologizers (see Hamrick 329). Moreover, Tottel's effort deliberately aimed at creating a more critically informed common reader by marketing the book to the increasingly literate mercantile and clerical sectors of society: "And I exhort the unlearned, by reading to learn to be more skillful, and to purge that swine-like grossness, that maketh the sweet marjoram not to smell to their delight" (1574, fol.1<sup>v</sup>).<sup>3</sup> Putting to good use the standard metaphors of the florilegia, his miscellany was at once a taste-making exercise and a concerted effort to elevate the aesthetic sensibilities of the general reader. Although having made a name for himself as the printer of John Lydgate's copious verse translation of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* (*On the Downfall of the Famous*), consisting of fifty-six mini biographies exemplifying the vicissitudes of fortune, Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes* far and away was "his most famous imprint during the period" (Gillespie 221). It came out the same year that Queen Mary signed the London Stationers' Charter and as the founding of the Stationers' Register with the result of formalizing, regulating, and expanding the English print trade, including book production and sales (see Gillespie 225).

George Gascoigne likewise labored in the literary garden, tapping into the anthological trope with the aim of promulgating and promoting superior literary standards. Like Tottel, he rightly anticipated a market of general readers eager to have ready-at-hand a choice gathering of estimable poetry, as can be seen in his descriptively titled *A hundreth sundrie flowres bounde vp in one small poesie Gathered partely (by translation) in the fyne outlandish gardins of Euripides, Ouid, Petrarke, Ariosto, and others: and partly by inuention, out of our owne fruitefull orchardes in Englande: yelding sundrie sveete sauours of tragical, comical, and morall discourses* (1573). In the preface to the 1575 revised and augmented version of his collected works, *The Posies of George Gascoigne Esquire*, Gascoigne strategically highlights for "gallant gentlemen, and lusty youths

of this my native country" (¶¶2<sup>r</sup>) what should be valued in contemporary verse. His metacritical literary practice recently has been dubbed "The Anthology Effect" in an extended etymological analysis pinpointing Gascoigne's contribution to the tradition (see Pfeifer 178-80). Gascoigne draws directly on the metaphoric field associated with Meleager's project, using "horticultural language for his master trope" (Pfeifer 178); and, moreover, like his classical predecessor, carefully arranges the material with an eye toward ease of access, handling, and profit.

If you (where you might gather wholesome herbs to cure your sundry infirmities) will spend the whole day in gathering of sweet-smelling Posies, much will be the time that you shall mispend, and much more the harm that you will heap upon my head. Or if you will rather beblister your hands with a nettle, than comfort your senses by smelling to the pleasant marjoram, then wanton is your pastime, and small will be your profit.

I have here presented you with three sundry sorts of poesies: Flowers, Herbs, and Weeds. In which division I have not meant that only the Flowers are to be smelled unto, nor that only the weeds are to be rejected. [...] Beware therefore, lusty gallants, how you smell to these Poesies. (¶¶3<sup>v</sup>-¶¶4<sup>v</sup>)

In the 1575 version, he also includes a section titled "Certain Notes of Instruction Concerning the Making of Verse or Rhyme in English" (T2<sup>r</sup>-U2<sup>v</sup>; also appearing in his *Whole Works*, 1587). Often considered England's first printed manual of versification, "Notes of Instruction" had a considerable and lasting impact on poetic practices and the printing of lyrics during the English literary Renaissance (see Schott 371).

For it is not enough to roll in pleasant words, nor yet to thunder in *Rym, Ram, Ruff* by letter (quoth my master Chaucer), nor yet to abound in apt vocables or epithets, unless the invention have in it also *aliquid salis* [something of value]. By this *aliquid salis* I mean some good and fine device, shewing the quick capacity of a writer: and where I say some good and fine invention, I mean that I would have it both fine and good. [...] Your invention being once devised, take heed that neither pleasure of rhyme nor variety of device, do carry you from it: for as to use obscure and dark phrases in a pleasant sonnet, is nothing delectable, so to intermingle merry jests in a serious matter is an *indecorum*. (T2<sup>r-v</sup>; original emphasis)

Around the same time, Isabella Whitney, the first Englishwoman to have written original secular poetry for publication under her own name, sought to cash in on this interest in printed collections with *A Sweet nosgay, or pleasant posye contayning a hundred and ten phylosophicall flowers*. Her title, and indeed the impetus for her well-marketed publishing venture, builds creatively on the anthological metaphor. More specifically, her title cannily if obviously capitalizes on Hugh Plat's *The Floures of Philosophie* (1572),<sup>4</sup> with its successful textual formula already very much in the consciousness of London's book-buying public (see Skura 149-67). And, moreover, Whitney's collection promises her readers ten more "flowers" above the number offered in Gascoigne's gathering.

In the wake of the pioneering anthological work in England by the likes of Tottel, Gascoigne, and Whitney, compilers and editors of eighteenth-century miscellanies and anthologies were successful in their own sometimes quite novel ways of transmitting particular tastes while being influenced by the larger culture they helped to create. Barbara Benedict speaks directly to this situation in her landmark study of pre-modern cultural mediation, *Making the Modern Reader* (1996).<sup>5</sup> The carefully assembled bank of evidence enabling her to reach this conclusion consists of "a six-page compilation, in chronological order, of English anthology titles from the early seventeenth to the early nineteenth century" (Spacks 349). Benedict poses the perennial question "Do anthologies reflect or shape contemporary literary taste?" and answers by way of a cultural dialectic. Not unreasonably, some of the critical distinctions raised in her assessment of premodern aesthetic predilections and taste-making gestures continue to resonate in current deliberations about canonicity today, especially with reference to "the contrary impulses of the anthology to consolidate a canon and to debunk it" (Benedict, *Making the Modern Reader* 221). The anthologies from the eighteenth-century discussed in her survey are showcased as being literary objects in their own right and treated as works that not only defined canons of the day but also shaped readers' ways of understanding functions of literature as much as their techniques of reading. As Patricia

Spacks has remarked on Benedict's tracing a legacy of decreasing reader autonomy, by "the time of the Restoration, collections, highly miscellaneous in substance and style, had come to celebrate aesthetic variety, thus implicitly granting readers the right to make their own literary judgments," and then, in the "early eighteenth century, anthologists evolved a distinct set of values (beginning with 'elegance') that placed readers in the role of discriminating consumers of art; a few years later, powerful critics and booksellers provided rankings of authors, enjoining or assuming their readers' assent to a proclaimed critical consensus" (349).

One useful take-away from Benedict's foundational monograph for this present study is the difference to be drawn between primary anthologies, namely those compiled for essentially commercial and literary purposes (like those exemplified by the early modern texts treated in the first part of this essay), and the scholarly or academic anthologies of works from the past which obviously have different goals and audiences. Alastair Fowler (97-119) goes further still in "differentiating among different types of canon," calling attention to important distinctions that subsequently have been instructively glossed by Barbara Mujica:

The *potential canon* includes all literature; the *accessible canon*, those books that are available; the *selective canon*, specific works that have been singled out for study, such as those that comprise anthologies; the *critical canon*, those works that have the subject of critical study; the *official canon*, books that fall into the second, third, and fourth categories; and the *personal canon*, the preferred readings of a given individual. These categories are not distinct and isolated, but overlap; the canon is not static, but changes and develops as new works become accessible and then subject to critical scrutiny and classroom study. (209)

Fowler, Benedict, and others who have contributed significantly to discussions of canonicity all imply or state outright that the pleasure of reading—and the attendant sense of edification from that experience—associated with premodern printed anthologies has for the most part disappeared in the contemporary classroom. Anthologies published to-

day are of a different sort, although still tending essentially toward either the purely literary on the one hand, and the academic or pedagogical on the other.<sup>6</sup> Mindful of such considerations, *The Death Arts in Renaissance England: A Critical Anthology* was conceived and designed to bridge the implicit gap between what might be thought of as the primary anthology and the academic one. Our editorial team judged that reinforcing this binary opposition was counterproductive when it came to dealing authentically with the kinds of canonical concerns and critical determinations we were encountering. This is what led us ultimately to extract from the archive works that both preserved a sense of the pleasure of reading (as calculated by the original printers and authors to appeal to their audiences) and also offered inroads for contemporary readers to rediscover a diverse range of representative and yet historically underrepresented literary samples of cultural significance.

### Participating in an Anthological Project: Limitations and Liberties

As a genre in its own right then,<sup>7</sup> the anthology raises important questions about the socio-economic circumstances underlying the curation, preservation, and even the prefiguration of an afterlife of a literary work. The decisions behind the culling and arrangement of material for anthologies in modern times—most notably those produced and disseminated by corporate titans such as Norton, Longman, Oxford, and Cambridge, who put their imprimatur on a wide range of different kinds of anthologies and thus set standards for a generation at least—warrant closer scrutiny. As a co-editor of two such anthologies, *The Memory Arts in Renaissance England* (2016) and *The Death Arts in Renaissance England* (2022), plus a bridge volume *Memory and Mortality in Renaissance England* (2023) consisting of case studies that put into practice the principles set out in those two anthologies, I have watched our team experience periodic crises of conscience when confronting the reality that our determinations implicitly were setting the canon for period-specific collections of literary excerpts. And so we decided intentionally

to foreground our deliberations concerning canon formation—and re-formulation—and to articulate in the anthology itself our principles for proceeding, which resulted in a metacognitive approach to producing (as duly is reflected in our subtitle) “A Critical Anthology.” I use the term *metacognitive* in its pedagogical sense, as a process of thinking about one’s own thinking and learning. David Perkins isolates four ascending levels in metacognitive learning (tacit, aware, strategic, and reflective), where reflective learners are not only strategic about their thinking but also able to reflect on their learning while it is happening. They monitor the relative success of the strategies being used to achieve their goals and incrementally alter their determinations to achieve better results overall.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, our editorial team self-consciously sought to model reflective metacognitive learning in the composition of our anthology.

By way of fleshing out the role of our textual rationale guiding our much debated selection of entries which came to comprise *The Death Arts in Renaissance England: A Critical Anthology*, we were careful to discuss the following key themes informing our engagement with the archive in an introductory section divided into two main parts. First, “The Legacy of the Death Arts,” with two subsections, “The Productive Ends of the Death Arts” and “The Visual Proliferation of the Death Arts”; and, second, “Representing The Death Arts,” with three subsections on “Gendering Death,” “Sexualizing Death,” and “Racializing Death.” Four main overarching and essentially epistemological categories for grouping the individual entries eventually suggested themselves as we went about sifting through, while seeking to select, a manageable number of entries from the first cull of some 400 representative possibilities: (1) Preparatory and Dying Arts; (2) Funereal and Commemorative Arts; (3) Knowing and Understanding Death; and (4) Death Arts in Literature. Our critical determinations along the way impelled us to include excerpts from what we deemed to be the most fruitful and imaginative literary engagements with the death arts, keeping in mind the following considerations:

Our selected entries take stock of death's thriving economy by making visible the extensive symbolic latticework—not just the verbal patterns and occupational pattern embedded in writing, but speech acts, images, artefacts, and activities—that the death arts built around “the real” of the corpse.<sup>9</sup> Stretching throughout the civic social sphere, such scaffolding can be seen to have far-reaching implications for the cognition of early modern individuals, when we consider the findings of distributive psychology and extended mind theory: thinking involves the collaboration between the brain and its environment so much so that culture installs into human ecosystems feedback mechanisms in order to offload cognitive functionality and extend people's minds. (9-10)

Accordingly, we made every effort to identify and include traditionally overlooked authors who were by all accounts deemed important in their own day (such as Margaret Tyler and Samuel Rowlands). Still, we were cognizant of the need to include also some of the more canonical if historically marginalized authors (for example, Christopher Marlowe and Aphra Behn). In this, however, we sought to select authors who were not “too canonical,” for to have done so would have been merely to replicate prior assumptions about literary value and thereby reify the very patterns of privileging long-unexamined presuppositions about canonicity that we were seeking to twist free from and situate more critically. Indeed, there are some obvious “much loved” authors and works we determined early on would not be included as main entries but certainly would need to be mentioned given their place of prior primacy. Donne, Shakespeare, and Milton, for example, are excluded owing to ease of access elsewhere, and because their expressions of the death arts have been covered adequately in the long, triumphalist tradition of anthologies from earlier times. Any new anthology runs the risk of leaving out some readers' much-cherished favorites, but it is a risk well worth taking if the goal is to produce a more objectively and metacognitively derived “Critical Anthology.”

The resulting entries forming *The Death Arts in Renaissance England* seek judiciously to represent a broad spectrum of the early modern English death arts. But, as we stress throughout, what we are presenting for the reader's consideration “is a selection and not the final say” (44). Our project—our “Critical Anthology”—is conceived as a prelim-

inary effort designed to point the way toward the horizon of possibilities for future, more open-ended continuations to be reflectingly carried out by others along similar lines. And, by way of limiting the scope of contenders for inclusion so as to conform to market conditions and our publisher's word-length limitations, we determined that our remit would involve the mediation and circulation of ideas through print. We foregrounded this decision by explaining our rationale for not including examples drawn from manuscript-only primary sources while acknowledging that such a project, of course, would be of immense value, finding evidence of the death arts in personal diaries, commonplace books, correspondence, and what often has been referred to as coterie writing (cf. May).

One unavoidable consequence of focusing exclusively on the production of the press (as we point out in the Introduction) is that "the recovered voices tend to be white, male authors, a demographic that, for the most part, controlled the early modern publishing trade along with authorship networks" (26). Even so, people of the lower socio-economic orders who fully inhabited oral traditions necessarily are underrepresented by vehicles of literacy. Printed matter of the period tended to promote the concerns and cater to the needs of the rising mercantile and patrician educated classes. Folk beliefs, rituals, and lore about dying, death, and the dead accordingly are mentioned as being beyond our anthology's scope. Death comes to all, but the early modern death arts in print obviously cannot articulate the full extent of the collective attitudes, understandings, hopes, and fears of Britain's heterogeneous population. Notwithstanding the ideological constraints of the publishing record, however, "issues of gender, sexuality, and race have strong implications for studying the death arts" (27).

Apropos of which, in the introductory section on "Gendering Death," we point out that one strand tracked throughout the anthology is the involvement of women writers in the death arts. We excerpted passages from an abundance of genres in which women regularly engaged, including prayer, elegy, mother's legacy, epistle, polemical pamphlet, religious and philosophical treatises, consolation, lyric, religious writing,



tragedy, and romance. In doing so, our aim was to foreground the complexities of gender relations imbricated in the cultural production of mortality. We opine in the strongest terms that the death arts should be understood as collaborative enterprises rather than strictly solitary ventures—for even individualistic *memento mori* contemplation presupposes the artefacts, techniques, and emulation of others. One must learn how to be taught to be mindful of death and made to recognize the consequences for not being thus guided and well advised. To emphasize the most prevalent strands of venerable exemplars of community-facing aspects of the death arts, within each entry is a section headed “About the author” in which, as appropriate, we identify cooperative authorship as well as those cases where printers are working from commonplace and often unattributed source material harkening back to the manuscript tradition. It is also observed that, as a consequence of the politics of patriarchal precedence and the concomitant historical imposition of socio-religious norms (even during periods when the regent of sovereign was a woman, such as respectively Henry VIII’s last wife, Anne Parr, and Elizabeth I—both of whom are given entries in the volume), women were barred from the period’s official institutions, such as politics, law, the military, the Church, medicine, universities, and membership in the Royal Society. Translating continental and classical works was an obvious choice for many women of learning, such as Elizabeth Tudor, Anne Cooke, Anne Dowriche, Margaret Tyler, and Mary Sidney Herbert, all of whom are included in our Critical Anthology.

Some have argued that seventeenth-century manuscript culture better represents female authorship than does print (see, for example, Wall 279-80). Manuscripts enabled women to write for family members and friends without the impediments of social prohibition, thereby providing research scholars with a fuller range of expression of female attitudes—including those on death—not hobbled by inhibitions and self-censorship. None of this means, however, that early modern women occupied the sidelines of the public-oriented death arts. Unlicensed teaching of literacy, medical treatment and midwifery, family devotion, and religious instruction were just some of the vital activities that

women generally performed in a non-institutional and non-state-sanctioned capacity for their households and immediate communities. Insofar as the print record obscures the extent to which women were active in the paperworld concerning the death arts, we make a point of highlighting the deeply committed cultural and social engagement of early modern women with the entire death cycle: family members, female servants, and neighboring women—whether or not paid—commonly attended the individual in his or her final sickness and act of dying. Attentiveness to the archive's gaps, innuendos, and in-between spaces can help reveal and recover further female participation in the death arts. The same, of course, applies to issues of race, a consideration that likewise goaded us to work steadily toward developing and producing a metacognitively oriented "Critical Anthology."

### The Racialization of Death

Regarding the issue of race (and of "race before race"),<sup>10</sup> it is fitting now to turn to the section of the Introduction on "Racializing Death" (36-43) since any substantial and sustained investigation of the Renaissance death arts almost at once runs into the blatant racism that permeates early modern European thought. To some extent, this is the result of very ancient prejudices in the West that link blackness to evil and death, such that, as Michael Neill has observed in *Issues of Death*, "blackness proves to be oddly like death" (147). The connection is reinforced by the medieval vernacular name for the sporadic waves of virulent pestilence, "the Black Death," owing to the dark-hued subcutaneous haemorrhaging that bruised and "blackened" the bodies of those infected by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. Gangrene of the fingers, toes, and nose likewise were visible signs of the Black Death, thus turning victims into living corpses that resembled allegorical depictions of Death (which were after all based on images of decaying human bodies). Throughout Europe death personified could be referred to as "Der schwarze Mann" ("the Black Man") and embodied the characteristics of an alien whose

unwelcomed otherness betokened an eerie mirror image of what otherwise was familiar. Death was the foreigner *par excellence* in the European popular imagination. By the fifteenth century, this construction of the dark and dangerous foreigner had become associated with the “moor,” often expanded to the term “blackamoor,” which turned the already terrifying image of the so-called “oriental” infidel into an avatar and harbinger of death as well as of malignant forces in the world (see Figure 1).



Figure 1

Dance of Death turbaned belligerent. Spreuerbrücke, Luzern.  
Photo credit William E. Engel, with permission.



Figure 2

Moor with horn, *Calender of Shepherds* (1528, sig. U4<sup>v</sup>).  
Image used courtesy of The Newberry Library.

Additionally, as sometimes was the case, for example in entry I.2, *The kalender of shepardes* (modernized as *The Calendar of Shepherds* in the anthology), this iconographic stereotype could be dialled down, domesticated, and contained in terms of the racialized pitch-black subaltern and subservient herald of Death (see Figure 2). His deadly spear is pointed toward the ground. As is covered at length in the Introduction with respect to visual literacy and the death arts, the Moor often was depicted holding Death's main iconographic attribute, the spear or dart (see Figure 3), a five-metre pole-weapon known colloquially in Elizabethan England as a Moor's or Moorish pike (because of its putative origin). For example, Dromio of Syracuse in Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* quips about an arresting officer: "he that sets up his rest to do more exploits with his mace than a Moorish pike" (4.3.25).<sup>11</sup>

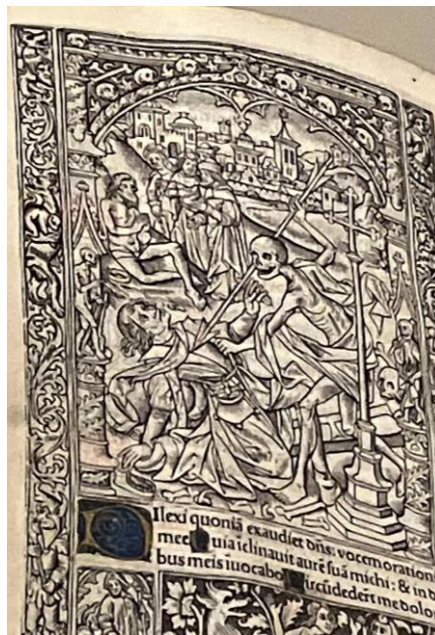


Figure 3

Death with dart. "Office of the Dead," *Book of Hours* printed by Thielman Kerver (Paris, 1503). Image used courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The long, menacing projectile wielded by the figure of Death—or Death's representatives in the world of allegory—has a long and enduring legacy in the West, a commonplace visual trope that finds its way into many imaginative works of the period (see Figure 4). And in lands closer to the Ottoman Empire, where there was always a threat of Turkish incursions into Christian Europe (a theme showcased, for example,

in entry III.9, Abraham Holland's over-the-top grisly account of the 1571 Battle of Lepanto, *Naumachia, or Hollands sea-fight*), the recurring character in the Dance of Death, a spry cadaver visiting people of all social stations and leading them away from this life, from time to time was depicted distinctively as a near-Eastern turbaned warrior (see again, Figure 1). Whether referred to as Turk or Moor, as a Blackamoor or Saracen, there is no mistaking that this socially coded figure of the foreigner stood in as an agent and simulacrum of death. While there was of course some historical precedent in the sixteenth century for fearing adjacent foreign nation-states, as well as those coded as foreign who dwelt in European metropolitan areas, the image of the death-dealing Moor persisted as a symbolic reminder, becoming a kind of stark *memento mori*, of the fragility and transience of life. The easy commerce between perceived reality and the symbolic register, signaling the concrete embodiment of abstract themes especially where issues of race are involved, at times marked, at times crossed, and at times melded zones of communally experienced tension and social anxieties associated with the recognition—and misrecognition—of cultural difference. Thus, through fairly typical displays of displacement and transference, the anxieties traditionally felt about Death often were transposed onto “the Moor” and vice versa.



Figure 4

Death with dart. *Allegory of Man* [inset right] (c.1569), The Tate Britain.  
Used by permission and with license, Tate Images.

One such entry, already mentioned with respect to its compelling imagery (see again Figure 2), *The kalender of shepardes*, includes the “Horner’s song” which is prefaced by the admonitory heading “How every man and woman ought to cease of their sins at the sounding of a dreadable horn” (M4<sup>r</sup>). This rhyme royal poem, ostensibly delivered by the “horner,” a moor, benignly holds the iconographic attribute associated with the figure of Death—which is to say, a Moor’s Pike—and, in his other hand, the horn associated with a herald or town-crier. The latter iconographic prop gives special resonance to Iago’s derisively calling attention to the distinctive sound preceding Othello’s entrance in act 2, scene 1: “The Moor! I know his trumpet.” In reading the final stanzas of this poem reproduced below, you are invited to attend especially, in the penultimate stanza, to the insistent line opening and mid-line resumption and repetition of the word “cease” which mimics the sounding of a horn of warning. In the final stanza, you cannot help but hear the *tour de force* “f”-alliterative effect of the whole, punctuated with the anaphora-inflected “flee,” resolutely resonating with the perennial *memento mori* message about amending one’s ways in the face of our mortal temporality. In this case, however, it has the effect of being conveyed with a sense of insistent difference expressed through hyperbolic sameness. In this sense it resembles death itself, as in a typical Dance of Death, where people of different stations and degree are encountering one person after another with the same end-result. In these stanzas of the Horner’s song, each line-opening “Cease” and “Flee” respectively, recalls and indeed mimetically echoes the urgent blast of a horn to be heeded by all people regardless of status or gender before it is too late.

Cease of your oaths, cease of your swearing,  
 Cease of your pomp, cease of your vainglory,  
 Cease of your hate, cease of your blaspheming,  
 Cease of your malice, cease of your envy,  
 Cease of your wrath, cease of your lechery,  
 Cease of your fraud, cease your deception,  
 Cease of your tongues making detraction.

Flee faint falsehood, fickle, foul, and fell  
 Flee fatal flatterers, full of fairness

Flee fair feigning, fables and favel<sup>12</sup>  
 Flee folks' fellowship frequenting falseness  
 Flee frantic facers, fulfilled of forwardness  
 Flee fools' fallacies, flee fond fantasies  
 Flee from fresh fablers, feigning flatteries.

Thus endeth the horner.

For any of a number of reasons, you will not find this poem in previously published anthologies. But, for all of the reasons alleged and discussed above, it is a document in the early print archive of English literary history that we deemed essential for inclusion in our "Critical Anthology."

By way of continuing this analytical survey of the first such critical anthology of the death arts in Renaissance England, let us move on to three further representative examples taken from different sections of the anthology, each in its own way shedding light on the diverse approaches to tapping into and repurposing the commonplaces of the period while at the same time seeking to advance the frontiers of knowledge about the materiality of mortality. Also, it is hoped that these exemplary passages will make for lively discussion and debate among readers of this journal in future issues.

### Skirting the Rules of Decorum and Still Getting Anthologized

From the second division of *The Death Arts in Renaissance England: A Critical Anthology*, let us consider a much reprinted and frequently anthologized poem by Francis Beaumont, "An Elegy on the Lady Markham" (entry II.14). Beaumont was well known for his playful and occasionally irreverent wit, evident in this self-conscious reflection on and clever approach to sporting with the commercial elegy, a popular literary form for paying tribute to the recently deceased. Far from being considered too outré for publication owing to the grotesque imagery of the woman being thus dubiously celebrated, one such comparable piece attributed to Beaumont was selected to lead-off Henry Fitzgeffrey's *Certain Elegies* (1618), containing the tongue-in-cheek lines:



“Where if I sing your praises in my rhyme / I lose my ink, paper, and my time” (A3<sup>r</sup>). Our selection for the anthology (the last half of which is given below), likewise is characterized by Beaumont’s signature style of literary parody. He regularly called upon well-known models and catch-phrases only to apply them in unexpected and decidedly topsy-turvy ways. This somewhat raunchy approach to commemorating the death of a loved one, however, would have been appreciated by the patron of this endeavour, Henry Hastings, given the refined aesthetic sensibilities he shared with his first cousin, Bridget Markham (a lady of Queen Anne’s bedchamber), who was buried 19 May 1609.

You worms (my rivals), whilst she was alive,  
 How many thousands were there that did strive  
 To have your freedom? for their sake forbear  
 Unseemly holes in her soft skin to wear:  
 But if you must (as what worms can abstain  
 To taste her tender body?) yet refrain  
 With your disordered eatings to deface her,  
 But feed yourselves so as you most may grace her.  
 First, through her ear-tips see you make a pair  
 Of holes, which, as the moist inclosed air  
 Turns into water, may the clean drops take,  
 And in her ears a pair of jewels make.  
 Have ye not yet enough of that white skin,  
 The touch whereof, in times past, would have been  
 Enough t’have ransomed many a thousand soul  
 Captive to love? If not, then upward roll  
 Your little bodies, where I would you have  
 This epitaph upon her forehead grave:  
 “Living, she was young, fair, and full of wit;  
 Dead, all her faults are in her forehead writ.”

This seemingly indecorous treatment of Lady Markham deploys in unusual ways the usual tropes associated with the *contemptus mundi* and *vanitas* traditions. The poet’s saying that he never met her gives him license in this elegy (or, more properly, this anti-elegy) to jest that in death she is incapable of putting him through the agonies as have his former mistresses. The result is a send-up of shop-worn tropes of the *carpe diem* style of erotic poetry, unsettlingly coupled with the *memento*



*mori* theme of funeral elegies. Instead of writing about etching her virtues in a mirror or eternizing her beauty through verse, he conjures up lurid images of worms penetrating her body, especially her ears and forehead, thereby transforming Petrarchan conceits used for blazoning the beloved's physical beauty into a *vanitas* image. Beaumont thus recycles in verse sepulchral representations of the deceased undergoing bodily decay; and, more specifically, vermiculation (tracks left by worms) often depicted on the recumbent figures (or *gisants*) of transi tombs (see Cohen 29-31, 91-93; and Welch 357).<sup>13</sup> Given Lady Markham's reputed delight in such sophisticated *jeux d'esprit*, this grisly elegy seems less out of place. Further, her will, made public the day before she died, calls for *memento mori* rings with death's heads to be purchased for three specifically named mourners. In all then, this entry (one of seventeen in the second division of the critical anthology), brings out some important satirically understood elements of the "Funereal and Commemorative Arts" not otherwise covered.

### Anthologizing Medical Anthologies

More seriousness of purpose, as befits the material in the critical anthology's third division "Knowing and Understanding Death," is evident in Helkiah Crooke (entry III.11), physician to James I, who published the first comprehensive anatomy text in English for the benefit principally of barber-surgeons. Crooke's main sources, which he duly cites, include works by Caspar Bauhin, chair of anatomy at Basel; André du Laurens, anatomy professor at Montpellier and physician to Henri IV; and, in the "corrected and enlarged" second edition, Ambroise Paré, that pioneer of surgical techniques and battlefield medicine who served four French kings and whose book is based largely on the *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* of Andreas Vesalius, physician to Emperor Charles V. Thus, something of an anthology in its own right, *Mikrokosmographia* (1615) presented in English the extent of European anatomical knowledge of the day (see Figure 5). Also, an epitome, mainly of the illustrations, came out in 1616 (reprinted 1634); but whether in small or

large format (the latter over 1,000 pages), Crooke's work was designed for empirically-minded, dispassionate surgeons to perform operations correctly and with the appropriate tools of the trade. In so doing, and with the aid of this medical anthology in English, they would contribute to keeping death at bay one person at a time.

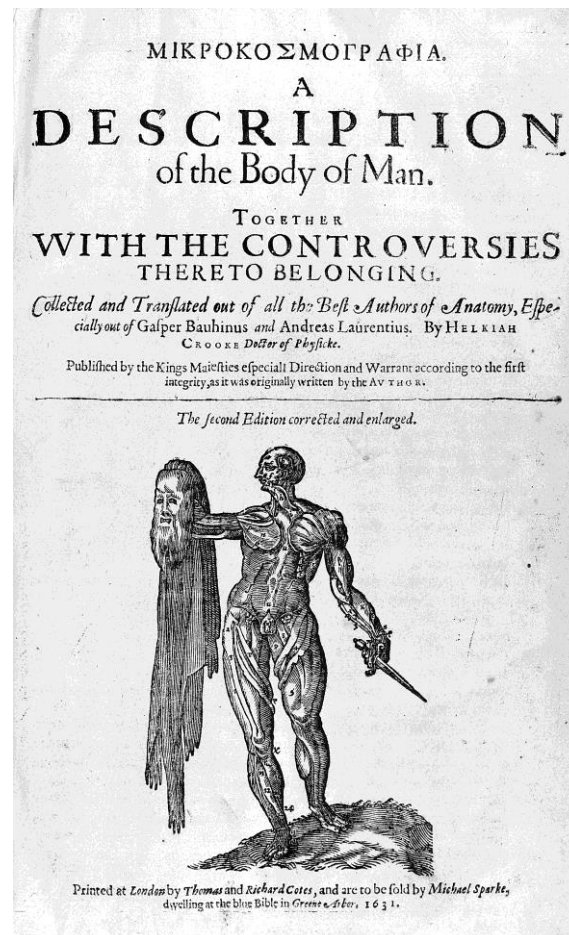


Figure 5

Titlepage. Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia* (1631).

Image used courtesy of the Huntington Library.

Owing to warfare, high infant mortality, and periodic pestilence and pandemics, dead bodies were a common site in the early modern world. Where and when the law permitted, fresh corpses regularly were opened up for investigative purposes. Notwithstanding the observational approach to experimental anatomy practiced by university trained surgeons such as Crooke, the human body remained a site of inescapable reflection on mortal temporality (see Figure 6).



Figure 6

Medical book skeleton with hourglass.

Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia* (1631, sig. B4<sup>v</sup>).

Image used courtesy of the Huntington Library.

Unlike other anatomical writers of the day, Crooke, however, so frequently refers to the soul as inhering in every part of the human body—as a mirror of our divine nature—that it stands out as a distinctive thematic element of his text. His frequent references to the soul (harkening explicitly to Plato's formulation in the *Timaeus* of each person being a little world, or microcosm) serve collectively as a defence mechanism against the desacralizing materialism inherent in the investigative enterprise of early modern surgery. Our entry highlights Crooke's revival and use of commonplace poetic analogies whilst describing cutting-edge approaches for disclosing the mysteries and minutiae of human anatomy.

[I]t is a very vain thing to take in hand to learn anatomy by the bare inspection of figures, without practice upon the body itself. And because our art concerns the cure not of beasts but of men, we must, therefore, exercise ourselves chiefly in the anatomy of the body of man, and that not alive but dead. (18; C3<sup>v</sup>)

This body, therefore, which, indeed, is but the sepulchre of that which God at first created, although to the eye it is very specious and beautiful, yet it is but infirm and weakly defended [...] for to death and diseases we lie open on every side. [...] It shall be sufficient in this place to draw the curtain and to show you the case, rather the coffin or winding-sheet wherein nature hath wrapped this living body of death. Those are four: besides the hairs, where-with as with flowers the coffin is garnished, that is, the cuticle or scarf-skin,<sup>14</sup> the skin itself, the fat, and the fleshy membrane. (61-62; G1<sup>r</sup>-G1<sup>v</sup>)

### Epitomizing the Anthological Enterprise: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

And finally, from the fourth and last division, "Death Arts in Literature," we come to Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (entry IV.17), which offers an especially apt way to conclude our volume, and likewise this essay about the metacognitively derived decisions driving our anthological project. First, because Behn's epitaph in Westminster Abbey echoes a prevailing theme running throughout *The Death Arts in Renaissance Literature*: "Here lies a Proof that Wit can never be / Defence enough against Mortality"; and, second, because *Oroonoko* was the last work to come from her pen, written and published within a year of her death. Behn was the first Englishwoman successfully to have earned her livelihood as a writer. She is best known perhaps for her enormously popular Restoration plays which were highly praised and patronized by Charles II, as well as for her poetry, treatises on materialism, translations, and five prose works.

*Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave. A True History* mixes travel literature with romance, historical narrative with epic conventions, as well as the language and themes of broadsides concerning "runaway slaves" and anti-slavery captivity stories so much a part of the emerging coffee house print culture of Behn's London. Indeed, *Oroonoko* can be considered the result of and to some extent can be seen as epitomizing distinctive aspects of the premodern anthological enterprise as it draws from several seemingly divergent literary currents of the time (as will be discussed further in the conclusion). While primarily a work of prose fiction, it recounts by way of memoir the exploits of a West African prince tricked into captivity by a slave trader and sold to a plantation in the

British colony of Surinam in South America. Behn writes with a high degree of accuracy based on her experiences there as a visitor (and perhaps as a spy) in 1663-64, before the colony had become a Dutch possession. She, along with her mother and sister, stayed on a plantation and apparently embroiled herself in political quarrels with the colonial administrators. Six years after her death, Thomas Southerne adapted *Oronooko* into a tragedy which met with such great success on the London stage that it revived interest in Behn's novel and thus gave it—and her bid for fame—a second life. In due course her popular narrative became a standard-bearer for abolitionists and remained so well into the nineteenth century. The African king Oroonoko, whom the colonists mockingly call Caesar, is abducted by Banister, the henchman of the governor who wants to make an example of the high-spirited slave.

Early in the novel, Behn idealizes Caesar by way of an amorous blazon drawn from the canons of conventional European beauty:

His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth, the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turned lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole proportion and air of his face was so noble, and exactly formed, that, [excepting] his colour, there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome. (C3r)

Behn similarly displays values typical of her time and place in her account of Caesar's execution, notwithstanding her extreme sympathy for the plight of enslaved Africans laboring against their will under colonial rule and subject to arbitrary acts of cruelty and mutilation.

And turning to the men that bound him, he said, "My friends, am I to die, or to be whipped?" And they cried, "Whipped! no, you shall not escape so well." And then he replied, smiling, "A blessing on thee"; and assured them, they need not tie him, for he would stand fixed like a rock and endure death so as should encourage them to die. "But if you whip me", said he, "be sure you tie me fast." [...] He had learned to take tobacco; and when he was assured he should die, he desired they would give him a pipe in his mouth, ready lighted, which they did; and the executioner came, and first cut off his members, and threw them into the fire; after that, with an ill-favoured knife, they cut his ears, and his nose, and burned them; he still smoked on, as if nothing had touched him; then they hacked off one of his arms, and still he bore up, and held his pipe; but at the cutting off the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropped;

and he gave up the ghost, without a groan, or a reproach. My mother and sister were by him all the while, but not suffered to save him, so rude and wild were the rabble, and so inhumane were the justices, who stood by to see the execution, who after paid dearly enough for their insolence. They cut Caesar in quarters and sent them to several of the chief plantations: one quarter was sent to Colonel Martin, who refused it and swore he had rather see the quarters of Banister and the Governor himself than those of Caesar on his plantations, and that he could govern his negroes without terrifying and grieving them with frightful spectacles of a mangled king. (237-39)

Literary critics usually characterize this scene as one of martyrdom, in which Caesar, following in the footsteps of saints, endures great pain and suffering to resist a godless state power. And yet, the trouble with settling on this interpretation alone is that the silent Caesar does not resemble a Protestant or Catholic martyr who calls upon divine authority for strength and comfort, inspiring others to take up the spiritual cause. Caesar also encodes and invokes the seventeenth-century abstraction of kingship by allusively reminding readers of the recent Stuart executions—of Charles I, as well as Charles II's eldest illegitimate son, James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, who tried to usurp the throne from James II. And so we are left with the interpretive conundrum of resolving his sovereignty with a punishment reserved for regicides or high traitors, particularly noted by his castration and the scattering of his limbs (see Griffin 110). British nobles of that era would have been beheaded, not subjected to the brutal corporeal degradation of dismemberment and quartering. At no point does Caesar betray any recognition of the ignoble treatment in store for him and instead conducts himself according to an altogether different honour-code. He passionately prefers death over whipping, whose import his blood-lusty captors fail to understand, believing that they will inflict upon him greater harm. His superhuman impassivity towards dismemberment allows them no sadistic pleasure and recalls the aboriginals who earlier in the narrative cut off pieces of their faces to prove their fitness for military leadership. Before the executioner works his cruel knife, Caesar's boast that he will "endure death so as should encourage them to die" (237) suggests his intention to instruct his captors in a kind of noble, resonantly stoic *ars moriendi*—a lesson lost on the spectating mob.

Caesar's execution raises more questions than it answers about how to apply the traditional notions of the death arts in Renaissance England to Behn's royal African in the colonial New World. In what might be considered a radical anthological approach, by representing the singularity of Caesar/Oroonoko drawn from a range of by then familiar narrative accounts written by and about enslaved black people,<sup>15</sup> Behn takes race in stride to the point of ignoring racial difference altogether.<sup>16</sup> Her portrait of the long-suffering Oroonoko insists on foregrounding the hero's stoic nobility along "classical," which is to say Greco-Roman, lines. This commonplace theme, most often associated with and personified by Socrates and Seneca, likewise was anthologized in many epitomes, treatises, and works of moral philosophy over the centuries. Behn thus had ready-at-hand a template she might overlay onto the composite figure of nobility drawn from narratives of black enslaved people, which by this time were recognized as following certain key themes and expressed in terms of familiar literary tropes. By weaving these anthological elements from both the classical tradition and more recent abolitionist tracts into a portrait of the singular heroism of an African king, Behn deftly uses expected narratological elements to achieve novel and unexpected effects. The result is that Oroonoko is put on equal footing with the Europeans—and perhaps even elevated further to higher moral ground. Far from falling prey to unreflecting "Eurocentrism," however (to use contemporary "presentist" terminology), Behn subtly engages with the available, operative semiotics of heroism found in moral philosophy, recently printed narratives of enslaved people, and sentimental novels of her age. To be clear, Behn is not deploying what might be termed a "proto-ethnographic register but rather an axiology of heroic value" (see again n16). And it is precisely this sort of composite and undoubtedly troubled representation of the death arts found in the print archive that our critical anthology seeks to recover, make available, metacognitively analyze, and keep in play for future readers.

The University of the South  
Sewanee

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Matthias Bauer, Burkhard Niederhoff, and Angelika Zirker for hosting the 17th International *Connotations* Symposium on “Textual Reasons for Canonicity,” 31 July to 2 August 2023, in Ellwangen, Germany, where a preliminary version of this paper was presented. The foundation of this work is indebted to a long-standing and truly felicitous collaborative arrangement with Rory Loughnane and Grant Williams.

<sup>2</sup>The *Greek Anthology* is hereafter abbreviated GA.

<sup>3</sup>Spelling and punctuation in quotations from early modern texts have been modernized and silently regularized (i for j, v for u, w for uu, and so forth), printers’ abbreviations expanded, and compositors’ accidentals corrected—except in those cases where retaining the original orthography preserves or helps bring out some special meaning otherwise lost. Titles of printed works, however, are given in their original forms in the Works Cited to make it easier for modern readers to recognize and locate these volumes for future reference. All early modern works cited have been examined in their original forms either in special collections or, as needed, photocopied originals using *Early English Books Online* (via ProQuest). Short Title Catalogue (STC) numbers, and for later works Wing numbers, are included. Square bracketed material in quoted excerpts indicates editorial interpolations; bracketed ellipses signal material omitted from quoted sections of the target text being excerpted.

<sup>4</sup>On this particular work by Plat and with special reference to the printing of his manuscript miscellanies, see Vine (164); on the vogue for “poetry masquerading as garden growth” in sixteenth-century English works, see Solomon (i-v).

<sup>5</sup>In what follows here I am indebted to the anonymous reader who reminded me about the importance of Barbara Benedict’s foundational contribution to ongoing discussions concerning canonicity and canon history.

<sup>6</sup>With regard to the latter type, and with reference to the selective body of works intended for use in the classroom, the aims and utility of such modern anthologies of limited length and scope have been discussed by Wendell Harris in terms of the “pedagogical canon” (113).

<sup>7</sup>On the development of the anthology as a genre, with special reference to the early-eighteenth-century form known as “the literary collection,” see Benedict: “Literary collections are commonly perceived as including two forms: the anthology and miscellany. Anthologies are characterized as volumes that contain material selected self-consciously for consistency and quality, usually long after the individual pieces within had first been published, whereas miscellanies contain new material, published for the first time” (“The Paradox of the Anthology” 231).

<sup>8</sup>On metacognitive approaches to literary analysis (“recursive intention-reading” or, more simply put, “embedding,” with reference to “people’s awareness of their own and other people’s states”) and cognitive approaches to literary criticism more generally, see Zunshine (2, 157-72).



<sup>9</sup>This is a clarifying note given in the original text which reads as follows: "Catherine Belsey asserts by way of Lacan's concept of the real, 'Death doesn't do fiction, but eliminates the body and the speaking subject, with all it thinks it knows. Death puts an end to the cultural game for each of us' (14)."

<sup>10</sup>"RaceB4Race" is an ongoing conference series and professional network community by and for scholars of color working on issues of race in premodern literature, history, and culture; see <https://acmrs.asu.edu/RaceB4Race>: "Bridging many traditional disciplinary divides, RaceB4Race not only creates innovative scholarly dialogues, but also fosters social change within premodern studies as a whole." See especially in this regard the Newberry Library's exhibition catalog, *Seeing Race Before Race* (2023).

<sup>11</sup>All quotations from Shakespeare follow the New Oxford edition (2016), listed in the Works Cited.

<sup>12</sup>A form of ingratiating flattery; "Favel" is among the personified vices encountered on the allegorical ship of state in John Skelton's *Bowge of Courte* (London, 1499; STC 22597).

<sup>13</sup>Worms feasting on corpses has been a staple for reflecting on mortality at least since the twelfth century, with Innocent III's *De contemptu mundi* and Bernard of Clairvaux's meditations on the human condition. In the vernacular literary tradition, the anonymous *A Disputacioun betwyx þe Body and Wormes* (see Conlee 52-54; Rytting 217-32), a Middle English dream-vision debate poem, gives voice to a dead noble lady undergoing decay and the worms consuming her entombed corpse (see Blum 107).

<sup>14</sup>Glossed by Crooke in the margin: "void of sense itself, is ordained as a monument to defend the skin from the violence of outward injuries."

<sup>15</sup>On the recurring plot patterns and composite elements drawn from a variety of enslaved peoples' experiences and applied to a single person's published autobiography, see for example Carretta (2-15); as well as, of course, the personal stories gathered in Carretta's anthology of Black authors' narratives in the English-speaking world of the eighteenth century. We do well to recall in this regard that what was to become the gold-standard of British abolitionist writing, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written By Himself* (London, 1789) was published a hundred years after *Oroonoko*.

<sup>16</sup>This phrasing, as well as the revised drift of the argument concluding my treatment of Behn's *Oroonoko*, is indebted to helpful suggestions offered by one of the anonymous readers.

## WORKS CITED

- Beaumont, Francis. "An Elegy on the Lady Markham." *Poems: by Francis Beaumont, Gent. Viz. The hermaphrodite. The remedy of love. Elegies. Sonnets, with other poems.* London, 1653. D8<sup>r</sup>-E1<sup>r</sup>. (Wing B1602)
- Behn, Aphra, *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave. A True History.* London: William Canning, 1688. (Wing B1749)
- Belsey, Catherine. *Culture and the Real: Theorizing Cultural Criticism.* New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Benedict, Barbara M. *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996.
- Benedict, Barbara M. "The Paradox of the Anthology: Collecting and *Différence* in Eighteenth-Century Britain." *New Literary History* 34.2 (2003): 231-56.
- Blum, Martin. "What Remains: The Middle English *Disputation Between the Body and the Worms* and the Late Medieval Experience of Death." *Care, Loss and the End of Life.* Ed. Nate Hinerman and Mary Ruth Sanders. Leiden: Brill, 2017. 105-15.
- Carretta, Vincent, ed. *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century.* 2nd ed. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2004.
- Cohen, Kathleen. *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol: The Transi Tomb in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1974.
- Conlee, John W. *Middle English Debate Poetry.* East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 1991.
- Crooke, Helkiah. *Mikrokosmographia: A description of the body.* London: 1631. (STC 6063)
- Engel, William E., Rory Loughnane, and Grant Williams, eds. *The Death Arts in Renaissance England.* Cambridge: CUP, 2022.
- Engel, William E., Rory Loughnane, and Grant Williams, eds. *The Memory Arts in Renaissance England.* Cambridge: CUP, 2016.
- Engel, William E., Rory Loughnane, and Grant Williams, eds. *Memory and Mortality in Renaissance England.* Cambridge: CUP, 2023.
- Fitzgeffrey, Henry, ed. *Certain elegies, done by sundrie excellent wits With satyres and epigrams.* London: Printed by B: A[lsop] for Miles Partriche, 1618. (STC 10945.3)
- Fowler, Alastair. "Genre and the Literary Canon." *New Literary History* 11 (1979): 97-119.
- Gascoigne, George. *A hundreth sundrie flowres bounde vp in one small poesie Gathered partely (by translation) in the fyne outlandish gardins of Euripides, Ouid, Petrarke, Ariosto, and others: and partly by inuention, out of our owne fruitefull orchardes in Englande: yelding sundrie sꝛveete sauours of tragical, comical, and morall discourses....* London: [Henry Bynneman [and Henry Middleton]] for Richard Smith, 1573. (STC 11635)
- Gascoigne, George. *The Posies of George Gascoigne Esquire. Corrected, perfected, and augmented by the authour.* London: H[enry]. Bynneman for Richard Smith, 1575. (STC 11636)

- Gildenhard, Ingo, and Andrew Zissos. *Transformative Change in Western Thought: A History of Metamorphosis from Homer to Hollywood*. London: Legenda, 2013.
- Gillespie, Alexandra. *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books, 1473-1557*. Oxford: OUP, 2006.
- The Greek Anthology: Books 1-5*. Trans. W. R. Paton; rev. Michael A. Turner. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2014.
- Griffin, Megan. "Dismembering the Sovereign in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*." *English Literary History* 86.1 (2019): 107-33.
- Hamrick, Stephen. "Tottel's Miscellany and the English Reformation." *Criticism* 44.4 (2002): 329-61.
- Harris, Wendell V. "Canonicity." *PMLA* 106.1 (1991): 110-21.
- The kalender of shepardes*. London, 1518 and 1528. (STC 22410 and STC 22411)
- Mujica, Barbara. "Teaching Literature: Canon, Controversy, and the Literary Anthology." *Hispania* 80.2 (1997): 203-15.
- May, Steven W. *English Renaissance Manuscript Culture: The Paper Revolution*. Oxford: OUP, 2023.
- McDonald, Lee Martin. *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.
- Ndiay, Noémie, and Lia Markey, eds. *Seeing Race Before Race: Visual Culture and the Racial Matrix in the Premodern World*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2023.
- Neill, Michael. *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*. Oxford: OUP, 1997.
- Perkins, David. *Smart Schools: Better Thinking and Learning for Every Child*. New York: Free Press, 1992.
- Pfeifer, Douglas. "'The Scope of Mine Intent': Reading for the Author in George Gascoigne's *Hundreth Sundrie Flowres and Posies*." *English Literary Renaissance* 53.2 (2023): 163-91.
- Rytting, Jenny Rebecca. "A Disputacioun Betwyx þe Body and Wormes: A Translation." *Comitatus* 31.1 (2000): 217-32.
- Schott, Penelope Scambly. "The Narrative Stance in 'The Adventures of Master F.J.': Gascoigne as Critic of His Own Poems." *Renaissance Quarterly* 29.3 (1976): 369-77.
- Shakespeare, William. *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Modern Critical Edition*. Gen. ed. Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus and Gabriel Egan. Oxford: OUP, 2016.
- Skura, Meredith Anne. *Tudor Autobiography: Listening for Inwardness*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008.
- Solomon, Deborah. *The Poem and the Garden in Early Modern England: Rival Media in the Process of Poetic Invention*. New York: Routledge, 2023.
- Songes and sonettes, written by the right honorable Lorde Henry Howard late Earle of Surrey, and others*. London: Richard Tottel, 1574. (STC 13866)
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. Review of *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* by Barbara M. Benedict. *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 9.3 (1997): 349-53.

- Vine, Angus. *Miscellaneous Order: Manuscript Culture and the Early Modern Organization of Knowledge*. Oxford: OUP, 2019.
- Wall, Wendy. *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993.
- Welch, Christina. "Exploring Late-Medieval English *Memento Mori* Carved Cadaver Sculptures." *Dealing With The Dead: Mortality and Community in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Thea Tomaini. Leiden: Brill, 2017. 331-65.
- Whitney, Isabella. *A Sweet nosgay, or pleasant posye contayning a hundred and ten philosophical flowers*. London: Richard Jones, 1573. (STC 25440)
- Zunshine, Lisa. *The Secret Life of Literature*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT P, 2022.

# From Rivers to Fountains: Henry Vaughan's Secular and Sacred Inaugurations

JONATHAN NAUMAN

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 48-62.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-nauman-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-nauman-1)

---

This article is the first entry in a debate on "Henry Vaughan's Secular and Sacred Inaugurations" (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/henry-vaughan-secular-and-sacred-inaugurations>).

If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

---

## Abstract

Henry Vaughan began his poetic career in emulation of the occasional verse of the Jonsonian coteries; and the pastoral title poem "To the River *Isca*," which opens his *Olor Iscanus* collection, evokes an explicit classicist pedigree of canonical river poets that Vaughan effectively sought to join. This self-canonizing effort was effectively revised and transfigured in Vaughan's conversion to sacred verse, with the introductory lyric to *Silex Scintillans*, "Regeneration," advancing a visionary pastoral sequence merging Vaughan's new devotional work with the sacred-canonical Song of Songs.

Literary figures conscious of residing on the margins of society often advance their works even more openly as responses to culturally definitive previous prose and poetry than writers resident at well-recognized cultural centers. Such perennial concerns can be seen very much at work in the publications of the seventeenth-century Anglo-Welsh cavalier poet Henry Vaughan, who became a medical doctor in Breconshire after his early training in Oxford and London. This paper will highlight how Vaughan proclaimed canonical aspirations in the first

stages of his literary career, and how these aspirations matured and changed when he turned toward writing his much-noted devotional verse.

Henry Vaughan first prepared his classicist verse collection *Olor Iscanus* for the press in December of 1647, apparently intending the work to emerge as his second published volume, a timely performance that would establish and further his recent efforts in *Poems* (1646) to emulate amatory and occasional literary exchanges he had observed among fellow Royalists in Oxford and London. The new project, however, was interrupted by a war-related personal tragedy, the death of his younger brother William, and by a resulting spiritual change of heart under which his literary energies were rechanneled toward composing the devotional lyrics of *Silex Scintillans*, on which his current reputation as a poet largely stands. Through the interventions of his twin brother Thomas Vaughan, who acted as Henry's literary agent in London during the early 1650s, the non-devotional collection that Henry had envisioned at first did eventually emerge, though not with all of the contents originally intended.<sup>1</sup> The general tenor of the work so released remained consonant with the earlier *Poems*, showing efforts to propagate the goods of antebellum literary culture as a "*more calme Ambition, amidst the common noise*" (*Works* 11) of the ascendant Parliamentary regime. Thomas Vaughan published the volume as a work "Formerly written" (*Works* 167), implicitly acknowledging the emergence and primacy of his brother's sacred verse.

Here I will examine and compare the two modes Henry Vaughan sequentially chose to continue his poetic works, in first instance as a man of letters emulating the classicist ethos of the Royalist coterie, and in the second instance as a man pursuing authentic Christian faith through lyrics inspired by the letters and poems of the Latin patristic poet St. Paulinus of Nola and the devotional works of George Herbert, of "whose holy *life and verse*" Vaughan would later profess to be a convert (*Works* 558). In the introductory lyric to *Olor Iscanus*, "To the River *Isca*" (*Works* 173-75), Vaughan's speaker articulates and performs his own entry into a classicist literary canon, explicitly and implicitly citing

the predecessors he means to join, transforming the Usk valley into a literary pastoral haven “redeem’d from all disorders” (l. 86). In “Regeneration” (*Works* 57-59), the introductory lyric for *Silex Scintillans*, Vaughan’s speaker presents himself instead as an explorer of pastoral landscapes that manifest prior transcendent realities and provide means toward spiritual understanding; and the speaker finally joins the plea of the sacred-canonical Beloved in the Song of Songs, asking to become himself by God’s intervention, through his new poetic offerings, a salubrious locale for spiritual transformation: “*Arise O North, and come thou South-wind, and blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out*” (*Works* 59; italics in original).

There is reason to believe that Henry Vaughan planned for “To the River *Isca*” to be the opening lyric of *Olor Iscanus* through all phases of the book’s construction. The volume’s title implicitly presents the author as “The Swan of Usk,”<sup>2</sup> and “To the River *Isca*” functions as a title poem, both explaining Vaughan’s aesthetic ambition and also ostensibly accomplishing it. The first ten lines offer a catalogue of river poets descending from gods of antiquity to Vaughan’s contemporaries John Milton and William Habington.

When *Daphne*’s Lover here first wore the *Bayes*,  
*Eurotas* secret streams heard all his *Layes*.  
 And holy *Orpheus*, *Natures busie* Child  
 By headlong *Hebrus* his deep *Hymns* Compil’d.  
 Soft *Petrarch* (thaw’d by *Laura*’s flames) did weep  
 On *Tybers* banks, when she (*proud fair!*) cou’d sleep;  
*Mosella* boasts *Ausonius*, and the *Thames*  
 Doth murmur *SIDNEYS Stella* to her *streams*,  
 While *Severn* swoln with *Joy* and *sorrow*, wears  
*Castara*’s smiles mixt with fair *Sabrin*’s tears. (ll. 1-10; *Works* 173)

Vaughan reinforces this proffered lineage with a discourse on the enduring gifts of literary fame that river poets have bestowed on their chosen landscapes, and he foresees for such “*Genii*” of rivers a pastoral apotheosis in Elysian fields merging with the natural beauties they described. Careful attention to Vaughan’s allusions has shown that his

learned citations include a significant component of collegial appropriation; see for instance this passage from Habington:

And though Imperiall *Tiber* boast alone  
*Ovids Corinna*, and to *Arn*<sup>3</sup> is knowne  
 But *Petrarchs Laura*; while our famous Thames  
 Doth murmur *Sidneyes Stella* to her streames.  
 Yet hast thou *Severne* left, and she can bring  
 As many quires of Swans, as they to sing  
 Thy glorious love [...] ("His Muse speakes to him," ll. 5-11; Habington 73).

One notes that Vaughan borrows a rhyme and also a full line from this sequence of poetic lovers and their rivers, presented as a literary enshrinement of Habington's newly-married wife Lucy Herbert, styled Castara. Robert Wilcher has spotlighted this borrowing in his careful examination of Vaughan's "magpie thefts,"<sup>4</sup> the poet's habitual adoption of other writers' phrases, pointing out that the verbatim echoing of Habington's allusion to Sidney and the Thames cannot be taken as a covert plagiarism, since Vaughan openly gestures at his source, Habington's *Castara*, in the lines immediately following; and he also points out that the passage quoted from *Castara* is "intended to bring to mind the relevance of Habington's 'many quires of Swans'" (Wilcher 173) as a collegial antecedent to Vaughan's own new literary identity as Swan of Usk. As Wilcher also mentions, Vaughan's art of allusion, verbatim or otherwise, was a "play of words or fancy" (182) involving textual knowledge shared by his expected audience; and it is specifically the classicist canon of the posthumous school of Ben Jonson and Thomas Randolph that Vaughan means here to join, extending its migration westward to enable the literary ennoblement of the Usk valley.

When I am layd to *rest* hard by thy *streams*,  
 And my *Sun sets*, where first it *sprang* in beams,  
 I'll leave behind me such a *large, kind light*,  
 As shall *redeem* thee from *oblivious night*,  
 And in these *vowes* which (living yet) I pay  
 Shed such a *Previous* and *Enduring Ray*,  
 As shall from age to age thy *fair name* lead  
 'Till *Rivers* leave to *run*, and *men* to *read*. (ll. 27-34)



Having stepped forward to perform his offices as a river poet bestowing immortality, Vaughan sets out in his poem so to do; and as Jonathan Post has observed, the transition is signaled by an incantatory “tightening of the verse into octosyllables” (32): blessings invoked here on the Usk include future literary acknowledgment and homage (ll. 35-38); the presence of proximate enchanted groves, vocal as with Orpheus, enabling veridical dreams in their shades (ll. 39-42); idyllic pastoral scenes with country dances and innocent courtships (ll. 43-50); freedom from unpleasant and treacherous animals, from contaminations, and from extreme heat:

May the *Evet* and the *Tode*  
 Within thy Banks have no abode,  
 Nor the *wilie*, winding *Snake*  
 Her *voyage* through thy *waters* make.  
 In all thy *Journey* to the *Main*  
 No *nitrous Clay*, nor *Brimstone-vein*  
 Mixe with thy *streams*, but may they passe  
 Fresh as the *aire*, and clear as *Glasse* [...] (ll. 51-58)

Vaughan’s allusive gesturing toward fellow classicist poets continues through these passages. Editors have noted that Vaughan’s friend Richard West praised the “Groves” of Thomas Randolph’s pastoral *Amyntas* as “Prophetically” (*Works* 986),<sup>5</sup> and have also shown that Vaughan’s lines here very closely follow a passage from William Browne’s *Britannia’s Pastorals* (1613).<sup>6</sup> This allusion, one of the most extensive and remarkable in Vaughan’s published verse, seems to indicate that when “To the River *Isca*” was written, Vaughan considered his and Browne’s literary work to be closely related. Indeed, Browne’s career would have seemed at the moment quite similar to Vaughan’s own. Browne, a son of minor gentry in Tavistock on the western edge of Devonshire, had gone to Oxford as a non-matriculated student and then down to London’s Inns of Court, where he became friends with Ben Jonson and met Selden, Drayton, Chapman, Wither, and others (see Moorman 3-5). His facility for pastoral observation and sensuous natural description would be influential for Milton’s earlier verse as well as for Vaughan’s.

It is worth observing that Vaughan himself glances toward Milton in "To the River *Isca*," *Comus* apparently supplying, along with Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, the association of the River Severn with the nymph Sabrina. Vaughan's responses would of course become much less friendly in the following decade, once Milton set about releasing his voluminous political tracts.

Vaughan sums up his extended tetrameter blessing on the Usk with a valediction in dimeter couplets, but then provides a reprise including a characteristic gesture regularly practiced in his devotional verse and prose, a candid glance at the current historical situation.

What *gifts* more *Heav'n* or *Earth* can adde  
 With all those *blessings* be thou *Clad*!  
     *Honour, Beautie,*  
     *Faith and Dutie,*  
     *Delight and Truth,*  
     *With Love, and Youth*  
 Crown all about thee! And what ever *Fate*  
 Impose else-where, whether the graver state,  
 Or some toy else, may those *lowd, anxious Cares*  
 For *dead* and *dying things* (the Common *Wares*  
 And *showes* of time) ne'r break thy *Peace*, nor make  
 Thy *repos'd Armes* to a new warre *awake*!  
     But *Freedome, safety, Joy and blisse*  
     *United* in one loving *kisse*  
     *Surround* thee quite, and *stille* thy borders  
     *The Land redeem'd* from all disorders! (ll. 71-86)

Louise Guiney and Gwenllian Morgan, pioneer researchers always on the lookout for Vaughan's civil war contexts, surmised from this conclusion that "To the River *Isca*" was probably written in "1646-7, when all was quiet in Breconshire" (see *Works* 988)<sup>7</sup> and the Usk valley briefly provided some opportunity for rest and peaceful literary endeavor after the poet's military service on behalf of the King's struggling cause. The ethos of Jonsonian occasional verse continues in a different vein as one moves into the second *Olor Iscanus* selection, "The Charnel-house" (175-77),<sup>8</sup> observations on an indiscriminate collection of exhumed

bones, presented as an opportunity for the speaker to “season all succeeding Jollitie” (l. 62) and to enforce through meditations on the inevitability of death the classicist virtues of balance and moderation:

But should wild bloud swell to a lawless strain  
One Check from thee shall *Channel* it again. (ll. 65-66)

Vaughan’s readers have remarked on the considerable difference in tenor between this poem and “To the River *Isca*,” to the point of viewing “The Charnel-house” as undermining the first lyric or facing it down.<sup>9</sup> I suspect that Vaughan meant the first poem’s celebration and the second poem’s sober counterpoise to demonstrate together the versatility and amplitude of his classicist poetic.

The “Check” that Vaughan would actually experience in 1648, when the Royalists’ “*repos’d Armes*” indeed awakened with uprisings in Brecon and other South Wales towns, apparently induced him to question not so much the vision of “To the River *Isca*” as the viability of the whole *Olor Iscanus* collection. Unrest in Wales worried Parliament, where there was concern over the possibility of the King receiving aid from nearby Ireland. Colonel Thomas Horton was first sent west, and then Oliver Cromwell. Horton defeated the Royalists at St. Fagans on 8 May, and Cromwell took Pembroke Castle on 11 July (see Royle 434-41). It has been inferred that Henry Vaughan’s younger brother William was a Royalist combatant, dying from war-related disease or injury on 14 July (see Hutchinson 95-97). Henry’s conscience was stirred by his brother’s manner of death, resolute in faith and Christian hope, and he began to write elegiac prayers in response.

O let me (like him,) know my End!  
And be as glad to find it,  
And whatsoe’r thou shalt Commend,  
Still let thy Servant mind it!  
Then make my soule white as his owne,  
My faith as pure, and steddy,  
And deck me, Lord, with the same Crowne  
Thou hast crownd him already!<sup>10</sup>

Neither the laureate crown of the poets nor the crown of legitimate kingly authority that he and his brothers defended in arms could compare with the eternal crown of Christian salvation gained through divinely-aided penitence and a spiritual life of conversion. A different genre of verse performance would be needed for this higher calling, one of which Henry Vaughan was quite aware but which he had hitherto sidelined. Now the worldly classicism of Ausonius, whom Vaughan had honored and included in his forthcoming non-devotional collection, was to be abandoned in favor of the sober and transcendently-oriented lyrics and elocutions of Ausonius' pupil, the Roman senator turned saint, Paulinus of Nola; and the ethos of the coteries would give way to the searching and personal testimonial verses of the university orator turned pastor, George Herbert. Placed in the context of these men's endeavors, Vaughan now viewed his personal ambition to become the Jonsonian genius of the Usk and to invest his home valley with a literary crown as mere vanity.

Vaughan thus issued the collection which did emerge as his second published volume, *Silex Scintillans* (1650), consciously and publicly as a redirection of his poetic career, effectively superseding *Olor Iscanus*, which he was now not inclined to publish at all. One sees this dynamic clearly in the devotional collection's short verse dedication, modeled in brevity and title after the introductory lyric to Herbert's *The Temple*, but differing from Herbert's piece in its emphatic repudiation of former work, characterizing earlier non-devotional poetic efforts as a land "curs'd, and void of store" (*Works* 56, l. 8). The introductory poems "Regeneration" (57-59) and "Death. A Dialogue" (59-60)<sup>11</sup> correspond with "To the River *Isca*" and "The Charnel-house" in dealing with life and death from either classicist or sacred points-of-view; and as I shall attempt to show in concluding this analysis, "Regeneration" especially reconfigures for sacred use the canonical concerns and pastoral themes explored in the non-devotional collection's title poem.

In "To the River *Isca*" the speaker first establishes a line of literary canonicity, and entering that line is enabled to bestow pastoral bless-

ings. In “Regeneration” Vaughan’s speaker does not orchestrate a pastoral; rather, he finds himself within one, experiencing a sequence of spiritual insights figured through natural images.<sup>12</sup> With some difficulty—the poem’s movements indicate a young personality quick in pursuit but slow to understand—these images gradually build awareness of a need for spiritual help, and with increasing clarity imply that such help is available but not always accepted. The poem ends with a tetrameter couplet that stands outside of the poem’s metrical frame, a plea for divine intervention; and the epigraph from *Canticles* shows that, in making his request, the speaker has joined his sensibility with the greatest of all sacred amatory pastorals.

The first three stanzas of Vaughan’s opening lyric dramatically enact the poem’s inward turn, juxtaposing the speaker’s external and unreflective youthful élan with his turbulent inner life impacted with vice and sin, and they also relay his inability to change his wrongful bents through his own efforts.

Regeneration.

A Ward, and still in bonds, one day  
                                 I stole abroad,  
 It was high-spring, and all the way  
                                 Primros’d, and hung with shade;  
                                 Yet, was it frost within,  
                                 And surly winds  
 Blasted my infant buds, and sinne  
                                 Like Clouds ecclips’d my mind.

2.

Storm’d thus, I straight perceiv’d my spring  
                                 Meere stage, and show,  
 My walke a monstrous, mountain’d thing  
                                 Rough-cast with Rocks, and snow;  
                                 And as a Pilgrims Eye  
                                 Far from reliefe,  
 Measures the melancholy skye  
                                 Then drops, and rains for grieve,

3.

So sigh’d I upwards still, at last

'Twixt steps, and falls  
 I reach'd the pinnacle, where plac'd  
 I found a paire of scales,  
 I tooke them up and layd  
 In th'one late paines,  
 The other smoake, and pleasures weigh'd  
 But prov'd the heavier grains; (ll. 1-24)

Once the scales have shown the speaker that he remains in need of spiritual help, he responds obediently to what seems to be an angelic prompting<sup>13</sup>—"Away" (l. 25)—and the poem's visions move into a pastoral-symbolic recapitulation of salvation history, beginning with "*Jacobs Bed*" from the Old Testament and modulating into the "new spring" of the Christian church, presented through imagery that implies Vaughan's respect, in line with St. Paulinus and Archbishop Laud, for the helps provided to Christian holiness by sacred architecture and liturgy. Perhaps it is not surprising that the sensuous natural descriptions here not only incomparably surpass the spiritually compromised "high-spring" of stanza one, but also very much exceed in splendor the Elysian Fields and lyric springtime blessings delivered by Vaughan's speaker in "*To the River Isca*" (ll. 19-24, 61-72).

4.

With that, some cryed, *Away*; straight I  
 Obey'd, and led  
 Full East, a faire, fresh field could spy  
 Some call'd it, *Jacobs Bed*;  
 A Virgin-soile, which no  
 Rude feet ere trod,  
 Where (since he stept there,) only go  
 Prophets, and friends of God.

5.

Here, I repos'd; but scarce well set,  
 A grove descryed  
 Of stately height, whose branches met  
 And mixt on every side;  
 I entred, and once in  
 (Amaz'd to see't,)  
 Found all was chang'd, and a new spring  
 Did all my senses greet;

6.

The unthrift Sunne shot vitall gold  
                     A thousand peeces,  
 And heaven its azure did unfold  
                     Checqu'r'd with snowie fleeces,  
                     The aire was all in spice  
                     And every bush  
 A garland wore; Thus fed my Eyes  
                     But all the Eare lay hush. (ll. 25-48)

The visions that Vaughan's speaker encounters here are spectacular and impressive, but his own relationship with what he sees remains undetermined, and the final showings of the poem serve to sharpen the question of how the speaker himself will relate to what he has seen. The poem's narrative has gone forward with quick and restless movement; then stanza eight highlights the speaker's repeated failures to comprehend by echoing the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, where it is said that "the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing" and "there is no new thing under the sun" (Eccles. 1:8-9). The visions, engaging as they are, emerge and are superseded by others: has there been any inner progress toward overcoming the "frost within"? The fountain in the speaker's stately grove appears to be weeping.

7.

Only a little Fountain lent  
                     Some use for Eares,  
 And on the dumbe shades language spent  
                     The Musick of her teares;  
                     I drew her neere, and found  
                     The Cisterne full  
 Of divers stones, some bright, and round  
                     Others ill-shap'd, and dull.

8.

The first (pray marke,) as quick as light  
                     Danc'd through the floud,  
 But, th'last more heavy then the night  
                     Nail'd to the Center stood;  
                     I wonder'd much, but tyr'd  
                     At last with thought,  
 My restless Eye that still desir'd

As strange an object brought;

9.

It was a banke of flowers, where I descried  
 (Though 'twas mid-day,)  
 Some fast asleepe, others broad-eyed  
 And taking in the Ray,  
 Here musing long, I heard  
 A rushing wind  
 Which still increas'd, but whence it stirr'd  
 No where I could not find;

10.

I turn'd me round, and to each shade  
 Dispatch'd an Eye,  
 To see, if any leafe had made  
 Least motion, or Reply,  
 But while I listning sought  
 My mind to ease  
 By knowing, where 'twas, or where not,  
 It whisper'd; *Where I please.* (ll. 49-80)

Here the ten eight-line stanzas of the poem come to an end, but Vaughan adds a tetrameter couplet in which his speaker finally makes a definitive response to the series of visions, one that combines the image of God's Spirit as wind<sup>14</sup> with St. Paul's injunction to die to sin in order to live in Christ<sup>15</sup>:

Lord, then said I, *On me one breath,  
 And let me dye before my death!* (ll. 81-82)

Once the speaker has made this request to the Holy Spirit, Vaughan deploys in turn an epigraph that merges the request with the words of the Beloved in Canticles: "*Arise O North, and come thou South-wind, and blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out*" (59), a sacred-canonical prayer that becomes for his new verse collection what the catalogue of river poets had been for *Olor Iscanus*. The outcome of "Regeneration" supplies a warrant and a blessing for the lyrics in *Silex Scintillans* to follow.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Vaughan, *Works* (149-53) for an account of the evidence surrounding Thomas Vaughan's unapproved 1651 publication of his brother Henry's *Olor Iscanus*. Quotations from Henry Vaughan's poetry and prose below are cited from this edition, which throughout this paper will be abbreviated as *Works*.

<sup>2</sup>Vaughan's relative John Aubrey and Vaughan's Oxford correspondent Anthony Wood afterward used "Olor Iscanus" as Vaughan's sobriquet; see *Works* 793-94.

<sup>3</sup>The river near which Laura reclines in Petrarch's 126th Sonnet would seem to be the Rhône near Avignon, though Habington calls it the "Arn." Vaughan chooses to associate Petrarch's amatory verse with "Tybers banks," perhaps misremembering Habington's lines while making casual allusion to them (*Works* 985).

<sup>4</sup>Wilcher takes this description of Vaughan's habit of verbatim allusion from Bird 12.

<sup>5</sup>See also Randolph 63 (ll. 143-44). West's poem "To the pious Memory of my deare Brother in-Law M<sup>r</sup> Thomas Randolph" was the publisher's commendation for Randolph's posthumous collection, and it also characterized "*Helicon*" as "a Spring" (l. 68), a usage Vaughan picks up in "To the River Isca" (l. 38).

<sup>6</sup>The lines Vaughan borrows belong in Browne's poem to the shepherdess Marina, who uses them to bless a river god for his offer to rescue her from unrequited love for the shepherd Celandine. See Browne 28 (*Britannia's Pastorals*, Book I, Song 2). Vaughan also seems to interact in "To the River Isca" (l. 43), with Browne's refusal in the first lines of *Britannia's Pastorals* to add to already overcrowded pastoral sites: "What neede I tune the Swaines of Thessalie? / Or, bootlesse, adde to them of Arcadie?" (Browne 2).

<sup>7</sup>Quoted from Guiney's and Morgan's notes compiled by F. E. Hutchinson in the unpublished typescript "A Commentary on the Poems of Henry Vaughan"; see *Works* xxiv.

<sup>8</sup>I find it likely that this lyric, along with "To the River Isca," is one of the earliest poems in *Olor Iscanus*, and that its printed position, second in the collection, reflects Vaughan's intentions in 1647.

<sup>9</sup>See especially Jonathan Post's and Peter Thomas's responses, summarized in the headnote to this lyric in *Works* 988.

<sup>10</sup>"Thou that know'st for whom I mourne," ll. 57-64 (*Works* 80).

<sup>11</sup>For his sacred sequence, Vaughan fittingly follows the body-soul dialogue in "Death" with a similar dialogue on "Resurrection and Immortality" (*Works* 60-62).

<sup>12</sup>It will be noted that my readings from this much-discussed poem largely follow the lead of Vaughan's latest editors in *Works* 877-85. For "the heavier graines" on the "paire of scales" in stanza three figuring the speaker's need for divine aid to truly overcome sin, see Halewood 130. For the grove "of stately height" in stanza five, see West 40, and Garner 59, who see the image functioning as "a church interpreted as a grove"; and see also Jonathan Post's intuition that the synthesis implicit

in Vaughan's pastoral image reflects on Vaughan's endorsement of the longstanding aesthetic openness in Christian art to the pre-Christian, which Thomas Fuller called "Christian thrift" (197-98). As the editors of *Works* have shown, most critical responses to "Regeneration" take the poem as a learned seventeenth-century man's personal religious testimony aesthetically deployed, and as such open to analysis as a manifestation of relevant Biblical, theological, and mystical texts and traditions. I have always been inclined to read the poem's opening lines as referencing Vaughan's own minor status as a non-matriculated Oxford student afterward "sent to London, being then designed by my father for the study of the Law" (*Works* 800).

<sup>13</sup>Durr 86-87 takes "some" in line 25 as singular and identifies the directive "Away" as the voice of Christ, who said that Jacob's vision of angels ascending and descending from Heaven would through His ministry be manifested again (John 1:51).

<sup>14</sup>In addition to John 3:8 (*Works* 884), see Isaiah 40:7-8, "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever."

<sup>15</sup>See Colossians 3:2-3, "Set your affections on things above, not on things in the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God." See also Galatians 2:20, and Romans, chapters 6 and 7.

## WORKS CITED

- Bird, Michael. "Nowhere but in the Dark: On the Poetry of Henry Vaughan." *English* 33 (1984): 1-20.
- Browne, William. *Britannia's Pastorals*. Menston: The Scolar P, 1969.
- Durr, R. A. *The Mystical Poetry of Henry Vaughan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1962.
- Garner, Ross. *Henry Vaughan: Experience and the Tradition*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1959.
- Habington, William. *The Poems of William Habington*. Ed. Kenneth Allott. London: The University of Liverpool, 1948.
- Halewood, William H. *The Poetry of Grace: Reformation Themes and Structures in English Seventeenth-Century Poetry*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1970.
- Hutchinson, F. E. *Henry Vaughan: A Life and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1947.
- Moorman, Frederic W. *William Browne: His Britannia's Pastorals and the Pastoral Poetry of the Elizabethan Age*. Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1897.
- Post, Jonathan. *Henry Vaughan: The Unfolding Vision*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982.
- Randolph, Thomas. *The Poems and Amyntas of Thomas Randolph*. Ed. John Jay Parry. New Haven: Yale UP, 1917.

- Royle, Trevor. *The British Civil War: The Wars of the Three Kingdoms*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Vaughan, Henry. *The Works of Henry Vaughan*. Ed. Donald R. Dickson, Alan Rudrum, and Robert Wilcher. 3 vols. Oxford: OUP, 2018.
- West, Philip. *Henry Vaughan's Silex Scintillans: Scripture Uses*. Oxford: OUP, 2001.
- Wilcher, Robert. *Keeping the Ancient Way: Aspects of the Life and Work of Henry Vaughan (1621-1695)*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2021.

# Anthologizing Shakespeare's Sonnets

THOMAS KULLMANN

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 61-95.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-kullmann-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-kullmann-1)

---

This article is the first entry in a debate on "Anthologizing Shakespeare's Sonnets" (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/anthologizing-shakespeares-sonnets>).

If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](http://www.connotations.de) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

---

## Abstract

Since antiquity, schools, universities, and other institutions have canonized literary texts, that is, made choices as to what students should read and study. The present article intends to explore on which grounds these choices are made, using Shakespeare's sonnets as a test case. Altogether, 38 collections of sonnets, published from 1783 to 2023, were examined. From Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (1861) onwards, a canon of sonnets emerges which were reprinted again and again, including sonnets 18, 73, and 116. The article suggests that the preference given to certain sonnets may be due to the modes of communication they use. While sonnet 2 (a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century favourite), in which second-person messages and the "conative" function (according to Jakobson's communicative model of language) are predominant, has gone out of fashion, sonnets containing first-person, or "emotive," messages (like sonnet 30), non-personal, or "referential," messages (like sonnet 116), and self-referential, or "metalingual," messages (like sonnet 18) have been the staple of anthologies ever since Palgrave. This choice of sonnets was obviously influenced by literary tastes informed by Romanticism and the nineteenth-century veneration of the wisdom of poets.

These preferences are all the more remarkable as they do not correspond to Shakespeare's own: only 26 of the 154 sonnets can be classified as predominantly emotive, 22 as referential, nine as conative/referential, and fourteen as self-referential, as opposed to 33 which privilege conative statements, and 50 which

mingle emotive and conative functions in a singular way, unique to Shakespeare (like sonnet 61). These I-and-thou sonnets, like the second-person sonnets, have clearly been neglected by nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century anthologists. We may conclude that existing anthologies often provide a biased picture of Shakespeare the poet, and that texts discarded and forgotten might be more representative of their author and period than canonized works.

## 1. Introduction: Canonizing Literary Texts

The practice of canonizing literary texts dates back to antiquity. It is due to processes of canonization, for example, that seven of Aeschylus', seven of Sophocles', and ten of the nineteen extant tragedies of Euripides have come down to us in the form of library copies, while several hundred other dramas (by these three tragedians as well as by others) are only known by their titles and by short fragments (cf. Lesky 73-74; and Gruber). The selection of these canonical works was obviously effected by one institution: school; and schools and universities have played a decisive role in establishing canons ever since.<sup>1</sup> From the sixteenth century onward the emerging book market joined in the processes of canon formation, as editors and booksellers made choices as to what purchasers of books would, or should, read.<sup>2</sup>

Why is it that schools, universities, and common readers prefer certain literary works over others? Which are the criteria which lead to a text's inclusion in, or exclusion from, the canon? According to a common assumption, these choices depend on ideologies and the powers exerted by influential elites. Indeed, a few years ago I read and published a paper on "Canon Formation in British Literature Studies," in which I argued that because of various ideological biases a small segment of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English novels came to represent this period on university reading lists (Kullmann, "Canon Formation"). The opposite view is taken by Harold Bloom, who in his monumental work on *The Western Canon* claims that canons are, or should be, formed on the basis of aesthetic criteria alone. "Aesthetic value" (22), he insists, does not depend on the ideologies of the authors

of literary texts (see 28), and should not depend on the social group the readers happen to belong to: "I myself insist that the individual self is the only method and the whole standard for apprehending aesthetic value" (22). The benefit readers derive from reading canonical works is "the proper use of one's own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own mortality" (28).

Bloom feels the need to defend the "Western Canon" against critics of the "School of Resentment" (20) who consider canons to be a discursive tool used by the ruling classes to manipulate dependents. By, however, insisting on the solitude of the reader, "the mind's dialogue with itself" (28), Bloom deprives himself of one of the central arguments which legitimize canon formation: if we agree on reading a common set of books, we can share our reading experiences with others. The pleasure and profit we derive from reading is supplemented by the pleasure and profit we derive from discussing canonical texts with our peers, as well as with people unknown to us (see Kullmann, *Reading Nevernight*, esp. v-ix). This particularly applies to the plays of Shakespeare, whose literary eminence Bloom considers unmatched (see 23-24). Shakespeare's plays were not meant to be read in solitude but to be experienced in a theatre,<sup>3</sup> often in the company of friends but certainly as a member of a large community of spectators.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, in the twenty-first century, the shared experience of reading Shakespeare offers ways of communicating with people of highly divergent cultural backgrounds, as seen, for example, in the conferences and proceedings volumes of the Asian Shakespeare Association.<sup>5</sup>

To find out about possible reasons for the canonicity of literary texts I propose to resort to Shakespeare's sonnets as a test case. While the whole sequence of 154 sonnets, first published in the quarto edition of 1609, has become canonical, certain sonnets are time and again chosen to represent the poet in anthologies, while others can only be found in complete editions. The original sequence does not accord a privileged position to any of the sonnets.<sup>6</sup> Almost all of them share the same form, with fourteen lines written as iambic pentameters following a certain,

and fixed, rhyme scheme. This being so, how come it is usually the same sonnets that are quoted, discussed, and reprinted?

In order to determine if canonization depends on timeless aesthetic qualities or on the cultural concerns of certain periods and social environments (or on both), I suggest pursuing a historical approach. Looking at the anthologies compiled in different epochs and addressed to different communities of readers, I intend to compare the selections and to suggest possible reasons for the respective choices and specificities.

This examination will then lead me to a hypothesis concerning textual reasons for canonical preferences: anthologists might prefer sonnets in which a speaker expresses his feelings over those in which he addresses another person. To substantiate this supposition, I propose to classify Shakespeare's sonnets as to communicative categories, on the basis of Roman Jakobson's model of verbal communication. With the help of this classification, I will demonstrate that there is indeed a regularity in anthologists' preferences for certain forms of communication, which may be due to cultural factors, such as a community's particular interests and predispositions, and certainly does not depend on aesthetic value alone. As a side effect, this analysis will offer a fresh perspective on some literary features of Shakespeare's sonnets which often go unnoticed.

## 2. Survey of Poetry Anthologies Featuring Shakespeare's Sonnets

A major stepping-stone in the history of anthologies is Francis Palgrave's popular five-volume *Golden Treasury*, published in 1861. While there had been poetry collections before Palgrave, the modern habit of collecting English poems from various periods in anthologies proliferated after that date. For the purposes of this paper, I have consulted five early anthologies (1783 to 1860) and 33 collections published from 1861 onwards, each of which contained some but not all of Shakespeare's sonnets, with the figures ranging from four sonnets (in Allingham's 1860 *Nightingale Valley* and Whiteford's 1903 *Anthology of English Po-*

etry) to 60 sonnets (in John Wain's 1990 *Oxford Anthology of English Poetry*). My aim was to include most of the British and American anthologies published for studying purposes as well as for the general reader. Concerning pre-Palgrave anthologies, my list basically consists of the collections discussed in Kingsley-Smith, *The Afterlife of Shakespeare's Sonnets*; concerning the post-Palgrave anthologies I proceeded from the anthologies currently found on the international market and accessible through the German inter-library loan system. I then searched prefaces and introductions for references to previous anthologies, which, in turn, informed me about earlier collections. I also included anthologies compiled in continental Europe, in Germany, Poland, and Hungary, for study purposes. This latter group of texts, found on the German book market as well as by means of internet searches, rather has the character of a random sample. The conformity of the results, however, may justify this procedure. Finally, my corpus includes recent collections which (like Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* itself) are intended for the general reader: Bulbeck's *The Illustrated Book of Shakespeare's Verse*, published in 2014 by Flame Tree Publishers (mainly sold in the gift shops of Shakespeare's Birthplace and other sights which are of interest to sightseers), and Allie Esiri's volume titled *Shakespeare for Every Day of the Year*, published in 2019. Another unorthodox collection is that established by the website of the "Poetry Foundation." As this website is open to additions, no date can be given; for the purposes of this research project I proceed from what was there in April 2023.

Altogether, 130 out of the 154 sonnets were chosen by at least one anthologist. 82 sonnets were chosen at least twice. 45 sonnets were printed five times or more, 27 ten times or more (see Appendix I). Most of the collections have an individual note, in that they include sonnets little anthologized elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, all the post-Palgrave anthologies agree on the canonicity of a small number of core texts. There is hardly a collection which does not feature sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"; 73, "That time of year thou mayst in me behold"; and 116, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds."<sup>8</sup>



In other ways as well the lasting influence of Palgrave's collection is evident. Later nineteenth- and twentieth-century collections usually follow the Victorian anthologist in rejecting the procreation sonnets (1-17) altogether and being extremely choosy with regard to the dark lady sonnets.<sup>9</sup> The stability of the canon can be assessed by the fact that seventeen of the twenty sonnets selected by Palgrave belong to the group of 27 sonnets printed in ten or more collections. There is just a small group of sonnets which were apparently popular in Victorian and Edwardian times but then fell out of favour with anthologists. This group includes sonnets 54, 57, and 109. The second half of the twentieth century saw few additions to the "Palgrave canon," most notably sonnets 20 and 130, which had not attracted much interest before. Sonnet 20 was certainly chosen for its take on homoeroticism<sup>10</sup> while 130 obviously tied in with the iconoclastic discourse which had been popular since the modernist movement of the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> The publication of Anthony Burgess's novel *Nothing Like the Sun* in 1964 may well have triggered the adoption of this sonnet into the canon.<sup>12</sup>

To a certain extent, the *Norton Anthology* marks a new departure in that it strives to compress English Literature in its entirety into the book covers of two volumes, which are obviously considered sufficient reading for an undergraduate course on English Literature. The Longman and Broadview anthologies have followed suit. All of these publications give extensive coverage to Shakespeare's sonnets, 32 of which are found in Longman, 42 in Norton, and 45 in Broadview. When we compare the selections, we note that Norton and Broadview have 35 sonnets in common, while Longman shares 27 of its 32 sonnets with Norton. 24 sonnets are found in all three anthologies; we might call them the "Norton canon," which is only partly identical with the "Palgrave canon." Of the 24 sonnets of the Norton canon, only ten also occur in Palgrave, so we may notice that a certain shift has taken place. New sonnets include 1, 12, and 15, as well as 35, 80, 93, 128, and 144, while 64, 104, and 146 are no longer considered essential. It appears that there is a new interest in sonnets conveying biographical information; this

may account for the inclusion of two of the procreation sonnets as well as sonnets referring to personal quarrels and entanglements.

Our examination of anthologies can be supplemented by some statistical evidence concerning scholarly interest, which can be obtained by looking at the MLA bibliographical database.<sup>13</sup> Looking for publications on individual sonnets we find that 23 sonnets are discussed in six or more publications each. This group of sonnets roughly corresponds to the canon established by the anthologies consulted. With regard to three sonnets, 73, 129, and 116, the database yields more than 30 entries each; sonnet 20, with 23 entries, comes next. What we see here is that scholarship, to some extent at least, follows, rather than sets, the canon: many of the articles on 73 and 116 were published to provide pedagogical aids to teachers and lecturers. It is obvious that these two sonnets, with their unexceptionable messages about ageing and true love, and avoidance of the issues of sexuality and the young man's beauty, are teachers' favourites.<sup>14</sup> Sonnets 129 and 20, by contrast, are apparently accorded scholarly treatments for the opposite reason: "Sex sells," and the images chosen by Shakespeare to represent the vagaries of sexual desire are often considered daring and provocative, and they have invited speculation as to the sexual practices referred to. The only significant departure of what can be called the "MLA canon" from that established by the collections lies in the fact that the two mythological sonnets concluding the sequence (153 and 154) are accorded extensive scholarly treatment while they are generally neglected by anthologists.

### 3. Types of Address and Reference

In order to determine possible reasons for these preferences, I propose to start from that sonnet which on the evidence of extant manuscript copies was a seventeenth-century favourite: sonnet 2.<sup>15</sup> Sonnet 2 was one of the eighteen sonnets included in George Kearsley's volume titled *The Beauties of Shakespeare, Selected from his Plays and Poems* (1783). It was also the only Shakespearean poem included in the three-volume *English Anthology*, published in 1793, the focus of which was contemporary, i.e.



the mind of the addressee, he even enters the addressee's mind as projected into the future, telling his readers what the young man's appearance and thoughts might be like twenty or twenty-five years hence.<sup>16</sup> The creation of such a point of view certainly testifies to the abilities of a dramatist used to fashioning the mental make-up of so many different characters.

Once we add the sonnet's formal perfection, it becomes obvious that with sonnet 2 Shakespeare was at the height of his poetical powers, and there is no wonder that readers were so fascinated by it that they took manuscript copies and included it in anthologies. What, then, is wrong with sonnet 2? Why has it fallen out of favour with nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first century readers and anthologists, after having been so popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? To answer this question, I propose to look at two sonnets which are regularly found in anthologies and on reading lists, sonnets 30 and 116.

Let us begin with sonnet 30:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought  
 I summon up remembrance of things past,  
 I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,  
 And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste;  
 Then can I drown an eye (unused to flow)  
 For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,  
 And weep afresh love's long-since-cancelled woe,  
 And moan th' expense of many a vanished sight;  
 Then can I grieve at grievances fore-gone,  
 And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er  
 The sad account of fore-bemoanèd moan,  
 Which I new pay as if not paid before.  
     But if the while I think on thee (dear friend)  
     All losses are restored, and sorrows end. (*Complete Sonnets and Poems* 441)

The speaker indulges in memories about friends who have died and love affairs which have ended unhappily, before complimenting his friend on compensating for the loss of previous friends and lovers. The subjectivity of the speaker's feelings is emphasized through the initial "when" clause. It is in "sessions of sweet silent thought" that he regrets

the loss of friends departed and takes to crying while his eyes are “unused to flow” at other times.

Comparing the two sonnets, we notice that the speaker of sonnet 2 does not refer to himself at all. All of his messages are second-person messages. The speaker does not just give advice to his addressee but even takes possession of his mind. The speaker of sonnet 30, by contrast, provides a chain of first-person messages, indulging in that kind of self-pity which is also found later, for example, in Milton’s “When I consider how my light is spent” (Milton 83-84), Keats’s “Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art” (Keats 452), and Tennyson’s “But the tender grace of a day that is dead / Will never come back to me” (from “Break, break, break,” Tennyson 244). Is it, we may ask, that anthologists prefer poems containing first-person messages to those which contain addresses directed at another individual? May this preference perhaps be informed by poetic conventions which post-date Shakespeare, so that sonnet 30 to present-day readers represents what they are looking for when opening a book of poetry?

Let us proceed to sonnet 116. Discussing what love, i.e. true love, is, the sonnet can be categorized with the tradition of poems defining an abstract concept. The speaker uses images of marriage, navigation, and harvesting to convey his message that real or true love will last until doomsday. Comparing “116” to sonnet 2, we may notice that both poems convey a message, but that the message of sonnet 2 is much more complex and original. Is it that readers and anthologists prefer a commonplace idea to an original one? At any rate, the message is more abstract and does not involve an addressee. The speaker only briefly refers to himself in the final couplet.

It appears obvious that it is not for reasons of formal quality that sonnets 30 and 116 are preferred to sonnet 2. From the points of view of form and imagery, all of them reach the highest standards of poetic excellence. The three sonnets, however, seem to represent three different communicative modes. My suggestion that anthologists prefer sonnets involving first-person messages, or non-personal statements, to those which address a second person, is so far only a tentative one, based on

a reading of three sonnets out of a corpus of 154. I therefore propose to classify all of the sonnets according to their modes of communication, making use of the model of language functions established by Roman Jakobson in his seminal essay, "Linguistics and Poetics" (1960). Jakobson defines the "constitutive factors in any speech event, in any act of verbal communication" (21) as follows:

The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to [...], graspable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE [...] common to the addresser and addressee [...]; and finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication. (21)

As Jakobson explains, "each of these six factors determines a different function of language". In any message, these functions are placed "in a different hierarchical order", and "the verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the predominant function" (22). Jakobson calls the function focused on the context "referential," on the addresser "emotive" (22), on the addressee "conative" (23), on the contact "phatic" (24), on the code "metalingual" (25), and on "the message as such" "poetic" (25).<sup>17</sup> If we apply this model to the three sonnets studied above, it is obvious that in sonnet 2 the conative function predominates, as opposed to the emotive function in sonnet 30, and the referential function in sonnet 116. Other sonnets (for example, 18 and 130) are primarily devoted to the art of writing sonnets and thus fulfil a metalingual function, according to Jakobson's terminology; they could be called "poetological" or self-referential.

While not all of the sonnets lend themselves easily to this kind of classification, it is often possible to determine a predominant function on the basis of the quantity of pronouncements about either the speaker, the addressee, or a non-personal referent. In sonnet 10, for example, the addressee is clearly focused on, even though the speaker also briefly refers to himself in lines 9 and 13. All of the statements have an appellative or "conative" character. Sonnet 12, by contrast, can be classified

as emotive, as lines 1 to 8 exclusively refer to the speaker's perceptions and thoughts. It is only in lines 9 and 10 that the addressee comes into play. A similar assessment can be made with regard to sonnet 15, which in lines 1 to 8 again refers to perceptions and thoughts of the speaker and only turns to the addressee from line 9 onwards. Sonnet 32 raises the issue of what the young man should do with the speaker's poetry after the latter's decease. While the sonnet contains both a self-referential ("my poetry is no good") and a conative message ("please preserve my poetry as a token of my love for you"), the conative function appears to be predominant. In sonnet 41 the conative function predominates as well, as lines 1 to 6 and 9 to 12 contain statements about the addressee, the young man, even though a woman, possibly the dark lady,<sup>18</sup> is referred to in lines 7, 8 and 13. In sonnet 73 all of the pronouncements of lines 1 to 12 concern the speaker's aging process, so that in spite of the fact that the statements are addressed to another person in lines 1, 5, and 9, and in spite of the two last lines which refer to this addressee, the sonnet is predominantly emotive.<sup>19</sup>

According to my reading, first-person, or emotive, messages seem to be predominant in 26 sonnets, while 33 sonnets (including most of the procreation sonnets) clearly privilege second-person, conative, statements (see Appendix II). Eight sonnets refer to either the young man or the dark lady in the third person; they can thus be called referential. In two sonnets (50 and 51) the speaker's horse is the character whose train of mind the speaker tries to delineate. Another type of referential predominance is found in ten sonnets which discuss a non-personal referent, such as true love in sonnet 116 and "lust in action" in sonnet 129. Sonnets 153 and 154 tell a mythological story and thus form a third type of referentiality. Fourteen sonnets are self-referential. As nine sonnets refer to the speaker's entanglement with two other persons (the young man and the dark lady, and the young man and the rival poet) and cannot easily be classified as either predominantly conative or referential, I propose to relegate them to a category of their own.

We are then left with a large group of sonnets which resist a classification, as first- and second-person messages are set side by side: the

emotive and conative functions are clearly of equal importance, and subtly intertwined with one another. As an example, I should like to quote sonnet 61:

Is it thy will thy image should keep open  
 My heavy eyelids to the weary night?  
 Dost thou desire my slumbers should be broken,  
 While shadows like to thee do mock my sight?  
 Is it thy spirit that thou send'st from thee  
 So far from home into my deeds to pry,  
 To find out shames and idle hours in me,  
 The scope and tenure of thy jealousy?  
 O no, thy love, though much, is not so great:  
 It is my love that keeps mine eye awake,  
 Mine own true love that doth my rest defeat,  
 To play the watchman ever for thy sake.  
     For thee watch I, whilst thou dost wake elsewhere,  
     From me far off, with others all too near. (*Complete Sonnets and Poems* 503)

Throughout this sonnet thou- and I- pronouncements are subtly interwoven. "Thy will" (line 1) relates to "my heavy eyelids," the young man's desire may break the speaker's slumbers (line 3). His spirit may pry into the speaker's deeds (lines 5-6), to find out instances of idleness in him (line 7), to feed his, the young man's, jealousy (line 8). The dialogical quality of the sonnet is enhanced when the speaker's suppositions are refuted in lines 9 to 14, with "thy love" (line 9) being replaced by "my love" (line 10). Both the speaker and the young man are awake at night-time, but while the speaker is "watching" anxiously, the young man is "waking," i.e. engaged in some kind of party.<sup>20</sup> The supposition of the young man's jealousy in line 8 is replaced by a hint at the speaker's jealousy in the last line of the sonnet. As Helen Vendler notes, we are then in a position to construe "the octave [lines 1-8] as a projection of the speaker's own agony" (289).<sup>21</sup>

While the young man is separated from the speaker (we may be allowed to say: the poet) by physical distance, he is inextricably linked to him by means of language, metre, and rhyme. We may even say that rhetoric and poetry serve as means of sublimating erotic desire. While



the poet's love cannot find fulfilment in a physical way, he manages to intertwine himself with the young man in subtle language games, to become one with him in the construction of a sonnet.<sup>22</sup>

In the body of Shakespeare's sonnets this interweaving of first- and second person messages recurs again and again; in fact, it is 50 sonnets altogether which, I think, can be classified thus. If we were looking not for the "predominance" but just the prevalence of the emotive and conative functions, the count would be even higher, as the thou-perspective is rarely completely absent from the poems predominantly emotive. According to Giorgio Melchiori, the Shakespearean sequence contains 21 "I-less sonnets" (19) and 33 "non-You sonnets" (28-29).<sup>23</sup> While fifteen of the sonnets without a first-person pronoun also belong to my list of conative sonnets, only eight of the 26 emotive sonnets do not contain a second-person pronoun.<sup>24</sup> In eighteen of them, the poet's concentration on himself is supplemented by an address to the young man or dark lady.

This rhetorical strategy may to some extent have been inspired by Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* cycle, which reports a kind of dialogue Astrophil has with Stella. In most of the sonnets, however, Astrophil refers to Stella in the third person. By my count, this applies to 66 sonnets out of the corpus of 108, while Stella is addressed in 21 sonnets. Astrophil is telling his readers the story of his unrequited desire for, and Platonic love affair with, this courtly lady. By contrast, the rhetoric interweaving described with regard to sonnet 61 seems to be a feature which is unique to Shakespeare.<sup>25</sup> We may well assume that it is Shakespeare's competence as a dramatist which makes him create these I-and-thou exchanges, and they certainly show the most original side of Shakespeare the poet. As Sandra L. Bermann points out, "Shakespeare's portrait of an 'I' and a 'thou' distinguishes his sonnets almost as radically from his English predecessors as from Petrarch himself" (73).

This subjective assessment can be supplemented by some hard statistical data collected by Melchiori (see 198): computerized concordances of the sonnet sequences by Sidney, Daniel, Drayton, Spenser, and

Shakespeare show that 14.17% of all the words of Shakespeare's sonnets are personal pronominal forms (like *I, me, myself, my, mine*, etc.). The proportion of pronominal forms used by Shakespeare is higher than that of the other four sequences but not strikingly so; the average being 13.2%. Even more significant are the proportions of first-person, second-person, and third-person pronouns: while in the five sequences the average proportion of first-person pronouns is 43.8%, it is 40.3% in the case of Shakespeare. The average proportion of second-person pronouns is 25.6%; in Shakespeare's sonnets it is 37.2%. Concerning third-person pronouns the average figure is 30.6%, and 22.5% in Shakespeare. There are two conclusions we can draw from these figures: first, that intersubjective communication is central to Elizabethan sonneteers in general, and, second, that Shakespeare accords particular prominence to second-person addresses and is less interested in third-person propositions than other Elizabethan poets.<sup>26</sup> We can add that, while the addressees of Sidney's sonnets include Cupid, the moon, Morpheus, hope, a kiss, a sparrow, absence etc., 120 of Shakespeare's 128 sonnets which contain a second-person pronoun are addressed to the young man or the dark lady.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. Canonical Preferences

To conclude our investigation, it now remains to correlate our categorization of the 154 sonnets with the frequency list. How many sonnets from each of our categories did our anthologists choose?

The answers are as follows: if we proceed from the list of 45 sonnets which were anthologized five times or more, we see that thirteen of them focus on first-person messages, seven on second-person messages, another ten belong to those which express the mutuality described. Two poems feature third-person messages, two are about triangular relationships, four are self-referential, and seven sonnets (out of a total of ten) express non-personal reasoning. We can notice a strong bias in favour of first-person-message and non-personal poems.

The figures are even more striking if we proceed to the shorter list of 27 sonnets which were chosen to represent Shakespeare in ten or more anthologies: seven of the 27 sonnets focus on first-person messages, two refer to the young man or the dark lady in the third person, four of the sonnets are self-referential and seven express non-personal reasoning. By contrast, there are only two second-person sonnets and five expressing I-and-thou mutuality.

What are the reasons for this universal preference for sonnets which focus on first-person and non-personal messages? The roots of this practice may lie with Palgrave's phenomenally successful *Golden Treasury*.<sup>28</sup> Out of the twenty sonnets chosen by Palgrave, six focus on first-person and two on second-person messages. The I-and-thou mutuality is found in four of the poems anthologized, two are self-referential, and six convey non-personal wisdom. Three of the eighteen sonnets included by Kearsley in 1783, by contrast, belong to the first-person group, three to the second-person, three to the I-and-thou mutuality, while five are non-personal.<sup>29</sup> We see that the two anthologies share a bias in favour of non-personal sonnets, while Palgrave also privileges those in which the first person predominates, in keeping with the *penchant* for Romanticism which Palgrave's collection exhibits. Romantic poets, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, are lavishly represented. These Romantic poets obviously corresponded to Victorian notions of what poetry should be like; and poems in which a poet expresses his "Weltschmerz," his suffering caused by the ways of the world and the human condition, fit in well with this Romantic discourse.<sup>30</sup> As Emrys Jones notes in the introduction to his *New Oxford Book of Sixteenth-Century Verse*, Palgrave's anthology "had the influence it did because he was fully in sympathy with the main direction of Romantic literary theory" (xxvi).<sup>31</sup>

As stated above, most of the twenty sonnets chosen by Palgrave still constitute the staple of contemporary anthologies.<sup>32</sup> It would be wrong, however, to lay the blame for the canon's bias on Palgrave alone. The preference for first-person sonnets and sonnets containing non-per-

sonal reasoning became even more pronounced in some of the later collections. Robert Whiteford, an American anthologist, included four Shakespearean sonnets in his 1903 *Anthology of English Poetry*, three of which contain first-person messages, while one, sonnet 116, falls into the category of non-personal reasoning. In the German anthology published in 1910 by Westermann-Verlag (edited by Max Förster), three of the five sonnets chosen focus on first-person messages (30, 33, 73), one is self-referential (18), and one is non-personal (116).

In other early twentieth-century anthologies, this imbalance is not that obvious. Arthur Quiller-Couch, in particular, presented a rather original collection in his *Oxford Book of English Verse*, first published in 1900. Out of the twenty sonnets chosen, five are first-person-sonnets, three focus on the second person, six express I-and-thou mutuality, two are self-referential, and four contain abstract reasoning. Similarly, E. K. Chambers's collection of "Fifty Sonnets" (676), contains twelve first-person, nine second-person, and fourteen I-and-thou sonnets, as well as three third-person, six self-referential, and six sonnets containing abstract reasoning.

The basic tendency in favour of first-person sonnets as well as sonnets containing self-referential statements and non-personal reasoning was reinforced, however, in the *Norton Anthology*, the later Oxford anthologies (Hadow, Hollander/Kermode, Leonard, Peacock, and Ricks), and Blaisdell's collection of *Elizabethan Poetry* (2005), and transcended national boundaries: in anthologies published for study purposes in Germany (e.g. Meller/Sühnel), Poland (Mazur/Bela), and India (Chaudhuri), the biases mentioned are much in evidence. Some recent collections discard first-person sonnets as well and concentrate on self-referential and non-personal sonnets, rendering their choices even less representative, for example, Ricks, and Löffler/Späth. The *Bedford Anthology of World Literature* (2004) includes four Shakespearean sonnets, two of them self-referential (18, 130), and two non-personal (116, 129). While this publication venture has been hailed as ground-breaking in

its extensive inclusion of non-European writing, the choice of Shakespeare sonnets selected to represent European literature cannot be considered either representative or revolutionary.

Looking at the “Norton canon” of the 24 sonnets shared by Norton with two other college anthologies, Longman and Broadview, we cannot observe any significant change with regard to the communicative categories researched: in six sonnets, the first-person point of view is predominant, four privilege the second person, three express I-and-thou mutuality, four are self-referential, and another four non-personal. Two sonnets concern triangular relationships, and one is a third-person sonnet. While some of the sonnets from the “Palgrave canon” have been replaced, the biases analysed remain intact.

If we discard the eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century anthologies consulted and focus on the anthologies from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the number of I-and-thou sonnets found in at least five anthologies is reduced from ten to four, and not a single one of the second-person or I-and-thou poems scores ten or more entries, i.e. 83 of the 154 Shakespearean sonnets are not represented in the group of sixteen sonnets printed most often. Looking at the three sonnets which found favour with Victorian anthologists but were dropped later, we may also note that two (57, 109) express I-and-thou mutuality while one (54) focuses on a second-person address.

Recent non-scholarly publications, though, have to some extent widened, or re-opened the canon. The Flame Tree collection of 2014 includes six sonnets not anthologized elsewhere, three of which belong to the I-and-thou group. The internet-based “Poetry Foundation” also includes some hitherto uncanonized sonnets from the second-person and the I-and-thou categories. Both collections contain sonnets which had been anthologized in Victorian and Edwardian anthologies but had been neglected since, e.g. 53, 54, 57, 98, 111, 148. It may be of some significance that these two publications address general readers, not scholars or students—who are obviously considered to be fixated to established traditions of scholarship.

## 5. Conclusions: Textual Reasons for Canonicity

By way of conclusion we can first state that, while the habit of publishing selections from Shakespeare's 154 sonnets started with Kearsley's *Beauties of Shakespeare* in 1783, it was with Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* that a certain canon of sonnets emerged which in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would be anthologized over and over again. This "Palgrave canon" would be slightly modified in the second half of the twentieth century, with sonnets 20 and 130 entering the canon, while a few others were dropped. A certain shift took place with the publication of college anthologies of English Literature like the *Norton Anthology*. The "Norton canon," however, retains a core group of around ten sonnets which had already been part of the *Golden Treasury* selection. New departures are taken by certain non-scholarly anthologies.

Secondly, our investigation has shown that, from Palgrave onwards, anthologies display a marked preference for three categories of sonnets: those in which the speaker expresses his feelings in first-person statements, those which discuss certain issues from a non-personal point of view, and those which focus on the art of sonnet-writing itself. These categories correspond to the "emotive," the "referential," and the "metalingual" functions of language in the communicative model established by Roman Jakobson. "Conative," or second-person sonnets, as well as sonnets which set emotive and conative pronouncements side by side (the two groups which together form the bulk of the Shakespearean corpus), however, have largely been neglected.

With regard to the preference given to first-person and non-personal sonnets, the aesthetic values of Romanticism which informed Palgrave's selection apparently continue to set expectations as to what poetical excellence amounts to.<sup>33</sup> There may, however, be additional, and more specific, reasons to account for this preference: lovers of Shakespeare's plays have turned to the sonnets to find out about the dramatist's inner self and therefore focused on first-person sonnets,<sup>34</sup> overlooking the fact that Shakespeare's genius is not least due to his ability to bypass his own inner self to enter into the minds of his characters.

Considering the whole corpus of sonnets we may also argue that Shakespeare's inner self was inextricably bound up with that of other persons, and that, like the plays, the sonnets testify to what Keats called Shakespeare's "negative capability" (Houghton 62).

Readers have also searched through the sonnets for spiritual guidance. According to a traditional assumption, a great poet such as Shakespeare must have been possessed with incomparable wisdom, inferior only to that of the Bible.<sup>35</sup> It was the non-personal sonnets which most clearly fulfilled that demand.<sup>36</sup> Sonnet 116 was read and studied as conveying the truth about true love and offered to young people as a help to get a proper direction in life.<sup>37</sup> Such a reading could be compared to the mis-reading of the famous speech delivered by Jacques in *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players [...]" (2.7.139-40, Riverside ed.) etc. This speech was learned by heart by generations of school children as conveying Shakespeare's wisdom; its dramatic context, which in a way refutes the pessimistic message conveyed by this speech, was not taken into account.

The preference given to self-referential sonnets also requires an explanation. When I studied English in the 1980s, sonnets 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day") and 130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun") were taught as being "anti-Petrarchist," and Shakespeare was praised for boldly and provocatively breaking away from Petrarchan conventions; since then I have repeatedly come across this interpretation. In view of the sonneteering output of other Elizabethan poets, however, I would like to argue that as an iconoclast Shakespeare has been overrated, as witty departures from Petrarchan conventions had become a staple of Elizabethan sonnets even before Shakespeare; Sir Philip Sidney and Michael Drayton, for example, could also be called anti-Petrarchists, for similar reasons (see Bermann 86). The I-and-thou poems discussed certainly constitute a more significant departure from Petrarca, most of whose sonnets to Laura are first-person messages, detailing the poet's own woes and frustrations. However we account for the anthologies' preferences, it is obvious that

they all convey a very biased idea of what the sonnets are about. Shakespeare was made to conform to expectations about great poetry, and this way reduced to a size which readers from the Victorian Age onwards could, and can, handle.<sup>38</sup>

What are the results of our investigation with regard to the more general questions about canonicity raised initially? One result is that there are indeed textual features which lead to a sonnet's adoption into an anthology and which initiate a tradition of canonization. These features, however, obviously do not indicate any timeless aesthetic quality. Changes in the canon are rather due to the impact of cultural movements like Romanticism or a more recent interest in iconoclasm and non-heteronormative sexuality.<sup>39</sup>

Some of the editors of modern anthologies explicitly refer to changing times as the reason for altering the selection of texts included. As editor of the *Oxford Anthology of English Poetry*, John Wain speaks of the "gradual obsolescence of [...] *English Verse*, edited by W. Peacock" (which had also been published by Oxford University Press) and claims that his "new collection" is meant to "serve the needs of a different time" (xix). Meyer Abrams, who, in the six edition, repudiates the charge that the editors of the *Norton Anthology* "reproduce, or even help establish, the traditional 'canon' of English literature," asserts that the selection follows the requirements of schools and universities: "Some texts, which our canvass of teachers showed to be assigned infrequently or not at all, have been replaced by others which were more in demand" (xxx). Emrys Jones, the editor of the *New Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse*, states that Edmund Chambers's, his predecessor's, volume "has receded further into the past" and "become more obviously not just a product but also an expression of its own time" (xxv). With regard to Shakespeare's sonnets, however, it is hard to see in what way Jones's selection of 43 sonnets (which to a large extent follows Chambers's choice) improves upon Chambers's 50: if we take the categories established in this contribution into account, we see that Chambers's selection is clearly more balanced and representative than more recent anthologies (with the possible exception of Jones's own).



We can conclude that a reexamination of a received canon might alert us to aspects overlooked by previous pedagogues and anthologists. Texts which were discarded or forgotten could prove to be more representative of their author and period than canonized works. In the case of Shakespeare's sonnets a reexamination of the established canon has made us aware of the technique of mingling emotive and conative messages, which informs a considerable part of the sequence. Shakespeare's sonnets thus provide another example of the truism that it is often the uncanonized texts which turn out to be the most interesting ones, as they correspond to our previous expectations least, and may thus teach us most about cultural history and—possibly—the human condition.

Universität Osnabrück

### Appendix I: List of Sonnets Found in Anthologies

- 1 Chambers, Penguin, Norton, Kodó, Longman, Broadview, Foundation
- 2 Kearsley, *English Anthology*, Chambers, Jones, Broadview
- 3 Chambers, Blaisdell, Norton 8/10,<sup>40</sup> Esiri
- 4 Esiri
- 5 Chaudhuri, Norton 6, Esiri
- 7 Dyce
- 8 *MLA*: 7
- 9 Kearsley
- 12 Kearsley, Dyce, Chambers, Peacock, Hollander/Kermode, Norton, Jones, Mazur/Bela, Kodó, Longman, Broadview, *MLA*: 7
- 14 Esiri
- 15 Kearsley, Chambers, Norton, Jones, Clark/Healy, Blaisdell, Longman, Broadview, Foundation
- 16 Penguin, Broadview
- 17 Chambers, Blaisdell, Flame Tree
- 18 Kearsley, Pitman, Palgrave, Quiller-Couch, Leonard, Herrig/Förster, Peacock, Chambers, Penguin, Meller/Sühnel, Reclam, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Chaudhuri, Jones, Norton, Clark/Healy, Ricks, Löffler/Späth, Bedford, Blaisdell, Kodó, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Flame Tree, Esiri, Foundation, *MLA*: 18

- 19 Kearsley, Dyce, Chambers, Hollander/Kermode, Wain, Jones, Clark/Healy, Mazur/Bela, Norton 8/10, Broadview, Esiri. *MLA*: 7
- 20 Hollander/Kermode, Wain, Jones, Norton, Löffler/Späth, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, *MLA*: 23
- 21 Chambers, Flame Tree
- 22 Chambers, Penguin, Flame Tree
- 23 Jones, Norton, Broadview, Flame Tree
- 25 Lofft, Pitman, Chambers, Wain, Flame Tree, Esiri, Foundation,
- 27 Kearsley, Pitman, Dyce, Chambers, Jones, Blaisdell, Esiri
- 28 Chambers
- 29 Pitman, Dyce, Allingham, Palgrave, Hunt/Lee, Henley, Quiller-Couch, Whiteford, Hadow, Symons, Peacock, Chambers, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Chaudhuri, Jones, Blaisdell, Norton, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Esiri, Foundation, *MLA*: 14
- 30 Dyce, Palgrave, Trench, Henley, Quiller-Couch, Whiteford, Leonard, Symons, Herrig/Förster, Peacock, Chambers, Penguin, Meller/Sühnel, Reclam, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Jones, Norton, Clark/Healy, Blaisdell, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Esiri, Foundation, *MLA*: 8
- 31 Quiller-Couch, Chambers, Longman
- 32 Dyce, Palgrave, Peacock, Chambers, Jones, Foundation
- 33 Dyce, Hunt/Lee, Leonard, Herrig/Förster, Peacock, Chambers, Penguin, Meller/Sühnel, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Jones, Norton, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Esiri, Foundation
- 34 Chambers, Wain
- 35 Wain, Jones, Norton, Longman, Broadview
- 36 Clark/Healy, Broadview
- 37 Flame Tree
- 38 Pitman, Flame Tree
- 39 Kearsley
- 40 Chambers, Wain
- 41 Wain
- 42 Wain
- 43 Flame Tree
- 47 Flame Tree
- 49 Wain
- 50 Wain
- 52 Lofft, Dyce, Allingham, Chambers, Wain
- 53 Henley, Quiller-Couch, Peacock, Chambers, Hollander/Kermode, Wain, Jones, Ricks, Mazur/Bela, Flame Tree, Foundation
- 54 Dyce, Trench, Quiller-Couch, Peacock, Chambers, Chaudhuri, Flame Tree

55 Dyce, Chambers, Penguin, Meller/Sühnel, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Chaudhuri, Jones, Norton, Ricks, Löffler/Späth, Blaisdell, Kodó, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Esiri, Foundation, *MLA*: 7

56 Flame Tree

57 Ellis, Dyce, Allingham, Palgrave, Quiller-Couch, Symons, Peacock, Reclam, Jones, Flame Tree

59 Penguin

60 Dyce, Palgrave, Symons, Peacock, Chambers, Penguin, Wain, Jones, Norton, Clark/Healy, Ricks, Flame Tree, Longman, Broadview, Esiri, Foundation, *MLA*: 8

61 Flame Tree

62 Wain, Norton

63 Chambers

64 Kearsley, Lofft, Dyce, Palgrave, Peacock, Chambers, Reclam, Hollander/Kermode, Wain, Chaudhuri, Jones, Blaisdell, Mazur/Bela, Broadview, Flame Tree, Foundation

65 Kearsley, Palgrave, Symons, Peacock, Reclam, Wain, Chaudhuri, Jones, Norton, Broadview, Esiri

66 Dyce, Palgrave, Peacock, Chambers, Reclam, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Jones, Blaisdell, Foundation, *MLA*: 11

68 Dyce, Chambers

70 Kearsley, Wain

71 Pitman, Dyce, Palgrave, Hunt/Lee, Henley, Peacock, Chambers, Meller/Sühnel, Leeson, Wain, Jones, Norton, Longman, Broadview, Esiri, Foundation, *MLA*: 14

72 Wain

73 Kearsley, Lofft, Pitman, Dyce, Palgrave, Hunt/Lee, Henley, Quiller-Couch, Whiteford, Hadow, Symons, Herrig/Förster, Peacock, Chambers, Penguin, Meller/Sühnel, Reclam, Hollander/Kermode, Wain, Chaudhuri, Jones, Norton, Clark/Healy, Ricks, Löffler/Späth, Blaisdell, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Flame Tree, Esiri, Foundation, *MLA*: 39

74 Chambers, Wain, Norton, Broadview

75 Kodó, Flame Tree

76 Dyce, Wain, Jones

77 Meller/Sühnel

78 Lofft, Chaudhuri

79 Lofft

80 Wain, Norton, Longman, Broadview

81 Chambers, Wain

85 Norton

86 Hollander/Kermode, Wain, Jones, Ricks, Mazur/Bela, Longman

87 Palgrave, Quiller-Couch, Leonard, Peacock, Chambers, Reclam, Hollander/Kermode, Wain, Jones, Norton, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Flame Tree

88 Wain, Flame Tree

89 Wain

90 Pitman, Dyce, Henley, Quiller-Couch, Peacock, Chambers, Wain, Jones

91 Pitman, Dyce, Blaisdell, Flame Tree

93 Dyce, Norton 8/10, Longman, Broadview

94 Kearsley, Palgrave, Quiller-Couch, Symons, Peacock, Penguin, Reclam, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Jones, Norton, Clark/Healy, Ricks, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Esiri, Foundation, *MLA*: 12

95 Dyce

97 Dyce, Palgrave, Henley, Quiller-Couch, Symons, Peacock, Chambers, Penguin, Reclam, Hollander/Kermode, Wain, Chaudhuri, Jones, Norton, Mazur/Bela, Broadview, Flame Tree, Esiri, Foundation

98 Kearsley, Pitman, Dyce, Allingham, Trench, Hunt/Lee, Quiller-Couch, Symons, Chambers, Wain, Jones, Norton, Broadview, Flame Tree, Esiri

99 Pitman, Chambers, Wain, Esiri

100 Chambers

102 Pitman, Dyce, Henley, Quiller-Couch, Symons, Chambers

104 Palgrave, Henley, Quiller-Couch, Hadow, Symons, Peacock, Chambers, Penguin, Reclam, Wain, Jones, Longman, Flame Tree, Esiri, *MLA*: 7

105 Dyce, Norton, Broadview

106 Dyce, Palgrave, Henley, Quiller-Couch, Symons, Leonard, Peacock, Chambers, Penguin, Reclam, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Jones, Norton, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Flame Tree, Foundation

107 Dyce, Peacock, Chambers, Hollander/Kermode, Wain, Jones, Norton, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Foundation

108 Dyce

109 Dyce, Palgrave, Henley, Quiller-Couch, Peacock, Chambers, Wain, Broadview

110 Symons, Peacock, Chambers, Wain, Chaudhuri, Jones, Norton, Broadview, Foundation

111 Dyce, Hunt/Lee, Symons, Peacock, Wain, Foundation

112 Jones

113 Dyce

114 Dyce

115 Flame Tree

116 Kearsley, Lofft, Dyce, Palgrave, Hunt/Lee, Henley, Quiller-Couch, Whiteford, Hadow, Symons, Leonard, Herrig/Förster, Peacock, Chambers, Penguin, Meller/Sühnel, Reclam, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Chaudhuri, Jones, Norton, Clark/Healy, Ricks, Löffler/Späth, Bedford, Blaisdell, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Foundation, Flame Tree, Esiri, Foundation, *MLA*: 31

117 Dyce, Broadview

119 Peacock, Wain

120 Wain

121 Hollander/Kermode, Wain, Jones, Clark/Healy, Mazur/Bela, Foundation

- 123 Kearsley, Chambers, Wain, Longman  
 124 Jones, Longman  
 125 Chaudhuri, Jones, Foundation  
 126 Norton, Longman, *MLA*: 7  
 127 Wain, Norton, Broadview, Esiri  
 128 Hunt/Lee, Wain, Norton, Longman, Broadview, *MLA*: 11  
 129 Dyce, Trench, Quiller-Couch, Symons, Chambers, Penguin, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Jones, Norton, Clark/Healy, Ricks, Löffler/Späth, Bedford, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Foundation, *MLA*: 33  
 130 Meller/Sühnel, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Chaudhuri, Jones, Norton, Clark/Healy, Ricks, Löffler/Späth, Bedford, Blaisdell, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Flame Tree, Esiri, Foundation, *MLA*: 13  
 132 Chambers, Wain, Flame Tree  
 133 Wain, Foundation  
 134 Wain  
 135 Hollander/Kermode, Norton, Broadview  
 136 Broadview  
 137 Flame Tree  
 138 Kearsley, Hollander/Kermode, Wain, Jones, Norton, Clark/Healy, Ricks, Löffler/Späth, Blaisdell, Kodó, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview, Esiri, *MLA*: 15  
 139 Foundation  
 140 Jones  
 141 Wain  
 142 Foundation  
 143 Symons, Broadview  
 144 Hollander/Kermode, Chaudhuri, Norton, Clark/Healy, Mazur/Bela, Longman, Broadview  
 145 Lofft, Esiri  
 146 Palgrave, Trench, Henley, Quiller-Couch, Symons, Peacock, Chambers, Penguin, Meller/Sühnel, Reclam, Hollander/Kermode, Leeson, Wain, Norton, Löffler/Späth, Mazur/Bela, Foundation, *MLA*: 15  
 147 Wain, Chaudhuri, Norton, Flame Tree, Broadview, Foundation  
 148 Palgrave, Peacock, Reclam, Flame Tree  
 150 Wain  
 151 Wain, Jones, Clark/Healy  
 152 Norton, Longman  
 153 Kearsley, Broadview, *MLA*: 7  
 154 Hadow, Broadview, Esiri, *MLA*: 9  
 (130 sonnets anthologized altogether, of which 48 only once)

## Appendix II: Statistical Survey of Sonnet Categories

Sonnets anthologized five times or more:

1, **12**, 15, **18**, **19**, 20, 25, 27, **29**, **30**, 32, **33**, 35, 52, **53**, 54, **55**, **57**, **60**, **64**, **65**, **66**, **71**, **73**, 86, 87, 90, **94**, **97**, **98**, **104**, **106**, **107**, 109, 110, 111, **116**, 121, 128, **129**, **130**, **138**, 144, **146**, 147 (45 sonnets; 27 sonnets ten times or more, in bold)

first-person messages:

12, 14, 15, 25, 28, 29, 30, 33, 44, 47, 62, 66, 73, 97, 102, 110, 111, 113, 115, 118, 119, 121, 124, 137, 147, 148 (26 sonnets)

anthologized five times or more: **12**, 15, 25, **29**, **30**, **33**, **66**, **73**, **97**, 110, 111, 121, 147 (13 sonnets)

second-person messages:

1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16, 20, 32, 35, 40, 41, 48, 53, 54, 69, 70, 77, 82, 84, 93, 95, 96, 104, 126, 131, 132, 139 (33 sonnets)

anthologized 5 times or more: 1, 20, 32, 35, **53**, 54, **104** (7 sonnets)

I-and-thou mutuality:

22, 24, 26, 27, 31, 34, 36, 37, 39, 43, 45, 46, 49, 52, 57, 58, 61, 71, 72, 74, 75, 78, 81, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 98, 99, 103, 107, 108, 109, 112, 114, 117, 120, 122, 125, 128, 136, 140, 141, 142, 149, 150, 151, 152 (50 sonnets)

anthologized 5 times or more: 27, 52, **57**, **71**, **87**, 90, **98**, **107**, 109, 128 (10 sonnets)

third-person messages:

19, 63, 67, 68, 105 (young man); 127, 138, 145 (dark lady/ Anne Hathaway), 50, 51 (horse) (10 sonnets)

anthologized 5 times or more: **19**, **138** (2 sonnets)

self-referential content:

17, 18, 21, 23, 38, 55, 59, 76, 83, 85, 100, 101, 106, 130 (14 sonnets)

anthologized 5 times or more: **18**, **55**, **106**, **130** (4 sonnets)

triangular relationships:

42, 79, 80, 86, 133, 134, 135, 143, 144 (9 sonnets)

anthologized 5 times or more: 86, 144 (2 sonnets)

non-personal reasoning:

5, 56, 60, 64, 65, 94, 116, 123, 129, 146 (10 sonnets)

anthologized 5 times or more: **60**, **64**, **65**, **94**, **116**, **129**, **146** (7 sonnets)

mythological story:

153, 154 (2 sonnets)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>On processes of canon formation in antiquity see, for example, Easterling.

<sup>2</sup>For an exemplary analysis of factors involved in canon formation see v. Heydebrand and Winko's discussion of the processes of the canonization of the poetry and prose of German poet Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (222-50).

<sup>3</sup>The traditional notion that Shakespeare's plays were intended for theatrical performance alone has lately been challenged (see, for example, Erne). We should be aware, though, that even the activity of reading Shakespeare has often been envisaged as a communal experience. Heminge and Condell, the Folio editors, referred potential readers to the guidance of "other of his [Shakespeare's] Friends" and invited them to become guides to others, in turn (*The Riverside Shakespeare* 95).

<sup>4</sup>The sonnets were not meant to be read in solitude either; on their social function, see Kullmann, "The Construction of Female Nobility"; and Kullmann, "Poeticising Emotion," esp. 254-55.

<sup>5</sup>As Poonam Trivedi, Paromita Chakravarti and Ted Motohashi point out in their introduction to the volume *Asian Interventions in Global Shakespeare: "All the World's His Stage"*: "In a world of increasing movement of human capital [...] where cultures are dynamic and not discrete, if Shakespeare does continue it is because through him and his words people can perceive, articulate and critique the shifting deflections of life" (5-6).

<sup>6</sup>A case has been made that certain sonnets got a privileged position by their arrangement on the printed page (e.g. Hutchison 50), but the evidence is not conclusive (see Kingsley-Smith 39-40).

<sup>7</sup>An exception is the bilingual publication of *English Sonnets* which was issued by the German publishing house of Reclam (ed. Kranz), where the selection of Shakespeare's sonnets closely follows that of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*.

<sup>8</sup>In this article Shakespeare's sonnets will be quoted according to the Oxford World's Classics edition: *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow.

<sup>9</sup>On the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century preference for the young man sonnets, see Matz 491-95 and 499-500.

<sup>10</sup>It would be wrong to attribute the absence of sonnet 20 from the early anthologies to Victorian prudishness, since sonnet 129, often considered even more obscene, *did* find its way into Victorian anthologies. Archbishop Trench, who in his *English Poetry* volume (1869) paired it with sonnet 146, may have considered it expressive of the Christian sentiment of disgust at the sinfulness of the human body. Quiller-Couch and Symonds followed suit in including sonnet 129 in their respective collections.

<sup>11</sup>According to Robert Matz, the "phenomenal rise in popularity" of sonnet 130 after 1945 may be due to its representation of "happy heterosexuality" (501). I am not sure that this is the reason, since the popularity of this sonnet did not obliterate twentieth-century appreciation of the beauty of the young-man sonnets.

<sup>12</sup>On Burgess's novel in the context of the reception of Shakespeare's sonnets, see Kingsley-Smith 229-35.

<sup>13</sup>I thank David Fishelov for the suggestion to supplement my examination of anthologies by looking at the MLA database.

<sup>14</sup>On "73" as a school text, see Kingsley-Smith 160; on the ascendancy of "116," see Kingsley-Smith 151-53.

<sup>15</sup>Out of the 25 early seventeenth-century manuscript copies of Shakespearean sonnets extant, thirteen contain versions of sonnet 2; see, e.g., Taylor 210-11, Kingsley-Smith 58-59, Duncan-Jones, "Appendix," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 453-66; and Burrow, "Introduction," in *Shakespeare, The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, 106-07, 161-62.

<sup>16</sup>"This sonnet derives its aesthetic claim on us by the variousness of its suppositional moves" (Vendler 55).

<sup>17</sup>By making use of Jakobson's communicative model I do not wish to imply that the sonnets' aesthetic features are unimportant; in fact, Jakobson himself puts some emphasis of the "poetic" function of language (see 25-26), which in Shakespeare's sonnets is certainly much in evidence. I would like to suggest, though, that, while any speech act can be considered an act of communication (as Jakobson contends), the sonnets by Elizabethan sonneteers like Sidney and Shakespeare fulfil a particular communicative function; see above, n4.

<sup>18</sup>To facilitate my line of argument, I will stick to the convention of calling the addressee of sonnets 1-126 the "young man," and the addressee of sonnets 127 to 152 the "dark lady," even though I do not wish to imply that these ascriptions cannot be questioned.

<sup>19</sup>There are sonnets with which categorization depends on interpretation. Sonnet 5, which does not contain any personal pronouns, can be described as "non-personal" or referential; but if you consider it as forming a diptych with sonnet 6 (which is conative), this categorization could be questioned.

<sup>20</sup>See *OED online*, s.v. "wake, v.", I.1.d.: "(with unfavourable implication:) to sit up late for pleasure or revelry; to turn night into day." *Hamlet*, 1.4.9, is the last recorded use; see Vendler 288.

<sup>21</sup>See Sandra L. Bermann's analysis of sonnet 87: "[...] a grammatical alternation, in which 'I' and 'thou' take turns as subject, creates the effect of inner dialogue. Thus, the poet first plumbs the reasons for the young man's break, turns in quatrain two directly to himself, then turns again, putting 'thou' in control of the third stanza for a pièce de résistance of mock explanation, only to close the sonnet with a couplet governed once more by 'I'" (62).

<sup>22</sup>It is tempting to relate the prevalence of the categories established to the phases of sonnet composition suggested by Macdonald P. Jackson on the basis of vocabulary statistics: while sonnets of all the categories are found in all the phases, the "I-and-thou" pattern clearly predominates in both the (comparatively) early phase, which comprises sonnets 61 to 103 as well as 127 to 154, and the late phase (104-26),



while there is a cluster of both "first-person" and "second-person" sonnets in the middle phase (sonnets 1-60).

<sup>23</sup>In my own count, based on the Oxford World's Classics edition, a second-person pronoun is found in 128 sonnets while it is missing in 26.

<sup>24</sup>There is a higher correlation between the "non-You sonnets" and my lists of non-personal sonnets (six of which are "non-You"), third-person sonnets (seven), self-referential (three), and mythological (two).

<sup>25</sup>Sonnet 61 thus provides another example of that "reciprocity" which Vendler notices with regard to sonnet 31 (171).

<sup>26</sup>With regard to the reasons I do not quite concur with Melchiori: I do not think that the use of the first person is characteristic of a "court poet" who "celebrates his own I" (10), as the predominant use of the first person follows the tradition established by Petrarca. Neither do I think that "Shakespeare is breaking with the tradition of the sonneteer as a court poet or an aristocrat" (15). Daniel, Drayton, and Spenser were not aristocrats either, and Shakespeare was at least as much a court poet as they were; see Kullmann, "Poeticising Emotion" 245-53. It is plausible, though, that "this balance between *I* and *thou*" is "an obvious demonstration of the dramatic and theatrical character of his poetic genius" (Melchiori 15).

<sup>27</sup>See Bermann 73. The exceptions are sonnets 19, 100, 101, 123, 137, 145, 146, and (possibly) 56, in which the speaker addresses Time, the Muse, love, or himself.

<sup>28</sup>On the printruns and impact of *The Golden Treasury*, see Kingsley-Smith 158-59.

<sup>29</sup>The figures concerning the other pre-Palgrave anthologies do not correspond with those of Palgrave's selection either: Six of Pitman's twelve sonnets belong to the I-and-thou group, with four first-person and two self-referential poems; two out of Lofft's eight sonnets are first-person, two are I-and-thou, two are non-personal, with one being third-person and one recording a triangular relationship. Ten out of Dyce's 38 sonnets are "first person," six are "second-person," and thirteen belong to the "I-and-thou"-group, with two third-person, four non-personal, and three self-referential sonnets. Three out of Allingham's four sonnets can be grouped with the I-and-thou sonnets, one with first-person poems. The one Shakespearean sonnet (57) printed in George Ellis's *Specimens of the Early English Poets* (1790) is also an "I-and-thou" poem.

<sup>30</sup>On the possible role of Tennyson in selecting the sonnets for the *Golden Treasury*, see Kingsley-Smith 158.

<sup>31</sup>It should be added that many Romantic poems also convey non-personal wisdom, such as Blake's "Love seeketh not itself to please" (Wright 72), Wordsworth's "The world is too much with us" (49), and Keats's "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever" (107).

<sup>32</sup>By contrast, Palgrave's collection of twenty sonnets shares only six of them with Kearsley's eighteen, three with Lofft's eight, four with Pitman's twelve, and two

with Allingham's four. While Palgrave shares thirteen sonnets with Dyce, it is significant that he includes six of Dyce's ten first-person sonnets, three of his four non-personal poems but only three of his thirteen I-and-thou sonnets.

<sup>33</sup>For a characteristic twentieth-century comment, see Hallett Smith: "Some of the most impressive and eloquent of the sonnets are those which depend less upon a reflective situation for their framework than upon an apparent display of the poet's moods directly [...] Two of the most effective of these sonnets of mood are Nos. 29 and 30" (181-82). When asked what poetry is about many people will answer that it is to give expression to the poet's "inner self." I remember a fellow-student who told me that she could not show me her poems as they expressed her inner self and were far too intimate for my reading.

<sup>34</sup>In his sonnet beginning "Scorn not the sonnet," Wordsworth famously claimed that "with this key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart" (50). For other nineteenth-century readings of the sonnets as autobiographical confessions, see Muir 118-20.

<sup>35</sup>Coleridge called Shakespeare "the poet, the philosopher, who combined truth with beauty and beauty with truth" (2: 119). Hazlitt remarked: "If we wish to know the force of human genius, we should read Shakespear [sic]. If we wish to see the insignificance of human learning, we may study his commentators" (77). Emerson pointed out: "Shakespeare is as much out of the category of eminent authors, as he is out of the crowd. He is inconceivably wise; the others, conceivably" (362). Ruskin proposed to "see whether the greatest, the wisest, the purest-hearted of all ages are agreed in any wise on this point [the true dignity of woman] [...] And first let us take Shakespeare" (59). And Lewis Carroll, speaking about "uninspired" literature [literature other than the Bible] added: "a misnomer, I hold: if Shakespeare was not inspired, one may well doubt if any man ever was" (281). And so on.

<sup>36</sup>It is for similar reasons that Melchiori isolates a group of four sonnets as "dramatic meditations" (Melchiori, esp. 31-32), three of which are non-personal (94, 129, 146), while one is "first-person" (121).

<sup>37</sup>In 2018 the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust published a "Shakespeare Edition" of the *Trivial Pursuit* game. One card contains the question: "Which of the sonnets is most frequently read at weddings?" The answer is, of course, "116."

<sup>38</sup>I cannot exempt myself from the charge of having introduced my students to a biased and truncated selection of Shakespeare's sonnets; in my lecture course on English Renaissance Literature and Culture, I regularly discussed sonnets 1, 18, 20, 27, 30, 33, 55, 60, 66, 73, 97, 116, 129, 130, 144, 146. Most of these sonnets are first-person, non-personal or self-referential. This will be remedied when I next teach this course.

<sup>39</sup>To a certain extent, the present investigation thus corroborates those models which see a canon as fulfilling a society's requirements of meaning and identity (the "Sinn und Identitätsbedürfnisse einer Gesellschaft," according to Herrmann 23).

<sup>40</sup>An anonymous reviewer suggested that the Norton selection of Shakespeare's sonnets may have changed over time, and as among modern anthologies the Norton Anthology "reaches far more readers than any other," these changes may be of some importance. I therefore consulted the 6th, the 8th and the 10th edition. The changes, however, were of a rather moderate scale: the 8th edition dropped one sonnet (5) from the 40 contained in the 6th edition, and added three (3, 19, 93). The tenth edition retained the choice of 42 sonnets established in the 8th edition. In the present list the abbreviation "Norton 6" is used to indicate that this sonnet it is not found in later editions, while the sonnets added in the eighth edition are marked "Norton 8/10."

## WORKS CITED

### Anthologies Consulted

- Allingham, William, ed. *Nightingale Valley: A Collection of Choice Lyrics and Short Poems, from the Time of Shakespeare to the Present Day*. London: Bell & Daldy 1860.
- Bedford Anthology of World Literature*, Book 3: *The Early Modern World, 1450-1650*. Ed. Paul Davis et al. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.
- Blaisdell, Bob, ed. *Elizabethan Poetry*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005.
- Broadview Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 2: *The Renaissance and the Early Seventeenth Century*. 2nd ed. Ed. Joseph Black et. al. Toronto: Broadview P, 2010.
- Chambers, Edmund K., ed. *The Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse*. London: OUP, 1932.
- Chaudhuri, Sukanta, ed. *An Anthology of Elizabethan Poetry*. Delhi: OUP, 1992.
- Clark, Robert, and Thomas Healy, eds. *The Arnold Anthology of British and Irish Literature in English*. London: Hodder Headline, 1997.
- Dyce, Alexander (Rev.), ed. *Specimens of English Sonnets*. London: Pickering, 1833.
- Ellis, George, ed. *Specimens of the Early English Poets*. London, 1790.
- English Anthology*. 3 vols. London: Egerton, 1793. Vol. 1.
- Esiri, Allie, ed. *Shakespeare for Every Day of the Year*. London: Macmillan, 2019.
- [Flame Tree.] Bulbeck, L., ed. *The Illustrated Book of Shakespeare's Verse*. London: Flame Tree Publishing, 2014.
- [Foundation.] The Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org>. 21 Apr. 2023.
- Hadow, Grace Eleanor, and William Henry Hadow, eds. *The Oxford Treasury of English Literature*, vol. 1: *Old English to Jacobean*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1906.
- Hayward, John, ed. *The Penguin Book of English Verse*. 1956. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979.
- Henley, William Ernest, ed. *English Lyrics: Chaucer to Poe, 1340-1809*. London: Methuen, 1897.

- Herrig, Ludwig. *British Classical Authors [...]*. Ed. Max Förster. 2 vols. Braunschweig: Westermann, 1910.
- Hollander, John, and Frank Kermode, eds. *The Literature of Renaissance England (The Oxford Anthology of English Literature)*. New York: OUP, 1973.
- Hunt, Leigh, and Samuel Adams Lee, eds. *The Book of the Sonnet*. 2 vols. London: Sampson Low, Son, & Marston, 1867.
- Jones, Emrys, ed. *The New Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse*. Oxford: OUP, 1992.
- Kearsley, George, ed. *The Beauties of Shakespeare, Selected from his Plays and Poems*. London, 1783.
- Kodó, Krisztina, ed. *An Anthology of English Poetry from the Middle Ages to the End of the 1930s*. Budapest: Bölcsész, 2006.
- Leeson, Edward, ed. *The New Golden Treasury of English Verse*. London: Pan Books, 1980.
- Leonard, Robert Maynard, ed. *The Pageant of English Poetry: Being 1150 Poems and Extracts by 300 Authors*. London: OUP, 1909.
- Löffler, Arnold, and Eberhard Späth, eds. *English Poetry: Eine Anthologie für das Studium*, 4th ed. Tübingen: Francke, 2003.
- Lofft, Capel. *Laura, or An Anthology of Sonnets [...]*. 5 vols. London: Taylor & Crosby, 1813-14.
- Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Gen. eds. David Damrosch and Kevin J. H. Dettmar. 4th ed. New York: Longman, 2010. Vol. 1.
- Mazur, Zygmunt, and Teresa Bela, eds. *College Anthology of English Literature*. Rev. ed. Krakow: Universitas, 2008.
- Meller, Horst, and Rudolf Sühnel, eds. *British and American Classical Poems, in Continuation of Ludwig Herrig's Classical Authors*. Braunschweig: Westermann, 1966.
- MLA International Bibliographical with Full Text. <https://www.ebsco.com>. 28 August 2023.
- Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 6th ed. Ed. Meyer H. Abrams. New York: Norton, 1993.
- Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 8th ed. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: Norton, 2006.
- Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 10th ed. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: Norton, 2018.
- [Palgrave.] *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*. Selected and arranged with notes by Francis Turner Palgrave. London: Macmillan, 1887 [1st ed. 1861].
- Peacock, W., ed. *English Verse*. Vol. 1: *The Early Lyrics to Shakespeare*. London: OUP, 1928.
- Pitman, J. R. (Rev.). *The School-Shakespeare: or, Plays and Scenes from Shakespeare, Illustrated for the Use of Schools*. London, 1822.
- Quiller-Couch, Arthur, ed. *The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1900*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1900.

- [Reclam.] Kranz, Gisbert, ed. and trans. *Englische Sonette: Englisch/Deutsch*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1970.
- Ricks, Christopher, ed. *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Oxford: OUP, 1999.
- Symons, Arthur, ed. *A Pageant of Elizabethan Poetry*. London: Blackie, 1908.
- Trench, Richard Chevenix, ed. *English Poetry*. London: Macmillan, 1869.
- Wain, John, ed. *The Oxford Anthology of English Poetry*. Oxford: OUP, 1990. Vol. 1.
- Whiteford, Robert Naylor, ed. *Anthology of English Poetry*. Boston: Sanborn, 1903.

## Other Works Cited

- Bermann, Sandra L. *The Sonnet Over Time: A Study in the Sonnets of Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Baudelaire*. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1988.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1994.
- Carroll, Lewis. Preface to *Sylvie and Bruno*. *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll*. Ed. Alexander Woollcott. New York: Random House, 1976. 277-86.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Shakespearean Criticism*. 2 vols. Ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor. London: Dent, 1960.
- Easterling, Pat E. "From Repertoire to Canon." *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Ed. Pat E. Easterling. Cambridge: CUP, 1997. 211-27.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Shakespeare; or The Poet." *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson [...]*. 3 vols. Vol. 1: *Essays, Representative Men, Poems*. London: Bell, 1894. 352-66.
- Erne, Lukas. *Shakespeare as a Literary Dramatist*. Cambridge: CUP, 2003.
- Gruber, Markus A. "Transmission of Text." *The Encyclopedia of Greek Tragedy*. Ed. Hanna M. Roisman. 3 vols. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. Vol. 3: 1432-35.
- Hazlitt, William. "On the Ignorance of the Learned." *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*. Ed. P. P. Howe. 21 vols. Vol. 8: *Table Talk: or, Original Essays*. London: Dent, 1931. 70-77.
- Herrmann, Leonhard. "Kanon als System: Kanondebatte und Kanonmodelle in der Literaturwissenschaft." *Die Bildung des Kanons: Textuelle Faktoren—Kulturelle Funktionen—Ethische Praxis*. Ed. Lothar Ehrlich, Judith Schildt, and Benjamin Specht. Köln: Böhlau, 2007.
- Heydebrand, Renate von, and Simone Winko. *Einführung in die Wertung von Literatur: Systematik—Geschichte—Legitimation*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996.
- Houghton, Lord, ed. *Life and Letters of John Keats*. London: Dent, 1927.
- Hutchison, Coleman. "Breaking the Book Known as Q." *PMLA* 121.1 (2006): 33-66.
- Jackson, Macdonald P. "Vocabulary and Chronology: The Case of Shakespeare's Sonnets." *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 52 (2001): 59-75.
- Jakobson, Roman. "Linguistics and Poetics." *Selected Writings*. Vol. 3: *Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry*. Ed. Stephen Rudy. The Hague: Mouton, 1981. 18-51.

- Keats, John. *The Complete Poems*. Ed. John Barnard. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.
- Kingsley-Smith, Jane. *The Afterlife of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Cambridge: CUP, 2019.
- Kullmann, Thomas. "Canon Formation in English Literature Studies: A Comparison of Britain and Germany." *The Institution of English Literature: Formation and Mediation*. Ed. Barbara Schaff, Johannes Schlegel, and Carola Surkamp. Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2017. 273-94.
- Kullmann, Thomas. "The Construction of Female Nobility in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*." *Virtus* 26 (2019): 146-55.
- Kullmann, Thomas, ed. *Reading Nevernight: Records of a Co-operative Online Seminar on Jay Kristoff's Fantasy Novel*. Düren: Shaker, 2020.
- Kullmann, Thomas. "Poeticising Emotion in the Sonnets of the Sidney-Pembroke Circle." *Spielräume des Affektiven: Konzeptionelle und exemplarische Studien zur frühneuzeitlichen Affektkultur*. Ed. Kai Bremer, Andrea Grewe, and Meike Rühl. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2023. 235-57.
- Lesky, Albin. *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*. 3rd ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972.
- Matz, Robert. "The Scandals of Shakespeare's Sonnets." *English Literary History* 77 (2010): 477-508.
- Melchiori, Giorgio. *Shakespeare's Dramatic Meditations: An Experiment in Criticism*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1976.
- Milton, John. *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Gordon Campbell. London: Dent, 1980.
- Muir, Kenneth. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979.
- Ruskin, John. *Sesame and Lilies*. Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones. The Arden Shakespeare. N.p.: Nelson, 1997.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*. Ed. Colin Burrow. The Oxford Shakespeare. Oxford: OUP, 2002.
- Smith, Hallett. *Elizabethan Poetry: A Study in Conventions, Meaning, and Expression*. Cambridge; MA: Harvard UP, 1952.
- Taylor, Gary. "Some Manuscripts of Shakespeare's Sonnets." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 1 (1985): 210-46.
- Tennyson (Lord), Alfred. *Poems of Tennyson*. London: OUP, 1909.
- Trivedi, Poonam, Paromita Chakravarti, and Ted Motohashi. Introduction. *Asian Interventions in Global Shakespeare: "All the World's His Stage"*. New York: Routledge, 2021. 1-11.
- Vendler, Helen. *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998.
- Wordsworth, William. *Poems*. Selected by W. E. Williams. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.
- Wright, David, ed. *English Romantic Verse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.

# The Ghost Story in Spenser's *Daphnaïda*

KREG SEGALL

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 98-120.  
DOI: [10.25623/conn033-segall-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-segall-1)

---

This article is the first entry in a debate on “The Ghost Story in Spenser’s *Daphnaïda*” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/the-ghost-story-in-spensers-daphnaïda>). If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](http://www.connotations.de) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

---

## Abstract

This study of Spenser’s *Daphnaïda* responds to David Lee Miller’s contentions that (1) this elegy is a purposely bad poem; (2) that *Daphnaïda* is more suitable to historical consideration than formal analysis; and (3) that the reader is meant to see Alcyon, the mourner in the poem, as primarily a figure for mockery. This essay complicates the work of mourning in the poem by considering its subtle tonal shifts and changes of register throughout Alcyon’s lament and offers a formal reading of the poem that considers the effect of the poet-narrator’s introduction on our subsequent evaluation of Alcyon and the poem as a whole.

## Overview

Who so else in pleasure findeth sense,  
Or in this wretched life dooth take delight,  
Let him be banisht farre away from hence:  
(8-10)<sup>1</sup>

The beginning of Spenser’s *Daphnaïda* requires the reader to struggle with and probably discard the poet-narrator’s perspective in order to continue reading. Banishing anyone who likes pleasure or takes delight in “this wretched life” (9) and inviting in only people who desire to

increase their cares, Spenser's narrator erects a barbed wire fence around this poem: the poem does not want me, and, the opening of the poem suggests, I will not want it. And lest the reader be tempted by an uninviting, but otherwise beautiful poem, the narrator further disin-vites the Muses, lest they "breede delight" (13)—instead passing divine sponsorship to the Fates, "those three fatall Sisters, whose sad hands / Doo weave the direfull threds of destinie" (16-17).

The primary spark for this essay is David Lee Miller's claim that *Daphnaïda* is a bad poem on purpose, an absurd, bathetic portrayal of Arthur Gorges, written out of resistance to a request by Raleigh to "write a poem in support of Gorges" (246). Miller takes *Daphnaïda*'s badness for granted in his essay, which opens, provocatively, with the question, "How could Spenser have written a poem as inexplicably bad as *Daphnaïda*, and why did he publish it?" (241). He describes *Daphnaïda* as "what must be [Spenser's] worst poem" and refers to its "extrava-gant badness" in setting up his historical argument, also noting William Oram's characterization of the poem as one of Spenser's "most experi-mental and least-loved works" (Oram 487). Miller suggests that the poem be taken at its word; we should simply stop reading this bad poem at the poet's say-so.

Miller's central contention—the element that makes this a lousy poem in his reading—is that Alcyon's grief is over-the-top, repetitive, and unsophisticated in expression, as in the below example, from Al-cyon's lament:

I hate to speak, my voyce is spent with crying:  
 I hate to heare, lowd plaints have duld mine eares:  
 I hate to tast, for food withholds my dying:  
 I hate to see, mine eyes are dimd with teares:  
 I hate to smell, no sweet on earth is left:  
 I hate to feele, my flesh is numbd with feares:  
 So all my senses from me are bereft. (414-20)

Miller adds that "eighty-one stanzas like this one would dull anyone's ears" (243).<sup>2</sup> But we do not have eighty-one stanzas like this one: Miller takes this stanza from a four-stanza set piece in the fifth section of a complex, seven-part lament. Sampling the poem here, at the very center



of a particularly low moment, a moment of grinding, plodding, and despairing on the part of the speaker, not only gives an inaccurate sense of the poem as a whole but also gives the wrong notion of the work of mourning this stanza is part of. I do not mean to suggest that the repeated “I hate” lines here is anything but excessive, but rather that well-written verse may not be Spenser’s goal at this moment, here in the depths of lament.

In considering the warning sign the poet places on the poem at the start, Miller says that, according to the poet, he

has written an elegy from which Horation [sic] *dulce* is excluded by design. The poem is deliberately unpleasing. If this unpleasingness is not inadvertent, then it calls for another order of explanation. Why deliberately write—and publish—*twice*—a bad poem? (244)

The pivot that Miller makes between “unpleasing” and “bad” is where I want to start my argument. Miller’s one example of badness takes aim at Spenser’s prosody, the “heavy-handed” quality of the verse that “would dull anyone’s ears”; but more significant is his sense that the poem’s content is oppressive and alienating. More importantly, his characterization of “eighty-one stanzas like this one” suggests that he reads the poem as a monolithic block of shrill, static moaning, without “consolatory gestures” like “the elegant and amusing *Book of the Duchess*” (243).

I also want to consider whether Spenser’s warning at the poem’s start might be read as an authorial tactic to arouse interest, to heighten an exciting sense of trespass, or to reveal something important about the narrative voice responsible for that warning. One might be reminded of the eerie dedication, “This is not for you” that rejects the reader on the first page of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, or Lemony Snicket’s gloomy warning in the first line of the first book of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, “If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book” (1). These gestures push the reader away, and in so doing, may create interest in the narrative voice—as an alienated or wounded figure who rejects readership, or in the text as a juicily forbidden piece of writing.

Attempting to argue “good poem” versus “bad poem” is a fool’s errand, and the goal here is not to convince the reader (or Miller) that they ought to enjoy *Daphnaïda* if they do not. I do, however, want to resist the characterization of *Daphnaïda*, particularly Alcyon’s lament, as a single, unsubtle, and static entity, but instead to carefully unpack its movements, its unsuccessful gropings, for closure. We may desire consolation at the end of a poem that depicts such bleakness and keenly respond to its absence, but that ought not to be the end of formal analysis of this complex, disturbing, and resonant poem. Elegant and amusing are not really the goals of *Daphnaïda*.

Like Miller, I also take seriously the poet-narrator’s strident warning as the poem begins: not because Spenser thinks I ought to put the poem down, but because the poet-narrator’s disclaimer is part of an imaginative contract made with his audience. In venturing past the threshold of this poem, the reader ostensibly agrees to its terms of use, to the understanding that the poet’s preferred audience is “the dreadfull Queene / Of darkenes deepe come from the Stygian strands, / And grisly Ghosts to hear this dolefull teene” (19-21). In proceeding, the reader is encouraged to see him- or herself as a member of that ghostly audience, or, at least, to try on that mantle, to hear with those dead ears, for the purpose of reading *Daphnaïda*.<sup>3</sup> We may, in the end, come to reject the notion that dead things have anything to gain from this poem, to at least partly exorcise those ghosts. But part of the work of this poem is to have the reader enter into this ruminative, cyclical text, reading it from an alienated, ghostly perspective—indeed, the depressed perspective of the poet-narrator—for a while. Alcyon’s grief is not primarily impious or sacrilegious, something to be rejected out of hand, but, instead, a representation of a slow and painful mourning that is nevertheless complex and productive, not static.<sup>4</sup>

### *Complaints and The Doleful Lay of Clorinda*

*Daphnaïda* was published in 1591, the same year as Spenser’s *Complaints* volume, a volume that shares themes, language, and images with the

standalone poem, and which provides a useful lens through which to consider the nature of *Daphnaïda*'s "badness." The most obvious contrast with *Daphnaïda* from the *Complaints* volume is *Prosopopoia*, or *Mother Hubberds Tale*. Like *Daphnaïda*, *Prosopopoia* has a narrator in the throes of a "wicked maladie" (9) which seems less like a physical sickness than emotional anguish, noting his "woe" and his "griefe" (14, 15). To attempt to alleviate the narrator's trouble, a group of friends offer pleasant chivalrous narratives which seek to "deceave" (23) the narrator's sense, which, according to the narrator, "the delight thereof me much releevd" (32). By contrast, the tale of Mother Hubberd—the tale that the vast majority of *Prosopopoia* occupies itself with—is described as wholly unaesthetic at the outset of the narrator's relating it and at the conclusion:

No Muses aide me needes heretoo to call;  
 Base is the style, and matter meane withall. (43-44)  
 [...]
 And bad her tongue that it so bluntly tolde. (1388)

*Prosopopoia*, then, asks us much the same question as *Daphnaïda*: if the poem at hand is unaesthetic, why relate it? Why does Mother Hubberd's tale get preserved as the center of *Prosopopoia*, rather than the chivalric tales of the narrator's friends which are full of delight? As in *Daphnaïda*, the narrator of *Prosopopoia* is not interested in aesthetic delight as much as verse that is effective at responding to grieving. This may be distressing, unpleasant, ugly, repetitive, and blunt, but for the narrator of *Prosopopoia*, it provides something less enjoyable and more salutary.

Another poem in the *Complaints* volume is *Virgils Gnat*, Spenser's translation of *Culex*. This poem also takes as a central theme the idea of the value of its own content—in this case, not because of the quality of its verse, but because of its theme—the death of a gnat with no particular claim to greatness, an everyday, unremarkable death of a tiny creature. What gives *Virgils Gnat* its power, and what likely was attractive to Spenser in choosing to translate it, is the way in which the gnat's

death, though trivial as such, on the microlevel, becomes aestheticized as the dead gnat is cast into a huge network of mythology and history, and shown to in fact participate meaningfully in a complex web of interlaced narratives. From one perspective, the story is trivial and pointless; from another it is aesthetic. This is very much the same move that the closely related poem *Muiopotmos* makes in the same volume, in which the death of a butterfly—when seen the right way—participates in a deep network of mythological narratives that transforms a rather ugly death into something beautiful. Not, of course, from Clarion the dead butterfly's point of view, but from a larger, macrolevel view of the reader. I do not mean to suggest that the verse of *Daphnaïda* ought to be compared with the quality of the verse of *Muiopotmos*, but rather to note that, like these poems from the *Complaints* volume, *Daphnaïda* explicitly seeks to linger on what may seem unaesthetic or an unlikely subject for good verse.

*The Doleful Lay of Clorinda*, published in 1595, offers a very useful contrast with the complex structure of *Daphnaïda*. *Clorinda*, only 96 lines long, similarly depicts a distraught mourner, here grieving the loss of Astrophel.<sup>5</sup> This poem opens analogously to *Daphnaïda* in its attempt to define its audience:

To heavens? ah they alas the authors were,  
And workers of my unremedied wo: (7-8)

To men? ah they alas like wretched bee,  
And subject to the heavens ordinance: (13-14)

The speaker determines to address instead "my self [...] / Sith none alive like sorrowfull remaines" (19-20). Part of the work of this opening is to establish its readers as "wretched" and therefore unable to provide her any comfort, since they themselves "need comforted to bee" (18).

The work of grieving that *Clorinda's* lay depicts has a clear trajectory, beginning by describing how the world has diminished now that Astrophel is gone: "Woods, hills and rivers, now are desolate" (25). She then moves from descriptive to imperative in her desire to have the world's beauty decline to match her own sorrow: "Breake now your

gyrlonds"; "Never againe let lass put gyrlond on"; "Ne ever sing the love-layes which he made" (37, 40, 43).

This move to push beauty away intertwines with an incorporation of the audience—the reader—of the poem. Although Clorinda has before claimed that she speaks only to herself, as her lament goes on, she gradually folds the readers into it, first by imagining Astrophel's death as "great losse to all" (35) and then by adding "you" to her cries:

Death the devourer of all worlds delight,  
 Hath robbed you and reft from me my joy:  
 Both you and me, and all the world he quight  
 Hath robd of joyance, and left sad annoy.  
 [...]
   
 Oh death that hast us of such riches reft [...] (49-52, 55)

Moving from "my selfe" to "you and me" and to "us" sets the poem up to find its consolation in its realization that Astrophel's spirit "is not dead, ne can it die, / But lives for aie, in blisfull Paradise" (67-68)—thus reinviting the "heavens" that Clorinda excluded from her poem at the outset. Naturally the relative brevity of *Clorinda* compared with the extremely lengthy mourning of Alcyon helps the shorter poem avoid the charge of tedium in its mourning, but the shape of Clorinda's mourning, and her presence within her community, more than its brevity, serves this function as well. The poem concludes with the introduction of communal mourning and song, represented by Thestylis, and "full many other moe" who "Gan dight themselves t'expresse their inward woe" (103; 104-05). *The Doleful Lay of Clorinda* here moves from alienation to consolation, from solitariness to community, from the rejection of beauty to the inviting of song.

In contrast to *Clorinda*'s teleological structure, *Daphnaïda*'s form is more circular, more unstable. Although many of the elements of *Clorinda* are present in *Daphnaïda*, its refusal to temper grief by pointing to potential healing at the end makes it fascinatingly frustrating to grapple with. Oram characterizes the structure of the poem as rooted in "the contrast between the narrator of the elegy and Alcyon. The narrator is grieving when he meets the mourner, but he puts aside his own sorrow

in an attempt to help his friend where Alcyon seems incapable of such self-forgetfulness" (Oram 490). That is, according to Oram, the fundamental structural element of the poem must be our perception of the narrator's movement from despair to charity; as we move from the beginning of the poem to the end, we respond to his attempt to reincorporate Alcyon back into the community, a move much like Clorinda's. The narrator was

sore griev'd to see his wretched case.  
 [...]
 I him desirde, sith daie was overcast,  
 And darke night fast approached, to be pleased  
 To turne aside unto my Cabinet,  
 And stay with me, till he were better eased (553, 556-59)

However, the narrator's hospitality and pity at the end of the poem is temporally *followed* by the narrator's melancholy warning-off at the start of his poem. That is, the poet has not reached an end point in his own process of grieving, provoked by his interaction with Alcyon, but just a momentary pause, followed by his alienated warning to the reader to flee from the tale of "sad *Alcyon*" (6). The language of the very end links the pitying conclusion to the spiky introduction. The "heavie plaint" and "heaviest plaint" (540-41) that the poet calls Alcyon's lament returns us to the "heavie minde" and "ruffull plaint" (1, 4) warned of at the start; Alcyon's expression as if he had met "hellish hags [...] upon the way" (566) may also recall the "fatall Sisters" whom the poet invokes at the start of the poem. The narration of the poem opens "in gloomie evening" (22), and by the end we are reminded that "darke night fast approached" (557); however, the poet's opening address to the reader seems to also place us in this growing darkness with its invitation to "the dreadfull Queene / Of darkenes deepe" (20-21). The cyclical nature of the poem is certainly prepared for by the narrator's description of his ruminative sorrow, "which dayly dooth my weaker wit possesse" (30).

Smaller loops, too, are crucial to the structure of the poem, including the "dayly" depression the narrator struggles with (30), the two near-

deaths (188) and recoveries of Alcyon (545), and the repeated requests to the narrator: "Weepe Shepheard weepe to make my under song" (245). In the light of the importance of looping, the anaphoric structure of the three stanzas that Miller quotes from ("I hate [...] I hate") can be seen in its full aesthetic context. The work of *Daphnaïda's* looping structure, then, is to evoke a ruminative, haunted feeling to Alcyon's and the narrator's grief.<sup>6</sup> Far from the repudiation of mourning that Miller calls it (see 249), *Daphnaïda* offers mourning that wrestles with itself. There is no direct path towards consolation, as in *Clorinda*, but a halting and frustrating process of mourning, with discoveries and insights gained and lost, and gained and lost—in fact, a process not dissimilar to the actual process of mourning.<sup>7</sup>

### The Fruit of Heaviness

Our first view of Alcyon is that of a man keeping his sorrow wholly within, unwilling to share his grief. He is long-haired and unshaven, and he looks down; he groans, but "inly" (48). In seeking to have Alcyon tell his sorrows, the narrator invokes the principle that "griefe findes some ease by him that like does beare" (67). The nature of shared grief here is simple: grief is treated like a burden that can be uniquely shared only by a fellow sufferer. The grief will not disappear; it is "committed" (70) to the ear of the narrator; it is a load borne by both of them—and by the reader, also ready to receive that burden as a fellow sufferer. Alcyon, however, rejects this sense of grief, saying that his sadness "cannot be tolde" (72).

Note the quick shift in Alcyon's perception of what his grief can accomplish rhetorically. From a flat rejection of the notion that his grief can be shared at all, he moves to a qualification that "no tongue can well unfold" (74) his pains—which seems a very different claim. He similarly transitions from pronouncing that he seeks "alone to weepe, and dye alone" to offering his story because the narrator "seemst to rue my griefe" (92): "Then hearken well till it to ende bee brought, / For

never didst thou heare more haplesse fate" (97-98). Far from the poet-narrator's claim that the appropriate audience for Alcyon's tale is a man who wishes to increase grief—accompanied by grisly ghosts—Alcyon agrees to tell his story to the poet because the poet shows sympathy and love. The difference between the poet's characterization of "what this poem is good for" and Alcyon's own claim ought to make the reader wary of taking the poet's description at face value. As the lament begins, Alcyon considers not only his stark sorrow, but also the aesthetic possibilities of the story of himself, particularly as he opens his narrative with an extraordinarily poetic description of his "lovelie Lionesse" (137).<sup>8</sup> At any rate, what we get from Alcyon is not at all only the "sobs and grones" promised by the narrator or the absence of the Muses (14) but a lament in which weeping can be transformed into song, an image exemplified in Alcyon's repeated requests to the narrator that he "Weep Shepheard weep, to make mine undersong" (245).<sup>9</sup>

An apt image for Alcyon's surprising production of poetry as part of the process of coping with his internal agony appears in the metaphor of the narrator's sudden birth of an "Infant" as he begins his evening stroll. He begins his walk with a clear mind, "to breath the freshing ayre" when, after finding himself in a field of frost-killed flowers,

There came unto my minde a troublous thought,  
Which dayly dooth my weaker wit possesse,  
Ne lets it rest, until it forth have brought  
Her long borne Infant, fruit of heavinesse. (29-32)

The speaker is not specific about the thought that provokes this mood, although his location suggests thoughts of death and, more generally, "this worlds vainesse and lifes wretchednesse" (34). The thought is characterized as productive of an infant—a fruit of "heavinesse," but a fruit nonetheless. The poet's pain brings something forth: in this case, clearly the poem *Daphnaïda*, beauty created from pain. The heaviness of the child links it with Alcyon's heavy "minde" (1); "eyes" (46); "case" (96); "plight" (170); "thought" (465); and "plaint" (540, 541). That is, the narrator's thoughts are cyclical, ruminative, but also productive: at a



certain point, the labor pains end, and the child—as much as the poem—is delivered.<sup>10</sup>

Alcyon's seven-part elegy to his love opens with a preface that addresses these questions of the relationship between pain and beauty. He begins by allegorizing his relationship with and the death of his Daphne as his taming of a "faire young Lionesse" (107) whom he met as he tended his "little flocke on westerne downes [...] / Not far from whence *Sabrinaes* streame doth flow, / And flowrie bancks with silver liquor steepe" (100-02). The language of his apprehension of the beauty of the lioness is lush and evocative:

It there befell as I the fields did range  
Fearelesse and free, a faire young Lionesse,  
White as the native Rose before the chaunge,  
Which *Venus* blood did in her leaves impresse,  
I spied playing on the grassie playne  
Her youthfull sports and kindlie wantonnesse,  
That did all other Beasts in beawtie staine. (106-12)

It is difficult to read these lines like a ghost—that is, it is difficult to read them cut off from pleasure, agreeing that the Muses really have been wholly exiled from the poem. Alcyon's first impulse in sharing his sorrow is to create a story, to aestheticize, to see his experience as making "new matter fit for Tragedies" (154), which is a very different impulse from making "Fit matter for [...] cares increase" (3).<sup>11</sup> Alcyon chooses to mythologize even the horrific moment of his love's death, by saying "A cruell *Satyre* with his murderous dart" killed her (156). The ghostly reader should be aesthetically unmoved by Alcyon's lyrical evocation of Daphne, his "lovelie Lionesse" (137), instead preferring the alternate version of this story: when the narrator fails to understand Alcyon's allegory of the lioness, Alcyon repeats the point with agonizing spareness, in one sentence, all the poetry wrung out of it: "Then sighing sore, *Daphne* thou knewest (quoth he) / She now is dead; ne more endured to say" (184-85).

These two versions of Daphne's death serve two purposes. First, they set up the poles between which Alcyon's lament will resonate, between

the lavish and the stark, between the urge to create poetry from his experience and the urge to strip the world of adornment forever.<sup>12</sup> And second, they make the reader question the terms under which they have entered the poem; if the poem shows us pleasure, joy in its verse, then imaginatively, we revive and reject the ghostly mantle—we, like Alcyon after his awakening by the narrator, recover “life that would have fled away” (188).

### The Seven-Part Lament

The first three sections of Alcyon's lament make a *Clorinda*-like move to universalize the death of his beloved, and to attempt to find comfort in Daphne's dying words. He begins by accusing the heavens of injustice in stealing away such a pure woman, claiming that they

[...] so unjustlie doe their judgments share;  
Mongst earthlie wightes, as to afflict so sore  
The innocent, as those which do transgresse,  
And does not spare the best or fayrest more [...] (199-202)

He eventually begins to grapple with this paradox by contending that her very purity makes her “Not mine but his, which mine awhile her made: / Mine to be his, with him to live for ay” (235-36): her purity makes her more fit for heaven than earth. He is struggling with Daphne's own dying words to him, in which she reproves Alcyon for his sadness, wondering “why should he that loves me, sorie bee / For my deliverance” (278-79):

I goe with gladnesse to my wished rest,  
Whereas no worlds sad care, nor wasting woe  
May come their happie quiet to molest,  
But Saints and Angels in celestiall thrones  
Eternally him praise, that hath them blest [...] (282-86)

These lines are the precise center of *Daphnaïda* and offer Alcyon and the poem as a whole a potential way to pivot from despair to healing, by way of considering both the beauty and goodness of the deserving deceased. This is the tactic used by *Clorinda*, as the speaker moves from

horror at divine injustice—"Ay me, can so divine a thing be dead?" (66)—to recognition of his joy in heaven: "Ah no: it is not dead, ne can it die, / But lives for aie, in blisful Paradise" (67-68).<sup>13</sup>

If this were *Clorinda*, the poem would end there. *Clorinda* uses that moment of celestial insight and comfort to transition to communal mourning and song; *Daphnaïda*'s response is more resistant and tentative. Alcyon's recognition that Daphne will live with God "for ay" is followed by his insistence on divine injustice: "For age to dye is right, but youth is wrong" (243). We also hear this tension in his "Lionesse" preface: "Out of the world thus was she reft awaie, / Out of the world, unworthie such a spoyle; / And borne to heaven, for heaven a fitter pray" (162-64), even as he resists that comfort by seeking her "throughout this earthlie soyle" (167). Her dying words offer him a possible way to end his despair, words that he returns to several times in different contexts, trying them out to consider their efficacy—and their central placement in *Daphnaïda* seems to glance at their potential as a poetic organizing principle. However, ultimately, if we move on to part three of his lament, it is clear that her words do not create closure, instead serving as just one waystation in Alcyon's painful rumination, a part of the loop of grieving he finds himself caught in at this moment:

So oft as I record those piercing words,  
Which yet are deepe engraven in my brest  
[...] With those sweet sugred speeches doo compare,  
The which my soule first conquerd and possest,  
The first beginners of my endles care [...] (295-96, 299-301)

The possible comfort of Daphne's dying words comes with a terrible, unavoidable sting: in order to be soothed by the notion of Daphne's merciful escape from a life full of "dolor and disease, / Our life afflicted with incessant paine" (274-75), one must accept that sense of life as agony. As such, her "sweet sugred speeches" must be reinterpreted not as a happy memory but as provokers of sorrow.

Poetically, this awful realization offers *Daphnaïda* the opportunity for an interesting twist on a traditional complaint theme. We have already

seen *Clorinda's* transition from the descriptive—"Woods, hills and rivers, now are desolate" (25)—to the imperative—"Breake now your gyrlonds, O ye shepheards lasses" (37). Oram notes the classical roots of this trope of "passionate desire for a world overturned" (506n), tracing its origin in Theocritus' first *Idyll* by way of Virgil's eighth *Eclogue*.<sup>14</sup> *Daphnaïda's* innovation is to have Alcyon's demands for all the joys of the world to end stem from his need to make Daphne's dying words be true: if there is good in the world, then Daphne's death cannot wholly be understood as a merciful blessing.<sup>15</sup> It is not that Alcyon can no longer perceive joy through his filter of depression, but that every instance of possible joy must be squashed, "to make the image of true heaviness":

Let birds be silent on the naked spray,  
And shady woods resound with dreadfull yells:  
Let streaming floods their hastie courses stay,  
And parching drough drier up the christall wells  
Let th'earth be barren and bring foorth no flowres,  
And th'ayre be fild with noyse of dolefull knells,  
And wandring spirits walke untimely howres. (330-36)

Alcyon lurches back and forth from quiet apprehensions of beauty and tenderness in the world to harsh rejections of that beauty: he considers how Daphne "trimly" would "trace and softly tread / The tender grasse with rosie garland crownd" (311-12); he considers the "wandring troupes" and the "virelayes" of the "Shepherd lasses" (316-17); the bagpipe "that may allure the senses to delight" (323); the shepherd's "oaten quill [...] that provoke them might to idle pleasance" (325-26); and "my little flocke, whom earst I lov'd so well, / And wont to feede with finest grasse that grew" (344-45).

Moments like these most successfully respond to Miller's claim that the poem "unmistakably treats hatred of the world as an utterly false posture" (250). Miller's reading requires that the reader maintain a wholly ironic perspective on Alcyon's lament, and, moreover, treats Alcyon's mourning as essentially static, a tongue-in-cheek, over-the-top performance meant to be seen through, when, in fact, the lament is

more groping and tentative than such a characterization would make it out to be. Indeed, Alcyon does not sustain this mode of lament for long. We might very schematically see his shifts in this section as follows:

**1. There is good in the world, but the gods are cruel and steal it away.**

- "Why did they then create / The world so fayre, sith fairenesse is neglected?" (205)

- "so unjustlie doe their judgments share; / Mongst earthlie wightes, as to afflict so sore / The innocent" (199-201)

**2. The world is a terrible place, and heaven is merciful to rescue the good.**

- "Our daies are full of dolor and disease [...] why should he that loves me, sorie bee / For my deliverance" (274, 278-79)

**3. The world contains good, but let it no more be so.**

- "Let ghastrinesse / And drery horror dim the chearfull light" (328)

**4. The world contains good, but it is removed from wicked people, who thus experience an earth devoid of good.**

- "The good and righteous he away doth take, / To plague th'unrighteous which alive remaine" (358-59)

In coming to the conclusion that Daphne's death not only means her worthiness but his own unworthiness, too, Alcyon pulls back from his desire for all joy to end, and, instead, focuses on increasing his own pain, his own sorrow, and, finally, his own death. This is the moment that Miller cites ("I hate [...] I hate [...] I hate [...]"), but in tracing Alcyon's progression of thought, we can see this poetic moment as more than badly-written solipsism; instead, it is a very self-conscious bargaining with death, as a means of exerting control over the uncontrollable. As such, Alcyon comes to the conclusion that the most significant meaning of Daphne's death is that "with her lacke I might tormented be" (368) and therefore deliberately increases his misery in paying "penance to her according to [the gods'] decree" and doing "to her ghost [...] service day by day" (370-71).<sup>16</sup>

Whereas the gods are harsh (but just) to men like Alcyon, the dead Daphne on her "celestial throne" (380) will intercede for him, "for heavenly spirits have compassion / On mortall men, and rue their miserie" (384-85). Alcyon's nadir of woe, in which he rejects the world and himself entirely, is far from the "travesty" Miller calls it; his words resound with surprisingly hopeful conviction that

[...] when I have with sorowe satisfide  
Th'importune fates, which vengeance on me seeke,  
And th'eavens with long languor pacifide,  
She for pure pitie of my sufferance meeke,  
Will send for me; for which I daylie long,  
And will till then my painfull penance eeke: (386-91)

Part of the beauty and the sadness of Alcyon's adamant faith is seeing the growing distance between what she said and what he believes she said. Here, Alcyon believes Daphne must send for him out of pity or mercy; later, he makes the stronger claim that she explicitly instructed him to stay (in this world of suffering) and that she assured him that she will take action to rescue him: "My *Daphne* hence departing bad me so, / She bad me stay, till she for me did send" (454-55). He compares his wandering through the earth to "the mother of the Gods, that sought / For faire *Eurydice* her daughter deere / Throghout the world" (463-65), combining the story of Orpheus' quest for Eurydice and Ceres' search for Proserpina—but also casting himself much more in the role of the trapped soul than the rescuer.

What Daphne did say, in her dying breath, is "adieu, whom I expect ere long" (292), with no intimation of her sending for him. The distance between her words and what he wants those words to be is the story he needs to tell himself to make his suffering make sense; if his suffering can be interpreted as self-inflicted penance, including his refusal to accept the poet's comfort and hospitality at the very end of the poem, then it has a function—penance leads, after all, to absolution. Alcyon is not seeking to deceive either himself or his listener—we learn about Daphne's actual dying words from his report, after all: this is the story he needs to tell himself as he mourns.<sup>17</sup>

## Lament My Lot

The final section of Alcyon's seven-part complaint offers his acknowledgement of his grief's aesthetic function. We have already seen him cast his grief as a song, by calling for the poet to "weep [...] to make my undersong" throughout. But in part seven he explicitly recognizes that even though Daphne must die, the poetry he has created—poetry which serves as a testament of her goodness and his love for her—will live.

Alcyon opens this section by claiming that "hence forth mine eyes shall never more behold / Faire thing on earth, ne feed on false delight / Of ought that framed is of mortall mould" (491-93) and suggests that people who perceive "riches, beautie, or honors pride" (498) will be the victims of "fortunes wheele" because "nought of them is yours, but th'onely usance / Of a small time" (503-04). Nevertheless, his closing stanzas are very different from his monotone "I hate [...] I hate" rejection, but instead an imaginative readmission of love and truth into the world. He imagines and speaks to "ye true Lovers" who have been "exiled from your Ladies grace" (505-06), but he also imagines

[...] ye more happie Lovers, which enjoy  
 The presence of your dearest loves delight,  
 When ye doo heare my sorrowfull annoy,  
 Yet pittie me in your empassiond spright, (512-15)  
 [...]

These happy lovers addressed directly by Alcyon, and invited to join in his sorrow by hearing his song, are a rather different audience than the man of grief that the poet invites into the poem at the start: Alcyon's woe has become more universal in scope, an invitation, perhaps, to appreciate present joy, because it is not permanent. Alcyon's tone is tender here, especially when contrasted with his numb "I hate all men, and shun all womankind" (421).

In closing his song, Alcyon acknowledges that there is such a thing as light and joy in the world—for some people—speaking to his "fellow Shepherds, which do feed / Your careless flocks on hils and open

plaines, / With better fortune" (519-21) and to "ye faire Damsels Shepherds dere delights, / That with your loves do their rude hearts possesse" (526-27). This is one of the only places in his lament at which Alcyon imagines an audience apart from the narrator—he speaks in the second person to fond men, true lovers, happy lovers, fellow shepherds, fair damsels, and poor pilgrims.<sup>18</sup> Notably, he sees a place for himself and Daphne in this world of lovers, shepherds, and pilgrims—in poetry, in song, in mourning; he addresses this group in second person, but he also clearly anticipates a wider audience and an afterlife for his words: "Lament my lot, and tell your fellow swaines" (524); "rue my *Daphnes* wrong, / And mourne for me" (537-38). In so requesting, Alcyon imagines himself and his grief eventually transformed into both spoken and written poetry, his endless suffering eventually sublimated into verse, as he imagines pilgrims coming his burial site, instructing them that "passing by ye read these wofull layes / On my grave written" (536-37). Unlike the poet-narrator's warning away of reader, Alcyon's words seem to invite readers in; indeed, his publically accessible words here stand in contrast to his own former, more private, characterization of his memory of Daphne's dying words as "deepe engraven in my brest" (296). In imagining a shared woe as his lament ends, Alcyon may make us think of the communal mourning at the end of *The Doleful Lay of Clorinda*, in which "everie one [...] / Gan dight themselves t'expresse their inward woe" (104-05) as part of the Clorinda-speaker's reintegration into the living world, although Alcyon is careful to note that he himself cannot return to the living.

From the poet's point of view, we have heard the story of a man who resists comfort entirely; the poet revives him from a death-like swoon twice (see 185-88; 542-46), but he seems to resent being dragged back to life each time even as he is "disposed wilfullie to die" (552). The poet tells us that Alcyon recoils from the poet's offered hospitality and rest, choosing instead to continue his wandering, looking as if "death he in the face had seene" (565). However, this is not just a cliché to Alcyon: he has in fact looked death in the face, having had his lover die in front of him. The overall effect of the poet's concluding remarks is to attempt



to have the reader shake their head at Alcyon's rejection of comfort, to stand in horror before his overwrought behavior—he "Did rend his haire, and beat his blubbered face" (551). The readers are invited to shake their heads at Alcyon's stubborn and ill-mannered "casting up a sdeinfull eie at me" (549) when the poet revives him. Still, in the context of having experienced the story Alcyon has created about the possibility of being called to rejoin Daphne in heaven, his tears at returning to the world of the living are more comprehensible, and feel less like the tantrum that the poet seems to suggest it is.

In returning to the poet's opening stanzas after concluding the poem, after reading Alcyon's lament, and considering its shifts, its tensions, its rejections and false steps, we may not wholly agree with the poet's characterization of it, his call for a ghostly audience, or his claim that the only function of the poem is to find "fit matter" for "cares increase." The poet's reading, I suggest, is insensitive to the subtle variations in Alcyon's mourning, hearing it, as in Miller's argument, as composed only of the stark moment of "I hate [...] I hate" without acknowledging Alcyon's, and the poem's, gropings and struggles in different directions. It is an easy trap to fall into: indeed, it is *the* trap of depression, that feeling that everything is bad, and it will remain that way forever.

In particular, the poet's division of his potential hearers into those who desire "cares increase" and those who "in this wretched life dooth take delight" does not leave any room for someone who would take delight in a perfectly nice life, or someone who suffers greatly, but desires healing, for example. Perhaps the poet's own misery ("I of many most, / Most miserable man" he says of himself) blunts his own response to Alcyon's lament, and it is critical, I think, to avoid reading Alcyon uncritically through the poet's opening warning—to exorcise, at last, the ghosts.

Regis College  
Weston, MA

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quotations of *Daphnaïda* are from *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*.

<sup>2</sup>In making this claim, Miller echoes Francis Palgrave's "pan" of the work saying that the poem's lack of sincerity is "intensified by the pastoral form here used without any specific appropriateness, and prolonged through more than eighty stanzas" (*Variorum Spenser* 7.429). For additional context, see Lambert.

<sup>3</sup>The lines "and let the dreadfull Queene / Of darkenes deepe come from the Stygian strands, / And grisly Ghosts to heare this doleful teene" might be read as meaning that the "grisly Ghosts" are simply located within the Stygian strands ("the dreadful queen of darkness deep and grisly ghosts.") However, the proximity of "to heare" next to "Ghosts" suggests that we read the line as a direct invitation to ghosts—a reading that this poem particularly invites in its later consideration of the immediacy of ghosts (see ll. 265 and 371).

<sup>4</sup>See Harris and Steffen, who call Alcyon's mourning "an instructional example, a personification of excessive, blasphemous grief" (20). For a related argument, see Gibson. Glenn Steinberg, however, argues that "the distaste that readers feel for Alcyon perhaps reflects our own embarrassment at bodily expressions of grief" (128-29).

<sup>5</sup>I accept Pamela Coren's and Danielle Clarke's respective attributions of the *Doleful Lay* as Spenser's work.

<sup>6</sup>Oram, in his introduction to *Daphnaïda* in the Yale edition, argues that the poem "may in fact be didactic: as a somewhat older man who may by this time have lost his own first wife the poet could be quietly suggesting to Gorges that grief can be carried too far" (490-91). Oram's influential argument suggests that the reader is invited to perceive Alcyon's mourning as "over-the-top" and eventually rejected in favor of the poet-narrator's more moderate helpfulness at the poem. Also see Oram (*Daphnaïda* and Spenser's Later Poetry) for further discussion of the didactic quality of the poem. My own argument considers the notion that it is the *poet-narrator's* viewpoint, particularly his opening lines, that must be eventually rejected.

<sup>7</sup>The most recent studies of prolonged grief (PGD) speak to this oscillating, ruminative quality of particularly intense bereavement. Notably for *Daphnaïda*, Jordan and Litz observe the bereaved's "aversion to seeking support from new individuals [who] may constrict a person's behavioral repertoire" (181). See also Nolen-Hoeksema, et al. While rumination (self-focused, cyclical, negative thoughts) would be expected to "exacerbate and prolong distress following loss," grief theory suggests that attempting "to understand one's experience of loss and to assimilate it into one's view of the self leads to positive adaptation to loss" (856). We see Alcyon engaged in both of these modes throughout his complaint.

<sup>8</sup>Donald Cheney, too, sees the aesthetic dimension of Alcyon's mourning, noting that the poem is "at once a criticism and an endorsement of Alcyon's relentless grieving" in which we see "the solitary brooding that is essential to his art" (128-29). Cheney also offers some useful suggestions about the name "Alcyon" and its

resonances in Chaucer and Ovid, particularly its echoes of "halcyon days that provide a brief respite to the winter's storms" and the myth of Alcyon's "triumph over mortality and seasonal death [which is] a triumph of the conjugal bond" (130-11).

<sup>9</sup>For a different reading of this moment, see Kay, who regards Alcyon's request as a defense of the primacy of explicitly professional poetry in responding to grief (see 52).

<sup>10</sup>Melissa Rack argues that Alcyon's plaintive complaint is "one of stasis rather than progress," suggesting that his rumination is not productive, but in fact "reflexive and self-negating, engendering a silence" which "mimics the absence of the beloved" (672). I agree with Rack's argument that the poem insists on resisting the portrayal of grief as "a melodic and evocative song," instead choosing to point the reader squarely at mourning's "powerlessness" and "chaos" (684).

<sup>11</sup>G. W. Pigman observes that, "while she was alive, Alcyon cared for Daphne as a possession, a tame animal which enhanced his stature among his fellow shepherds; he did not love her as a person with an independent existence. Alcyon turns his courtship into lion-taming. No wonder Daphne is glad to be freed from wretched long imprisonment" (78). I am less certain that we are intended to hear this scene as bluntly as that; while Pigman is right to note the binding of the lion, the language of their love is often touchingly mutual, noting how "she in field, where ever I did wend, / Would wend with me, and waite by me all day" (127-28); further, the shepherds' praise is for the lioness, not Alcyon, who is not praised, but blessed for his "good fortune" (147). The epithalamic language that Alcyon quotes from Daphne's dying words suggests that he would be the first to agree, however, with how limited his earthly love was compared to the divine love Daphne has departed to. For more on this moment, see Schenck.

<sup>12</sup>See Lynn Enterline's consideration of the nexus between poetry and grief; and Peter Sacks for a contrasting view.

<sup>13</sup>Mathew Martin notes the commonplace of the Renaissance elegy's shift from "presenting the deceased in relation to the public sphere" to the "metaphysical realm of God the Father in its celebration of the deceased's new heavenly location" and therefore "demands that the living acquiesce to this ultimate reinscription of the father in the culture's symbolic order" (160). As in Spenser's poem, Jonson's elegy resists this movement to acceptance by choosing "withdrawal [...] to live henceforth as if what he loves may be snatched away at any moment" (165).

<sup>14</sup>Oram specifically cites Virgil 8.52-60, and Theocritus 1.132-36.

<sup>15</sup>Pigman claims that "Alcyon's self-absorption leads him to a view of Daphne's death which contradicts her own. For her, death is deliverance from wretchedness; for him, punishment of himself" (79). By contrast, I argue that Alcyon's desire to deprive himself of joy is precisely an attempt to make literal her words of comfort.

<sup>16</sup>See Pigman 79. He asks, "Why should Alcyon do penance to Daphne rather than the gods unless he feels that she is the one who is tormenting him?" I suggest that penance does not go hand-in-hand with torment, but instead a desire to heal, to transcend and correct sin. A modern psychological reading of Alcyon's grief might consider the extent to which Alcyon's perception of himself as wicked (and

thus causing, indirectly, Daphne's death) gives him a locus of control over the otherwise unimaginable randomness of death. Norton and Gino observe that ritual—including religious ritual (like pilgrimage or penance)—can serve as a “compensatory mechanism designed to restore feelings of control after losses and that this increased feeling of control contributes to reduced grief” (266). For a related view, see also Eisma, et al.

<sup>17</sup>Steinberg notes that “Alcyon's grief is [...] hardly the excessive grief of one without reason or faith. Rather, it is the overpowering sorrow of a spiritual exile who has glimpsed paradise for a brief moment and longs for the permanent realization of that paradise on earth” (135).

<sup>18</sup>The other such section of second person address is between 316-53, at which he similarly addresses “ye Shepherd lasses” and then “you my sillie sheepe.”

## WORKS CITED

- Cheney, Donald. “Grief and Creativity in Spenser's *Daphnaïda*.” *Grief and Gender, 700-1700*. Ed. Jennifer C. Vaught and Lynne Dickson Bruckner. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 123-31.
- Clarke, Danielle. ““In Sort as She It Sung’: Spenser's ‘Doleful Lay’ and the Construction of Female Authorship.” *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 42.4 (2000): 451-68.
- Coren, Pamela. “Edmund Spenser, Mary Sidney, and the Doleful Lay.” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 42.1 (2002): 25-41.
- Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. New York: Pantheon, 2000.
- Eisma, Maarten C., Stroebe, Margaret S., Schut, Henk A. W., Stroebe, Wolfgang, Boelen, Paul A., and van den Bout, Jan. “Avoidance processes mediate the relationship between rumination and symptoms of complicated grief and depression following loss.” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 122.4 (November 2013): 961-70.
- Enterline, Lynn. ““The Phoenix and the Turtle’: Renaissance Elegies, and the Language of Grief.” *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion*. Ed. Patrick Cheney, Andrew Hadfield and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr. Oxford: OUP, 2007. 147-59.
- Gibson, Jonathan. “The Legal Context of Spenser's *Daphnaïda*.” *Review of English Studies* 55 (2004): 24-44.
- Harris, Duncan, and Nancy Steffan. “The Other Side of the Garden: An Interpretive Comparison of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and Spenser's *Daphnaïda*.” *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 8 (1978): 17-36.
- Jordan, Alexander H., and Brett T. Litz. “Prolonged Grief Disorder: Diagnostic, assessment, and treatment considerations.” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 45.3 (2014): 180-87.
- Kay, Dennis. *Melodious Tears: The English Funeral Elegy from Spenser to Milton*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1990.
- Lambert, Ellen. *Placing Sorrow: A Study of the Pastoral Convention from Theocritus to Milton*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1976.

- Martin, Mathew. "The Name of the Father in 'On My First Son': Ben Jonson and the Work of Mourning." *Ben Jonson Journal* 15.2 (2008): 159-74.
- Miller, David Lee. "Laughing at Spenser's *Daphnaïda*." *Spenser Studies* 26 (2011): 241-50.
- Nolen-Hoeksema, Susan, Angela McBride, and Judith Larson. "Rumination and psychological distress among bereaved partners." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72.4 (1997): 855-62.
- Norton, Michael I., and Francesca Gino. "Rituals Alleviate Grieving for Loved Ones, Lovers, and Lotteries." *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 143.1 (2014): 266-72.
- Oram, William. "*Daphnaïda* and Spenser's Later Poetry." *Spenser Studies* 2 (1981): 141-58.
- Pigman, G. W. *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy*. Cambridge: CUP, 1985.
- Rack, Melissa J. "A Song of Silence: Plaintive Dissonance and Neoteric Method in Spenser's *Daphnaïda*." *Studies in Philology* 116.4 (2019): 668-95.
- Sacks, Peter. *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985.
- Schenck, Celeste. *Mourning and Panegyric: The Poetics of Pastoral Ceremony*. University Park: Penn State P, 2008.
- Snicket, Lemony. *The Bad Beginning*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*. Ed. Edwin Greenlaw et al., 9 vols. Baltimore: Palgrave, 1932-49.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*. Ed. William A. Oram, et al. New Haven: Yale UP, 1989.
- Steinberg, Glenn. "Idolatrous Idylls: Protestant Iconoclasm, Spenser's *Daphnaïda*, and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*." *Refiguring Chaucer in the Renaissance*. Ed. Theresa Krier. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998. 128-43.

# And This Gives Life to Baby Shoes: Textual and Other Reasons for Canonicity\*

DAVID FISHELOV

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 121-36.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-fishelov-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-fishelov-1)

---

This article is the first entry in a debate on “And This Gives Life to Baby Shoes: Textual and Other Reasons for Canonicity” <http://www.connotations.de/debate/and-this-gives-life-to-baby-shoes-textual-and-other-reasons-for-canoncity>).

If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](http://www.connotations.de) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

---

## Abstract

In this article, I first relate briefly to several important characteristics of the six-word story “For sale: baby shoes, never worn,” erroneously attributed to Hemingway and the best known and canonical example of flash fiction. I then suggest that the canonicity of this story stems from these characteristics and from certain oppositions within and between them that contributed to the important aesthetic value of complexity, unity, and intensity. Finally, I argue that these textual characteristics and their aesthetic values, which have indeed contributed to the story’s canonicity, should be considered as necessary—but not in themselves sufficient—conditions for such canonicity. For the story to become canonical, it had to also meet a hospitable cultural environment and inspire other writers to relate to it as a model, producing many and varied echoes and dialogues.

## Characteristics of the Canonical “For sale...” Story

A Google search (conducted in June 2023) for the exact string “For sale: baby shoes, never worn,” produced over 80,000 results. This large number indicates the popularity and proliferation of this peculiar story, erroneously attributed to Hemingway,<sup>1</sup> that has become the prototypical example of a recently-born new narrative genre—that of the six-word

story. The story is also referred to on almost every website devoted to publishing six-word stories and in every discussion of this particular narrative genre, and hence it has earned the title of a canonical text. This terse yet highly effective story succeeds in evoking, through the image of the unworn shoes, an entire tragic world associated with the loss of a baby (see Gilead). There are several important and conspicuous textual reasons that appear to have contributed to the story's attractiveness as a source of inspiration for many writers, and eventually to its canonicity. I shall first discuss some of these textual characteristics.

The story combines several formal, structural, and semantic characteristics (Fishelov, "The Poetics of Six-Word Stories" 36-41) that can (appropriately!) be presented in a list of six:

(1) The story is composed of exactly six words. This highly conspicuous formal characteristic has been adopted by thousands of followers. To comply with this strict formal rule, while at the same time wishing to introduce additional words, practitioners of the format sometimes use "tricks" in the form of abbreviations, such as "it's" rather than "it is," or even acronyms: for example, the story "T.H.C., L.S.D., D.U.I., C.P.R., D.O.A., R.I.P."<sup>2</sup>

(2) A narrative element, as opposed to a general statement or a developed metaphor. The text represents a chain of events and, in the "For sale..." story, these events are causally connected: because the baby died (cause), the parents published the ad of selling the shoes (effect). The story can even be understood as representing a complex narrative structure of problem and solution: the parents faced the problem of what to do with the no longer needed shoes and therefore decided to post the ad.<sup>3</sup>

(3) The "tip of the iceberg" principle. Not all of the story's events are explicitly present in the text. The untimely death of the baby is not stated but, rather, assumed by the story's readers.

(4) A punchline-like structure. The last part of the sequence ("never worn") motivates us to go back and reread the preceding part ("For sale: baby shoes") and interpret it differently (or at the very least with a different emphasis) to how we had initially read it.

(5) The text is organized in a rhythmic structure of three pairs of words (2-2-2), a kind of iambic trimeter, in which the metrical units consist of words rather than syllables.

(6) The story is anchored in a realistic, familiar situation. The publication of an ad in a newspaper in order to sell a domestic item is something we all know from our everyday lives, whether as publishers or as readers of such ads.

### Embedded Oppositions in the Canonical Story

A closer examination of these characteristics and the relations between them reveals unexpected oppositions. The notion of telling a story composed of only six words (characteristics #1 and 2) is in itself striking. We expect stories to unfold according to the internal logic of their plot, characters, and other important narrative elements (for example, setting, themes), not by means of a specific and extremely small number of words. Furthermore, stories, both in everyday life and in literature, usually require a much longer text. Condensing a story into only six words is regarded as a challenge because it combines two contradictory characteristics: length and brevity, expansiveness and contraction. The “tip of the iceberg” principle (characteristic #3) points to the tension between the explicit and implicit elements: in our attempt to make sense of the extremely short text we realize that we are encountering only the story’s “tip of an iceberg.”

This realization is associated with an ambiguity that allows for different interpretations, i.e. different assumptions about the hidden part of the “iceberg.”<sup>4</sup> While the “Hemingway” story in its usual, canonical, reading is interpreted as a tragic story about the selling of the shoes of a dead baby, the selling of the shoes could also be the result of the parents having received two pairs of the same shoes or because the size or color of the shoes as a gift was wrong. Although such alternative interpretations are perhaps more plausible than the tragic, canonical, interpretation, most readers nonetheless favour the latter reading (that they



have construed by themselves or after they were introduced to it), because it offers a more interesting and meaningful literary experience. Thus, the “tip of the iceberg” principle is linked to the tension between ambiguity (or polyvalence) and clarity (or unequivocal reading): while the story enables construing different explanations or “gap-filling” (see Perry and Sternberg) for the publication of the ad, hence different ways of solving the narrative ambiguity, most readers opt for its canonical, tragic interpretation, and hence a specific clarity.<sup>5</sup> We can describe this tension also as combining a sense of puzzlement when we first encounter the story with relief from puzzlement when we construe the missing part, namely the death of a baby that led to publishing the ad.

The punchline-like structure (characteristic #4) embodies a tension between two kinds of movement in the reading process. On the one hand, we have the usual, mostly accumulative, mode of reading in which we construe, add, and slightly modify meanings as we move along the text continuum, progressing from one word to the next. On the other hand, the last segment of the text (its two final words), which forces us to reread, re-understand, and reevaluate the preceding parts, works in the opposite direction—moving backwards. When we reach the concluding pair of words (“never worn”), we are invited to reconsider the preceding first four words (“For sale: baby shoes”) and discover in the seemingly mundane newspaper ad possibly heartbreaking meanings related to the untimely death of a baby and the coping of the parents with the tragic event.

When we focus on the story’s rhythmic structure (characteristic #5), we encounter another intriguing tension or coexistent opposition: the story combines typical narrative interest with poetic interest. While making sense of the story we raise questions such as “What exactly happened?” “How did it happen?” and “Why did it happen?” Such questions are strongly related to elements like narrative events, characters, and their motivation—all typically an important part of our experience of reading stories: How and why did the baby die? Why have the parents decided to sell the shoes rather than, for example, donate them? Is it because they are poor, or because keeping the small pair of shoes and

looking at them was too painful for them? Concomitantly, the readers are invited to focus on aspects typically associated with poetry: compactness, rhythm, connotations, attention to the particular choice and order of the words, the text's specific organization and texture—the kind of attention related to what the Russian formalist Roman Jakobson called “the poetic function” of language: “The set (*Einstellung*) toward the MESSAGE as such” (Jakobson 356).

The realism of the story (characteristic #6), namely the fact that it is anchored in the mundane phenomenon of a newspaper ad (the ad appears every day, in the same place, using the same formula), stands in sharp contrast to its specific implied content, namely the loss of a baby, which is, at least in the modern world, thankfully an unusual event. This opposition is also related to an even more important opposition—between the cold, emotionally detached form of a sales ad and the deep, intense emotions associated with the untimely, tragic death of a baby.

To better appreciate the unique combination of textual characteristics of the “Hemingway” story, we can compare it with a similar story published in 1921 that, theoretically, could have become an alternative canonical text of flash fiction: “For sale: a baby carriage, never used” (O’Toole 187). Such a comparative analysis reveals that this specific “carriage” story lacks, first, the elegant rhythmic structure of 2-2-2. Second, and even more importantly, unlike the mechanical image of a carriage, the image of the tiny shoes has a strong emotional impact because shoes are intimately connected to the body of the person who wears them.<sup>6</sup> While the differences between these two stories are small, they probably played a role in the “Hemingway” story being favoured over other theoretical “competitors” for the canonical status of flash fiction. Side by side with these small but significant textual reasons we should also note the fact that the “Hemingway” story was presented in Peter Miller’s popular book *Get Published! Get Produced!: A Literary Agent’s Tips on How to Sell Your Writing* as the epitome of the possibility of telling a powerful story with “a clear beginning, middle, and end” in only six words (Miller 27).

## Oppositions Exemplifying Complexity

So far, I have emphasized the oppositions in the “Hemingway” story: (a) between telling a whole story and only six words; (b) between the explicit and implicit elements of the story; (c) between opaqueness and clarity, puzzlement and its relief; (d) between narrative interest and poetic interest; (e) between the mundane and the uncommon; and (f) between a detached form and a tragic, highly emotional content. I have emphasized these oppositions because they can be described as manifesting an aesthetic value that favours opposing elements, and hence complexity, which is an important aesthetic value (as opposed to simplicity). In discussing certain aesthetic values that are quite often assigned by critics to artistic works, Monroe C. Beardsley, in his *Aesthetics: Problems in Philosophy of Criticism*, refers to complexity, along with two other values—unity and intensity. According to Beardsley, when critics want to praise artistic works by calling attention to their complexity, they use formulations such as “it is rich in contrasts” (Beardsley 462)—a phrase that aptly reflects the above-described oppositions in the “Hemingway” story.

It is reasonable to assume that complexity is indeed an important aesthetic value, and one that can be found in canonical literary works, past and present. While complexity seems to be an aesthetic quality of canonical literary works, we should also note that when textual complexity becomes extreme, it may also become a liability rather than an asset, by making the text unintelligible.

It is problematic, if not impossible, to precisely formulate a text’s desirable or optimal complexity. Part of the difficulty in finding a specific formula for complexity is related to the fact that a literary text is a multilayered phenomenon; and, while one of its dimensions can be quite complex, another can be relatively simple: for example, a sonnet can express complex emotions but be written in a relatively simple rhyme scheme; and a novel can have a complex plot structure but present relatively flat characters, or vice versa. Perhaps the only general formula for complexity that can be offered is that it should be developed as much as possible, but not on all levels and layers—lest the text becomes

too dense to comprehend, let alone enjoy. Despite the difficulty in positing a specific formula for the specific degree of complexity or the specific textual layer(s) in which the complexity can or should be found, we can assume that complexity is an indisputable aesthetic value that can be regarded as a *sine qua non* of canonicity.

Side by side with complexity, Beardsley refers to the aesthetic value of unity, which features in statements describing artistic works as “well organized” or as having “an inner logic of structure and style” (Beardsley 462). This aesthetic value seems to be also applicable to the “Hemingway” story: its elegant, poetic structure of 2-2-2 words clearly makes it well organized. The story also manifests an inner logic of structure and style: when readers reach its end, and after processing its (possible) meanings, the text is grasped as a complete and unified story, despite its extreme brevity. While the aesthetic value of unity can be easily applied to many canonical artistic and literary works, it is important to acknowledge, first, that unity can be manifested, just like complexity, on certain levels of the literary text but not necessarily on all of them: a sonnet can offer a perfect rhyme scheme (hence unity) but at the same time can express a chaotic emotional state or even a disintegrated psyche; and a novel can represent unity of characters but not of plot, etc. Second, unity as an aesthetic value seems to be less universal than complexity. Whereas certain historical periods and poetic schools favour unity (for example, classical and neo-classical), others may advocate open-ended or even fragmentary literary texts (for example, some modernist and post-modernist texts). Still, even open-ended texts may show unity on at least one important narrative level (e.g. plot or character).

The third aesthetic value that Beardsley notes is that of intensity, which can be found in certain formulations that describe works of art as “ironic, tragic” (Beardsley 462). Such adjectives can easily apply to the “Hemingway” story: its tragic content is evident to almost every reader, especially after being introduced to its canonical reading (in case this was missed in the first reading). The story’s ironic element is closely associated with the tension between its intense (though implied) emotional content and the detached, cold formula of a newspaper ad.

Indeed, one important component of the story's strength stems precisely from the fact that such a short, seemingly practical, text carries such immense emotional weight.

As noted above, it is difficult to formulate the exact degree of aesthetic complexity in advance. It is even more difficult to offer a formula that describes the specific relations between the three aesthetic values, let alone a formula for producing an aesthetically valuable text. Usually, it is only in retrospect that we can detect and describe a successful text that presents those aesthetic values which make it a good candidate for canonization.

So far, I have argued that the "Hemingway" story complies with certain aesthetic principles presented by Beardsley. There are, of course, other literary theorists and philosophers of art who have suggested different aesthetic properties that can be found in artistic works. Frank Sibley, for example, has presented a long list of aesthetic adjectives (as opposed to descriptive ones) that are commonly used in discussing artworks. The list includes positive terms such as "unified, balanced, integrated [...] dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving [...] tragic" (Sibley 421); and he then adds: "The list of course is not limited to adjectives; expressions in artistic contexts like 'telling contrast,' 'sets up a tension,' [...] or 'holds it together' are equally good illustrations" (Sibley 421-22). I will not elaborate here on the aesthetic terms noted by Sibley, nor on the rich trail of discussions that followed Sibley's seminal essay. Suffice it to say that I have chosen to present Beardsley's concise tripartite aesthetic principles because they seem to integrate in an elegant manner many of the concepts mentioned by Sibley and other philosophers of art and literary critics: Sibley's "unified" is of course echoed in Beardsley's "unity," and the former's "sets up tension" and "hold it together" are echoed in the latter's "complexity" and "unity" (respectively). Whereas there are different conceptual and terminological frameworks to describe the canonical "Hemingway" story, Beardsley's seems to offer an elegant and convenient one. Furthermore, Beardsley's three general aesthetic values are applicable to a great num-

ber and variety of canonical artistic works; and, since the “Hemingway” story seems to qualify as such, it can also be accepted into this prestigious and heterogeneous club, even if it is much shorter and more recent than the club’s senior members.

### Textual and Other Reasons for Canonicity

After describing several conspicuous characteristics of the “Hemingway” story and emphasizing that the various oppositions of its characteristics are directly related to the aesthetic value of complexity; and after pointing out that the “Hemingway” story can also illustrate Beardsley’s two other important aesthetic values—those of unity and intensity—we can argue that there are indeed textual reasons which may account for its canonical status. This story has not only acquired canonicity but has in fact become the prototypical example of the new genre of the six-word story.<sup>7</sup> It would appear that the canonicity of the “Hemingway” story is thus accounted for by its textual characteristics. Such a conclusion, however, offers only a partial answer to the question: What makes a text canonical?

While there are many other texts in which we can find textual characteristics that illustrate important aesthetic values—such as Beardsley’s complexity, unity, and intensity—these texts have not become canonized. We should remember in this context that only a very small fraction of published literary works ever acquire canonical status. This point becomes clearer when we examine the vast number of hypothetical “candidates” for entering the prestigious club of canonical texts, especially in modern times, in which the publication of literary works has grown exponentially. The Worldometers website (<https://www.worldometers.info/books>), for example, presents more than two million new book titles published in one year alone (!). Even if we accept that only a quarter of this number constitute “belles-lettres” (and three-quarters are reference books, cook books, etc.), we are still left with an ocean of texts from which only a few hundred can cross the threshold of canonicity, and the rest will unfortunately enter oblivion (see Moretti). Thus, certain textual characteristics that, theoretically, can

be found in a very great number of texts, and compelling as they may be, cannot explain in and of themselves a text's acquired canonical status.

The complex process by which a literary text acquires canonicity indeed includes textual characteristics with aesthetic value. However, there must be other, equally important, factors that contribute to it becoming a canonical text. Thus, rather than being satisfied with the textual reasons for the "Hemingway" story's canonical status, we need to consider a broader perspective. In order for the story to have become canonized, in addition to its unique textual characteristics with their aesthetic value, there must have been other factors that came into play in paving its way to canonization. While textual reasons play a vital role in the complex process of canonization, they should be treated as necessary—but not in themselves sufficient—conditions for canonicity. Following are several other factors that have participated in the complex process of the canonization of the "Hemingway" story.

First, the fact that the "Hemingway" story is closely associated with certain popular cultural modes of short communication (e.g. headlines, breaking news, advertisement slogans, text messages, tweeting). These short forms of communication are in turn intimately connected to the expectations of contemporary audiences, notably of youth, characterized (correctly or not) by their relatively short attention span.<sup>8</sup> When certain prevailing cultural sensitivities and expectations are hospitable to certain texts, these texts have a promising starting point in the complex process of canonization. In other words, in order to be canonized the right text needs to be published at the right time and in the right place, thus creating a fortunate match between text and readers. Part of the reason why the flash story "For sale: a baby carriage, never used" became neither canonized nor the "founding father" of a new genre, is that—in addition to the textual reasons pointed out earlier (for instance, it lacks poetic rhythm)—it was published in 1921, when the literary and cultural atmosphere was not yet ready for flash fiction. By contrast, during the 1990s, the *Zeitgeist* was ripe to embrace and appreciate an extremely short text like the "Hemingway" six-word story.

Second, the “Hemingway” story became so highly visible and a memorable reference point to many readers and prospective followers, and ultimately acquired canonicity, due to the very fact that it was (erroneously) attributed to Hemingway.<sup>9</sup> In the late twentieth century, Ernest Hemingway enjoyed both popularity and respectability and already possessed a canonical aura. Similarly to how a witty aphorism gains prominence when it is attributed to an author such as Oscar Wilde, so too does a flash fiction attributed to Hemingway gain visibility and an increased chance of canonicity. The “Hemingway” story’s first appearance was actually in the relatively marginal play *Papa*, which premiered at the Colony Theatre in 1987 in southern Florida and was later published in book format in 1989 (see De Groot). The story first gained popularity, however, following its publication in Miller’s book in 1991, which attracted the attention of many novice writers.

Last but not least, in addition to the story’s intrinsic valuable textual characteristics, as well as to the external hospitable cultural conditions that favoured short forms, and the attribution of the story to Hemingway (in De Groot’s play and Miller’s book), there is another, crucial, factor that contributed to the canonization of the “Hemingway” story: the fact that it has inspired a great number of followers who have adopted the form and produced many and varied six-word stories.<sup>10</sup> To better understand the important role played by followers in the general dynamics of canonization, we can recall the followers and imitators of Petrarch who contributed to building his reputation and canonical status.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, to better appreciate the crucial role of followers in canonization, it is especially useful to consider those works that have “forced” their way into the literary canon despite the fact that when they were first published it was hard to foresee their bright future. This is, for example, the case of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719): Defoe did not belong to the literary elite of his time, and the genre of a travelogue was not part of the respected literary repertoire of his time. *Robinson Crusoe* gradually gained its canonical status first and foremost thanks to the numerous followers who witnessed the success of the book



among readers and then adopted the format of a travelogue, creating what later became known as “Robinsonade.”<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps an even more telling case of the important role played by followers in establishing the canonical status of a literary text is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818, 1831). The novel undoubtedly contains certain textual features that contributed to its becoming part of the English literary canon, such as its captivating plot, complex characters, and thought-provoking and universal themes (for instance, the desire to overcome death). There were nevertheless other reasons, too, that contributed to the canonization of Shelley’s novel: first and foremost, the fact that it has inspired many adaptations—first for the stage during the nineteenth century and then in cinema during the twentieth century, notably James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931). Indeed, it is difficult to understand the survival, the visibility, and the canonization of Shelley’s novel without this rich trail of adaptations. This becomes clearer when we note that the novel had almost no new editions throughout the entire nineteenth century; being perceived primarily as a sensational, marginal literary work, part of the inferior genre of horror stories that did not “deserve” serious critical attention.<sup>13</sup> The cases of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, as well as the “Hemingway” six-word story, clearly support the argument that, in order to become canonized, in addition to its valuable textual characteristics a text needs to inspire many and varied echoes, imitations, and adaptations.

### Concluding Remarks

In principle, the “Hemingway” story is not that different from Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* or Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or, for that matter, from any other literary text that has undergone the complex process of canonization. We should note, however, that, while it took about a century for Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* to acquire the status of a respected, canonical, literary work (as opposed to merely an adventure story for adolescent readers), and for Shelley’s *Frankenstein* it took about a century and a half to become part of the esteemed literary canon, in the case of the “Hemingway” six-word story the canonization process took place in

less than three decades; it was a canonization process on steroids. From the mid-1990s to the present day, tens of thousands of followers have written “in imitation of the manner of” the “Hemingway” story, thus making it *the* canonical text of flash fiction.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that this specific text has inspired many followers to adopt the new format of a six-word story is not only an indication of its canonicity but also an important reason for creating its canonical status. While the relation between a text’s canonical status and its echoes and adaptations can be presented as a classic case of the chicken-and-egg problem, we should not dismiss the important role played by the dialoguing texts (the egg) in creating the canonical status of a text (the chicken). In other words, echoes, imitations, and adaptations have a vital role in creating, and definitely in maintaining, the canonical status of a literary work in the ongoing, dynamic, and dialectical relations between the canonical status of a literary text and its followers.

The “Hemingway” story, as we have seen, exhibits certain aesthetically valuable textual characteristics. In order for it to become canonical, however, it first had to acquire many and diverse followers who related to it as a model and a point of reference, producing numerous echoes and dialogues. In fact, every canonical text seems to manifest both certain valuable textual characteristics and an impressive trail of echoes and dialogues that it has inspired with other writers and artists. Thus, it is this combination of intrinsic textual reasons, external factors in the form of a hospitable cultural environment, and a sizable number of echoes and dialogues, that has established the canonicity of the “Hemingway” story. In conclusion, while each and every one of the above arguments deserves a longer discussion, in the spirit of the “Hemingway” story I have decided to keep my article (relatively) short.

The Hebrew University  
Jerusalem

## NOTES

\*I would like to thank the participants at the 17th *Connotations* Symposium for their helpful and perceptive comments. I am also grateful to the readers of the article and to the editors of *Connotations* for offering very useful suggestions. This research was supported by THE ISRAEL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (grant No. 1479/19).

<sup>1</sup>Two studies of the origin of this six-word story persuasively demonstrate that its attribution to Hemingway is erroneous: O'Toole (183-91) introduces valuable information on proto-versions of the "Hemingway" story found in literary magazines and newspapers during the first decades of the twentieth century; and Wright offers a well-documented hypothesis regarding the actual source of the "Hemingway" story, showing that before it was attributed to Hemingway by Miller (Miller 27), a source on which commentators often rely, the story's specific formulation was introduced by De Groot in a play titled *Papa* (De Groot 25), based on the legends surrounding Hemingway's life. To indicate that the story was and still is erroneously attributed to Hemingway, it is referred to hereafter as the "Hemingway" story.

<sup>2</sup>the pork fold; <http://www.sixwordstories.net/2014/02/t-h-c-l-s-d-d-u-i-c-p-r-d-o-a-r-i-p/>

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of the minimal narrative element required in six-word stories and the possibility of interpreting some of them as representing, despite their brevity, a complex narrative structure, see Fishelov, "Six-Word Stories as Autonomous Literary Works."

<sup>4</sup>The hidden part of the "iceberg" quite often contains the explanation of the explicit part of the story, notably so in many six-word stories that suggest a causal chain of events such as the "Hemingway" story. When both the cause and effect are described in a story, the cause is usually omitted when people are asked to present a summary of the story (see Shen). Thus, the "Hemingway" story can be described as a summary of an (imagined), longer story.

<sup>5</sup>Every story has "gaps," or parts of the story that are not explicitly told but comprise an important part of the constructed storyline and of our understanding of what happened and why it happened. In six-word stories, however, this general principle, applicable to all stories, plays a more central and conspicuous role: the extreme shortness of the form seems to dictate that vital parts of the story are not explicitly stated.

<sup>6</sup>Part of the emotional power of Van Gogh's "Shoes" painting (1866) is precisely related to this aspect (see <https://www.vincentvangogh.org/a-pair-of-shoes.jsp>).

<sup>7</sup>On the linguistic-cognitive concept of a prototypical member, see Rosch and Mervis, and Rosch. On the role of prototypical members in literary genres (e.g. *Oedipus Rex* with regard to tragedy), see Fishelov, "Genre Theory and Family Resemblance," *Metaphors of Genre* 62-68, and "The Structure of Generic Categories."

<sup>8</sup>On the predilection of readers in contemporary culture for short texts, see Johnson.

<sup>9</sup>This attribution made sense due to Hemingway's own use of "the tip of the iceberg" principle; he even used the expression in discussing the writing of stories (Hemingway 227).

<sup>10</sup>I have elaborated on this argument in Fishelov, *Dialogues with/and Great Books: The Dynamics of Canon Formation*, especially with regard to "the hardcore" of the Western canon.

<sup>11</sup>On the widespread phenomenon of followers and imitators of Petrarch in the Renaissance see, for example, Guss.

<sup>12</sup>For a detailed discussion of the important role played by followers of *Robinson Crusoe* in its canonization, see Fishelov, "Dialogues with/and Great Books: With Some Serious Reflections," and *Dialogues with/and Great Books: The Dynamics* 172-82.

<sup>13</sup>For additional details on the role of the novel's adaptations for stage and cinema on its way to the literary canon, see Fishelov, "The Indirect Path to The Literary Canon."

<sup>14</sup>The expression "in imitation of the manner of" is taken from the title page of Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*: "The History of The Adventures of Joseph Andrews [...] Written in Imitation of The Manner of Cervantes, Author of *Don Quixote*" (Fielding). In marking Cervantes's *Don Quixote* as his model, Fielding retroactively created the "founding father" of the new, nascent genre of the novel, and this marking also played an important role in assigning canonicity to *Don Quixote*. On the process of retroactively creating the "lineage" of a new genre, see Fishelov, "The Birth of a Genre."

## WORKS CITED

- Beardsley, Monroe C. *Aesthetics: Problems in Philosophy of Criticism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958.
- Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. London: W. Taylor, 1719.
- De Groot, John. *Papa: A Play Based on the Legendary Lives of Ernest Hemingway*. Boise: Hemingway Western Studies Center, 1989.
- Fielding, Henry. *Joseph Andrews*. Ed. R. F. Brissenden. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.
- Fishelov, David. *Dialogues with/and Great Books: The Dynamics of Canon Formation*. Brighton: Sussex Academic P, 2010.
- Fishelov, David. "Dialogues with/and Great Books: With Some Serious Reflections on Robinson Crusoe." *New Literary History* 39.2 (2008): 335-53.
- Fishelov, David. "Genre Theory and Family Resemblance—Revisited." *Poetics* 20 (1991): 123-38.
- Fishelov, David. *Metaphors of Genre: The Role of Analogies in Genre Theory*. University Park: Penn State UP, 1993.

- Fishelov, David. "Six-Word Stories as Autonomous Literary Works in Digital Contexts: A Response to Paola Trimarco." *Connotations* 32 (2023): 68-79. <https://www.connotations.de/article/six-word-stories-as-autonomous-literary-works-in-digital-contexts-an-answer-to-paola-trimarco/>
- Fishelov, David. "The Birth of a Genre." *European Journal of English Studies* 3.1 (1999): 51-63.
- Fishelov, David. "The Indirect Path to the Literary Canon Exemplified by Shelley's *Frankenstein*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 18.2 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2847>
- Fishelov, David. "The Poetics of Six-Word Stories." *Narrative* 27.1 (2019): 30-46.
- Fishelov, David. "The Structure of Generic Categories: Some Cognitive Aspects." *Journal of Literary Semantics* 24.2 (1995): 117-26.
- Gilead, Amihud. "How Few Words Can the Shortest Story Have?" *Philosophy and Literature* 32.1 (2008): 119-29.
- Guss, Donald, L. *John Donne, Petrarchist: Italianate Conceits and Love Theory in "Songs and Sonnets"*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1966.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *Death in the Afternoon*. New York: Scribner's Son, 1960.
- Jakobson, Roman. "Linguistics and Poetics." *Style in Language*. Ed. Thomas Sebeok. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology P, 1960. 350-77.
- Johnson, Tom. "Less Text, Please: Contemporary Reading Behaviors and Short Formats." Created January 21, 2011. <https://idratherbewriting.com/2011/01/21/contemporary-reading-behaviors-favor-short-formats/>
- Miller, Peter. *Get Published! Get Produced!: A Literary Agent's Tips on How to Sell Your Writing*. New York: Shapolsky, 1991.
- Moretti, Franco. "The Slaughterhouse of Literature." *Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1 (2000): 207-27.
- O'Toole, Garson. "Concoction." *Hemingway Didn't Say That: The Truth Behind Familiar Quotations*. New York: Little A, 2017. 183-91.
- Perry, Menahem, and Meir Sternberg. "The King through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process." *Poetics Today* 7.2 (1986): 275-322.
- Rosch, Eleanor, and Carolyn B. Mervis. "Family Resemblance: Studies in the Internal Structure of Categories." *Cognitive Psychology* 7 (1975): 573-605.
- Rosch, Eleanor. "Principles of Categorization." *Cognition and Categorization*. Ed. Eleanor Rosch and Barbara B. Lloyd. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1978. 27-48.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*. London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones, 1818.
- Shen, Yeshayahu. "Centrality and Causal Relations in Narrative Texts." *Journal of Literary Semantics* 19.1 (1990): 1-29.
- Sibley, Frank. "Aesthetic Concepts." *The Philosophical Review* 68.4 (1959): 421-50.
- Wright, Frederick, A. "The Short Story Just Got Shorter: Hemingway, Narrative, and the Six-Word Urban Legend." *Journal of Popular Culture* 47.2 (2014): 327-40.

# And This Gives Life to Baby Shoes: Textual and Other Reasons for Canonicity. A Response to David Fishelov

LOTHAR ČERNÝ

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 137-39.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-cerny-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-cerny-1)

---

This response is a contribution to the debate on “And This Gives Life to Baby Shoes: Textual and Other Reasons for Canonicity,” see <http://www.connotations.de/debate/parodies-of-six-word-stories>. Further contributions to this debate are welcome; please contact [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

---

## Abstract

This response to David Fishelov suggests that the establishment of canonicity could/should be described as the result not only of textual and aesthetic qualities but as a semiotic process that extends the borders of genre.

David Fishelov's article on the conditions of what makes a literary work part of the canon may remind the reader of a statement by Thomas Mann at the beginning of *Der Zauberberg* where he claims that only the thorough is truly entertaining, i.e. worth one's time. Fishelov's article is truly thorough and entertaining, thorough from beginning to end, no doubt, entertaining because it is a pleasure to see how a six-word-story gives rise to a scholarly disquisition of more than four and a half thousands words.

Fishelov first describes the textual characteristics that might account for the canonicity of a literary text, in particular of the six-word-story he is concerned with, the so-called Hemingway story. Then he connects the textual characteristics of the story with three aesthetic categories or values as described by Beardsley: complexity, unity, and intensity.

While these categories cannot be prescriptive, they help to understand essential qualities of literary texts: they may be necessary but not sufficient conditions. Complexity almost guarantees interest on part of the readers; unity is a more formal quality but does not preclude complex relationships within literary works. Intensity may be more difficult to pinpoint in terms of form, but it definitely is a decisive element of reader reception.

Considering these categories, Fishelov cannot but agree that some works belong to the literary canon. At the same time, Beardsley's aesthetic categories are derived from what is considered as the literary canon. Neither intends to escape this circular dilemma, and Fishelov is careful not to define canonicity.

Even though textual characteristics could be called the foundation of canonicity, Fishelov rightly points out that there are other factors that play a part. They are the result of "a broader perspective" (128). In this case I would have suggested using the more specific semiotic categories, i.e. semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics, the triad of signification within and outside of literature.

Without actually using semiotic terms, Fishelov points to several semiotic factors that have an influence on the formation of a canon or have contributed to the canonicity of particular works. He refers to the "Zeitgeist," e.g. fashions or, as in the case of the Hemingway story, the popularity of a famous name. Fishelov nicely calls such facts "external hospitable cultural conditions" (129), definitely pragmatic issues. They would favour imitation, the greatest compliment for the inventor.

By referring to the success of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* not least thanks to its cinematic versions, Fishelov exemplifies the semiotic extension of the literary work or rather the extension of its reach. Other semiotic means are able to pave the way to new audiences. The literary sign is not limited by its composition but interacts with other sign systems as much as with unexpected phenomena in the process of reception. Fishelov rightly speaks of this process as "an impressive trail of echoes and dialogues" (131).

Finally, a comment on the title of Fishelov's essay "And This Gives Life to Baby Shoes": the title could be said to be "meta-canonical" as it combines phrases from two canonical texts—if not stories—, each one metonymical. Who would not immediately associate Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 and, because of the Baby Shoes, the Hemingway story. Thanks to its contrasting canonical phrases, the title links human tragedy with Dantean comedy. If there were a canon of exquisite titles, I would put this one on the shortlist.

TH Köln



# “It’s Exactly Like That”: Bearing Resemblance in Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*—A Response to Linne/Niederhoff and Hahnemann

CHLOE WHEATLEY

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 140-158.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-wheatley-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-wheatley-1)

---

This response is a contribution to the debate on “The Poetics of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/the-poetics-alice-oswalds-memorial>). Further contributions to this debate are welcome; please contact [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](http://www.connotations.de) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

---

## Abstract

This article examines Alice Oswald’s use of simile in *Memorial: A Version of Homer’s Iliad* (2011). While critical attention has tended to focus on the ways in which Oswald has cut apart and redistributed elements of her original, with particular emphasis on how she has adapted the *Iliad*’s epic similes, I argue that the shards of often anachronistic simile that Oswald has introduced into her descriptions of the dead invite the reader to discover new kinds of connection between ancient and contemporary experience. Building on work published in *Connotations* by Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff, as well as the response to their article by Carolin Hahnemann, I argue that *Memorial*’s paratactic poetics invite the reader to explore not only emotional but also deeply intellectual points of engagement with Oswald’s canny adaptation.

Since its initial publication, Alice Oswald’s *Memorial: A Version of Homer’s Iliad* (2011) has inspired a variety of critical responses, testimony to just how much its structure invites and even demands continued engagement.<sup>1</sup> To date, two highly formative critical responses to Oswald’s poem have been published in this journal; in 2018 *Connotations* published an article by Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff,

which was followed by Carolin Hahnemann's 2019 development of their canny emphasis on Memorial's "paratactic poetics." I want to build upon the areas of inquiry carved out by Linne/Niederhoff and Hahnemann, especially their shared attention to how the "placement of similes in Memorial is meaningful and worthy of investigation" (Hahnemann 46), by drawing attention to the sharply focused figures of comparison found in the obituary stanzas which are located in the middle section of the poem. I will argue that, although their presence has tended to be either overlooked or oversimplified, the similes embedded within the obituary stanzas play a key role in Memorial, helping readers identify and then shift some of their most engrained cognitive tendencies.

Oswald's introduction to Memorial characterizes the poem as a "series of memories and similes laid side by side" (x), a structure Oswald has created by taking apart the *Iliad* and putting it together again. Most obviously, Oswald has removed what readers likely consider central to the epic poem: the story of Achilles and his vengeful response to the death of Patroclus, his ultimate compassion for his enemy's father, and the concluding burial rites for both Patroclus and Hector. Oswald casts her adaptive choices as an "excavation" of Homer's *Iliad*: her version sets aside the better part of the original poem's narrative focus on Achilles, and focuses instead on the deadly fates of the many other Greeks and Trojans whose stories are also present, if not foregrounded, in the *Iliad*.<sup>2</sup>

Oswald's three-part version of the *Iliad* is capped at beginning and end by more purely concentrated renderings of two different formal impulses. Part A of Memorial consists of a bare-boned litany of warriors' names that, in their columnar listing down the page in capitalized roman typeface, create the visual impression of a memorial inscription. Part C elaborates a sequence of eleven images, one stanza per page and each opening with the word "Like." Through their common use of this simile marker, the stanzas of Part C rhetorically proclaim their status as the first halves of extended comparisons, but then no further explicit signposting is provided to guide the reader in how exactly to connect

vehicle to tenor. As Linne and Niederhoff put it, “the simile marker at the end of the vehicle” in such stanzas is “conspicuous by its absence” (21). These ungrounded epic similes describe falling leaves and winnowed grain, gathering water birds and bees pouring out of the hive, “wandering tribes” of flies hovering over a pail of milk and “restless wolves” drinking “the whole surface off a pool” (*Memorial* 73, 78). Many of these images have been repurposed from parts of the *Iliad* that convey the sheer multitude of men involved in a grim and protracted war. Picking up on a pattern established in the middle section of the poem, the last image provided in Part C (“Like when god throws a star / And everyone looks up / To see that whip of sparks / And then it’s gone”) gets repeated twice (80-81).

*Memorial*’s structure in some ways resembles a triptych, with Parts A and C framing a surprisingly complex central Part B that, among other things, alternates between obituary stanzas and repeated stanzas of ungrounded simile. This paratactic structure encourages the reader to take an active role in sorting out the relationship between the poem’s parts. To begin with one illustrative example, the following lines of poetry comprise the whole of page 42 in *Memorial*:

Like the war cries of cranes going south escaping the rain  
 Every winter the clang of their wings going over us  
 And the shock of their parachutes  
 Landing on someone else’s fields

Like the war cries of cranes going south escaping the rain  
 Every winter the clang of their wings going over us  
 And the shock of their parachutes  
 Landing on someone else’s fields

EPICLES a Southerner from sunlit Lycia  
 Climbed the Greek wall remembering the river  
 That winds between his wheatfields and his vineyards  
 He was knocked backwards by a rock  
 And sank like a diver  
 The light in his face went out

Like the shine of a sea swell  
 Lifting and flattening silently  
 When water makes way for the wind  
 And dreams of its storms  
 Huge waves hang in a hush  
 Uncertain which way to fall  
 Until a breeze breaks them

Like the shine of a sea swell  
 Lifting and flattening silently  
 When water makes way for the wind [...] (42)

Linne and Niederhoff have emphasized how the poem's stanzas of ungrounded simile suggest unspecified but evocative points of comparison and contrast with the obituary stanzas that they follow, and in this way contribute to the poem's poetics of parataxis. For example, the description of a sea swell, represented in the above stanza at a moment of relative calm before it is impinged upon by outside forces (only "dream[ing] of its storms"), seems not unlike Epicles, who in Oswald's invention is "remembering" his farm right before getting "knocked down" by a rock.

Hahnemann observes that the relationship of name, obituary, and simile is even more dynamic and variable than a first glance might suggest, and that any given stanza of simile in *Memorial* can be connected to any number of stanzas that precede or follow it. This insight could be easily applied to the opening stanza on page 42 and its description of cranes in flight, an image that gets echoed and elaborated much later in Part C, when the narrator describes in even more detail "great gatherings of geese and cranes" that are "[f]laring and settling in those fields where the rain runs down to the Cayster," and, in a contribution to the poem's metapoetic moments, "[c]ontinually shuffling and lifting and loving the sound of their wings" (72).

In addition, this page stands as evidence of Hahnemann's key point that sometimes Linne and Niederhoff's model of recontextualization "does not apply": the stanza that precedes page 42 consists of a simple if stark list of seven names that does not elaborate on any biographical

details with which the following simile could be matched. As Hahnemann notes, Part B in this and other ways both resists summary, and draws attention to the challenges of commemoration.<sup>3</sup> I too am interested in those ways in which Oswald makes it difficult to summarize what constitutes Part B of her poem. But while Hahnemann is interested in places where obituaries subside back into lists of names, and at times even into emptiness of a blank space on the page, I will focus on those places where the obituaries of *Memorial* get thickened through the inclusion of similes that enrich and complicate, from within, the stories that they tell.

In the obituary of Epicles, to take the case in point, one finds a very direct articulation of how the warrior falls “*like a diver*” (42; italics mine). Other examples of figurative language abound within the obituary stanzas. The commemoration of Euchenor, for example, characterizes him as “cold as a coin” in choosing to die “at Troy of a spearwound” instead of staying home to meet a prophesied death by sickness (47). Asius, who does not heed the life-saving directives of his commander, pitches himself in harm’s way as if “[s]itting “in god’s headlights trembling” (45). And Hector is described as “so boastful and anxious” that he “used to nip home deafened by weapons / To stand in full armour in the doorway / Like a man rushing in leaving his motorbike running” (69).

At times, such well-placed shards of contemporary reference simply help to clarify by conveying in vivid terms, say, how Euchenor views his own life with a kind of transactional logic; how Diomedes has about as much regard for the lost lives of his adversaries as we have for souls of tinned fish; or how Asius in the face of his imminent death stands stricken and immobilized by that which he was not built to comprehend.<sup>4</sup> But at other times the comparisons drawn in the obituaries play a more complex role, drawing attention to the simile itself as a tool of cognition.

For example, early on in *Memorial* Oswald incorporates a pair of similes into an obituary in a way that first introduces and then dramatizes the challenges involved in using the simile as a heuristic tool. The

stanza in question focuses on the story of Phegeus and Idaeus. In the *Iliad*'s version, Phegeus and Idaeus, sons of Dares, the rich priest of Hephaestus, are praised equally for their skill at fighting. In the end, however, they prove no match for Diomedes, who, when attacked by the brothers, kills Phegeus. Idaeus does not have the courage to stand down his brother's killer, but he is saved from death by Hephaestus, who wishes to prevent his priest from being overwhelmed wholly by grief.

Oswald's adaptation of this story emphasizes how a simile can illuminate a character's most fundamental ideas about the larger order of things. In *Memorial*, this story begins with a focus on the father Dares, "priest of Hephaestus," who prays to the god asking him to protect his sons from harm (13). In imagining their deliverance, Dares uses a simile drawn directly from his experience staring "hot-faced" into the fire: "Calm down their horses," he prays, "*lift them / Out of the fight as light as ash*" (13; italics mine). The narrator then provides a corrective that turns on a very different use of the key term "lift." The god hears his priest but cannot fulfill his wish fully, for Hephaestus himself proves in the end less like a fire and more like a single component of much more complex mechanism: "*like a lift door closing / Inexplicable Hephaestus / Whisked one [of the sons] away / And the other died*" (13; italics mine).

In *Memorial*, the ultimate rescue of only one son is characterized not as a god's spontaneous act of compassion, but rather as an "inexplicable" half measure (13). Which son dies and which one survives is not even a matter of differentiation. What is more, the narrator organizes the description of the disappointment of Dares' desires and also presumptions as the brutal replacement of one simile (Hephaestus is like a fire, able to "lift" the warriors) with another simile (Hephaestus is really more like a "lift" or elevator door, bisecting and separating the sons' mortal trajectories in ways that follow the operations of a very different logic).

Similes work to clarify, of course. In this example, Oswald draws upon the contemporary reader's knowledge of a technology associated

with the infrastructure of the modern built environment, and she brings to mind a feat of engineering that enables the intense concentration of human bodies, not to mention capitalist economic systems. More particularly, readers are invited to draw on their own memories of times when the closing of an elevator door brought them up short, perhaps separating them from others with a brutal efficiency. It is apt that the first time when Oswald inserts a fully anachronistic shard of modernity into her poem it is connected to the figure of Hephaestus, who was associated with technology. My point, though, is not just that the second simile clarifies; the whole stanza is organized around a process of correction in which the reader not only is prompted to turn towards the more apt point of comparison but also to think about how the priest's initial ideas reflect his desires and delusions more clearly than the reality of his and his god's power.

Oswald not only draws attention to the relative potential of competing similes but also to how a single event or phenomenon can yield startlingly different terms of comparison. In this way, she shows her interest in developing contemporary literary counterparts to the larger systems of signification that underpin ancient epic. Drawing on the work of William C. Scott, Linne and Niederhoff explain that the similes of Homer "are based on a limited set of so-called similemes, complex patterns or events or situations (a lion hunting its prey, wind blowing on land or sea, trees falling or standing firm) which the poet adapts, more or less vigorously (often less) to a moment in his narrative" (Linne and Niederhoff 40). While some of the contemporary similes used by Oswald are simply stand-alone shards of reference inserted into the archaic material of the original, others have the potential to take on "a life of [their] own" (Linne and Niederhoff 41). As Oswald indicates in her recorded lecture "Interview with Water," she is deeply interested in simile's capacity to "proliferate," "reverberate," and "sprout," suggesting sometimes disturbing but always innovative terms of connection (00:32:30).

If in the story of Dares and his sons we find an example of one simile supplanting another, in other obituary stanzas we find something

closer to what Linne and Niederhoff discuss as an epic capacity to dip into the details of a single yet fairly complex simile to draw out multiple aspects of comparison. This capacity is fully in operation in the conceit that drives the story of Diomedes killing the Thracians in their sleep.

Diomedes is amply established in *Memorial* as an implacable and violent force, a “madman a terrible numbness / Turned inside-out” who sees “through everything to its inner emptiness” (17). The Thracians, in sharp contrast, are described as figures of elegance with “smooth hair” and marble-white horses. “[C]amping apart from everyone,” the Thracians prepare for the next day of combat and go to sleep with their “weapons cleaned and layed down like cutlery” (31). They are described, in other words, as preparing for combat as if it was for a dinner party. The bitter irony, of course, as the narrator soon enough reveals, is that Diomedes is making preparations for a “bloodfeast” of his own (31). “Red-faced” and as efficient as “a butcher keeping up with his order,” Diomedes kills the Thracians so quickly that their names are separated from their souls as the “raw meat smell of their bodies” wakes the dogs (31). The reader hardly needs the narrator’s direct interjection (“This is horrible”) to feel how this stanza enacts horror’s shocking plot twist (31). One might well be curious or even skeptical about the initial formulation, in which preparation for battle is likened to setting the table for a feast, but then the comparison proves brutally, manifestly accurate—only with the Thracians as the bill of fare rather than the hosts.

I have suggested that Oswald draws attention to the multiple ways in which a single figure can be applied. The examples from *Memorial* that I will consider next explore even more deeply the simile’s rhetorical potential, prompting the reader to consider those points of connection that, however much one might wish to disavow them, prove most important to confront. Oswald uses all of the rhetorical resources at her disposal to activate but also push the reader beyond the default response of simple sympathy either for the war dead or for the family members who grieve their loss, prompting readers to understand more deeply what actually links them to the long dead in this archaic war.



The following three examples adapt biographies found in Book 11 of the *Iliad*. This part of the original epic focuses on Agamemnon's success in the field, then Hector's; narrative suspense is built around the back-and-forth struggle of Greeks and Trojans for military dominance. In *Memorial*, the stanzas drawn from this part of the *Iliad* shift away from the original narrative focus, emphasizing instead the familial as well as broader communal relationships that have already begun to be warped by war, even before the death of the individual warriors in question. The narrator, in each instance I am looking at here, slips between different temporal moments and also points of view in order to convey the experience not just of traumatized parents but also, importantly, of bystanders and maybe even local neighbors or villagers, who I argue provide a bracingly critical attitude towards the doings of young would-be warriors. I am not the first to recognize the layered vocal and temporal complexity of these stanzas, but I differ from those critics who emphasize above all how this approach brings the reader close to the scene of grief.<sup>5</sup> I want to suggest that Oswald's rhetorical choices bring the reader close, but not too close, to scenes of grief and mourning. Often, emphasis falls on the vexed webs of cause and effect that have helped to generate that grief. These stanzas, and their embedded similes in particular, play a crucial role in fostering in readers a stance of catalyzed critical attention.

Isos and Antiphos, for example, are characterized in *Memorial* as simple shepherds who, while they survive the misfortune of being kidnapped by Achilles, decide during their time in the custody of the Greeks that they do not want "to farm anymore" and ultimately go "riding out to be killed by Agamemnon" (32). Their folly in thinking they are up for the task is emphasized by a narrator who, like a bystander, receives their story as a matter of common knowledge: "Everyone whispered listen / [t]hat was Isos and Antiphos / They used to be shepherds they were hill people / Working out of reach of the world" (32). Their gullibility is especially evident, as the narrator of *Me-*

morial emphasizes with anaphoric repetition that conveys some measure of exasperation in how the boys themselves have been taken in by fantastical hearsay:

They said it was wonderful to be tied in creepers  
And taken to the other side by [Achilles] that gypsy  
They said he could talk to horses  
They said his mother was a seal or mermaid  
And he introduced them to Agamemnon  
The great king of Mycenae [...] (32)

In other words, even after they have been ransomed and returned home, these warriors remain at least imaginatively within the Greeks' thrall.

Into a narrative stance that is unstable and, I want to suggest, not fully compassionate, Oswald inserts shards of modern reference that intensify the distanced if not critical attitude. Isos and Antiphos are characterized initially as "[t]wo more metal ornaments / Knocked down anonymous in their helmets" (32). The reference to "metal ornaments" seems an apt enough way to figure men in armor, especially men who have been reduced to baubles that enhance Agamemnon's decorated reputation as a fearsome killer. When the narrator goes on to describe Isos and Antiphos as coming away from their time with the Greeks "as proud as astronauts," the image of a metal ornament also brings to mind an unexpected but thought-provoking link between the conditions of war and the simile of space travel. In their mental anticipation of war, Isos and Antiphos are as far away from home as the moon is from the earth. Fully out of their element, they are nonetheless filled with fantasies about how their own participation in the war will adorn their society with both credit and glory.

The obituary of Iphidamas also, like that of Isos and Antiphos, is conveyed by a narrator who appears to know this young man in the way in which one might know a neighbor or fellow inhabitant of a small community. The narrator is thus able to convey with sorrow mixed with general disapproval just how much the boy's parents have spent

in the vain attempt to procure things (first a flute, and a wife) that will appease the very “restlessness” that leads to their son’s death:

[...] all that money wasted  
A hundred cattle he gave [his wife, now widow]  
A thousand sheep and goats  
All that hard work feeding them wasted (35)

The narrator also has access to the sentiments of Iphidamas’ widow, who “said even on his wedding night / [Iphidamas] seemed to be wearing armour / He kept yawning and looking far away” (34). At first glance this seems a straightforward enough figure for how Iphidamas proved emotionally unavailable to his new bride. But as the stanza proceeds, the associations between armor and amour prove even more resonant. This warrior’s ultimate downfall comes down to a failure to kill Agamemnon, even though he has invested all of his “crazy impatience” into an effort to push his spear into “the soft bit under the breastplate” of Agamemnon’s armour. His spear tip, the narrator specifies, “simply bent like lead” (35). The image of a lead arrow echoes the depiction by Ovid of Cupid, and the comparison thus casts Iphidamas as a misdirected version of the capricious love god. Iphidamas is figured as shooting his spear at the heart of his enemy and yet misunderstanding the more local erotics that he has thrown over in order to fight “for Helen” (35). It is not just his “crazy impatience” that is on trial in this stanza; there is also much implied about how his parents have been so busy trying to provide him ways to “amuse himself” that they have “crippled him with love” (34). These stanzas, replete with extended similes of Oswald’s own devising, render devastatingly clear what confusions in their own domestic and filial situations have motivated these young men to “set out together” to Troy even though “Death / [is] already walking to meet them” (37).

The obituary focused on the fate of Socus and Charops seems to me a culminating example of how the impulse to feel sympathy for these warriors gets activated but also then undercut by the workings of both voice and figure. The narrator first takes the emotional register up a

pitch by appealing to the young warrior directly in the second person: "Come back to your city Socus / Your father is a rich man a breeder of horses / and your house has deep decorated baths and long passages," exclaims the narrator in the first lines of the stanza (39). And when Socus and his brother fail to listen, the stanza concludes by adapting what in the *Iliad* serves as a taunt by their killer:

But this is it now this is the mud of Troy  
This is black wings coming down every evening  
Bird's feathers on your face  
Unmaking you mouthful by mouthful  
Eating your eyes your open eyes  
Which your mother should have closed (39)

Pache argues that in using such language Memorial's narrator "recreates and activates the Homeric tradition, mourning Socus 'now' and making the audience share in the grief for him and for the other victims of the Trojan war" (181). Streeter acknowledges, particularly in the abrupt shift mid-stanza to a third-person commentary detailing the brothers' fatal encounter with Odysseus, that this biography contains "multiple and ambiguous perspectives" (44). But she too argues ultimately that these choices in sum intensify the "pathos" of the individual reader's experience "at the same time as the use of the second person address universalizes it" (44). I want to acknowledge the undoubted pathos of this stanza while also emphasizing how its embedded simile confronts the reader with the conditions that have precipitated its tragedy.

Specifically, we find comparison of the brothers to "men on wire walking over the underworld" (39). This turn of phrase invokes *Man on Wire*, the title of the 2008 documentary about Philippe Petit and his 1974 high wire act in which he walked back and forth across a 440-pound cable that he and his team had strung between the Twin Towers. In Oswald's rendering, then, the simile's vehicle lends a figurative precision to the daredevil nature of the young warriors and their disregard of the opening appeal that they stay grounded in their exceedingly comfortable home with its "deep decorated baths and long passages"

(39). More attracted to height than depth, and interested in proving their terrible powers of concentration, they “weren’t listening” (39) in the ways that high-wire artists will not, and really cannot, listen to those below them. What is more, in this stanza the embedded simile performs what Oswald has termed in other contexts as a swing-door effect, illuminating aspects of the lines that both precede and follow it (see Jaffa 19). The phrase “like men on wire walking over the underworld” not only makes a clarifying comment about how the sons seek out high-wire thrills; it also sheds light on the predicament of their parents, who now must understand the space that they inhabit as a potential “underworld,” a space of both acute consciousness and loss.

The stories of these ambitious yet doomed young men gain their power and impact from Oswald’s development of wildly different terms of figurative comparison, but they all include an adjectival interjection that has a productively double connotation. “Poor fools,” the narrator says of Isos and Antiphos (32); “Poor Iphidamas,” the narrator exclaims, “now he is only iron / Sleepings its iron sleep poor boy” (35); and the narrator also repeats this phrasing in a wry comment about how “Poor Socus,” in his effort “get away from his own ending / Ran out his last moments in fear of the next ones” (39). These boys are “poor,” as in afflicted in ways that prompt the reader’s compassion; and surely, they deserve our pity for the way their deaths have been precipitated and sped by war. Read one after the other, though, their stories also intimate that they are “poor” in another sense as well: the conditions of protected privilege seem to have made them feel, however foolishly, that war will compensate for a vital thing they believe their lives to lack. Their poverty, in this second sense, consists in their lack of any awareness of how they are already a valuable part of a greater social whole.

In the obituaries that have been my particular focus in this essay, Oswald has taken pains to make her readers stand witness to the grief of those close to the war dead, but, perhaps even more importantly, to participate in a process of reflection that is adjacent to but not fully congruent with that grieving process. We may even come to recognize in

ourselves what is so carefully dramatized through these obituaries: a short-sighted but deeply held desire to exempt our children from hardship, which may well foster the conditions for an even worse fate. If we do acknowledge this as an uncomfortable yet resonant point of kinship, we will have connected to this archaic time and ancient war in a powerfully ethical way.

Memorial is built upon the premise that the job of epic is to push readers beyond received ways of knowing and being in the world. In order to achieve this important end, the poem must somehow captivate and redirect basic tendencies of human thought. Oswald has reached back into Greek epic tradition and stripped it of the consolations of heroic narrative and its attendant projection of *kleos* or future fame; but she has hardly erased from her poem an emphasis on human agency. While contemporary criticism has emphasized Oswald's transfer of attention to the extraordinary agency of natural elements like water, I want to draw equal attention to the interpretive agency she trusts to be present in her readers. We are invited to recognize in the grotesque ironies of ancient Greek warfare some uncomfortable parallels to the grotesque ironies of our own moment: our blend of arrogance and naiveté; hyper-focused attention coupled with a lack of fundamental awareness; and sense of exceptionalism brought up short by acute mortal vulnerability. Memorial adapts the conventions of epic in order to bring the reader not only into emotional connection but also, perhaps less comfortably, into intellectual engagement with some of the fundamental flaws of human thinking that make war a perpetual possibility.

Having read across selected obituaries with attention to how their sometimes odd but always apt similes invite the reader to engage with those paradoxes built into our most basic ways of being in the world, I now want to point out how Part C contains subtle but important points of connection to Part B.<sup>6</sup> First, it is worth noting that while the obituary stanzas drop out of Part C, we are still invited to carry forward all that they have taught us, to exercise a certain basic humility and also be open to seeing our likenesses with the more-than-human world on new terms.<sup>7</sup> Some of the startling details in this final section of the poem

include the appositive renaming of animals using references to human beings: crickets are likened to “tiny dried up men” (74); summer bees are compared to “[a] billion factory women flying to their flower work” (76). In examples like this, it is not precise enough to say that the human drops out—rather, references to the human become the vehicle in an elaborating simile, not the tenor.

It seems fitting to conclude with consideration of the sixth ungrounded simile of Part C, which is set so resonantly among a whole series of stanzas that invoke the actions of breathing, flying, gathering, and shimmering. Significantly, it interjects reference to the kind of mental perturbation that this essay has tracked in great detail:

Like strobe-lit wasps  
That have built their nest on a footpath  
Never give up their hollow house  
But hang about the walls  
Worrying for their children (75)

Here the reader finds a sharply refocalized adaptation of a simile originally used in the *Iliad* by a Trojan warrior to describe the way the Argives fiercely defend the path to their ships. Oswald has modified it to create a neat summing up of precisely the contradictions that I have traced through key stanzas of Part B: these small insects, having built their “hollow house” too near that which will surely endanger it, have created the inbuilt conditions for their own worried vigilance. Here the impulse to seek out similitudes is both rewarded and refined, as the reader is invited one last time to reckon with how humanity’s most defining and self-damaging quality may very well be our tendency to think of ourselves as exceptions to the rules governing both the human and the more-than-human world.

Trinity College  
Hartford, CT

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Many thanks to Jennifer Buehler, LaDawn Haglund, Marianne Montgomery, and Suzanne Gottschang for their support; and to colleagues at Trinity as well as the readers for *Connotations* for their feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

Carolyn Hahnemann has appended to her 2019 *Connotations* article an "Appendix: On *Memorial* in the News Media and Scholarship." I have included as an addition to this resource an appendix of critical material published since 2019. To sum up the dominant strands of critical interest since the publication of Hahnemann's article: critics have continued to excavate the relationship between *Memorial* and the *Iliad* with ever-more nuanced attention to Oswald's stanzas of extended simile and the poem's engagement with a contemporary readership, as essays/chapters by Jan Haywood, Elizabeth Minchin, Corinne Pache, Leah Middlebrook, and Catherine Mary Simmerer attest. Sarah Kennedy and Hazel Streeter build on Hahnemann's feminist scholarship as well. For more on recent English translations and adaptations of Homeric texts by women, see Richard Hughes Gibson. Since the 2019 publication of *Nobody*, Oswald's adaptation of *The Odyssey* (characterized in its promotional material as a "collage of water stories"), critics have been particularly drawn to the water imagery of *Memorial*. See the works cited below by Dianne Chisholm, Sarah Kennedy, and Pamela Rader. These and other critics, including Yvonne Reddick, Hazel Streeter, and Helen H. Yeung, have worked to further lines of critical inquiry explored by David Farrier, bringing together lyric studies and the concept of the Anthropocene to address how *Memorial* represents the relationship between the human and more-than-human world.

<sup>2</sup>As the colophon of the American edition notes, this poem was first published in Great Britain under the title *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad*.

<sup>3</sup>Because of her interest in how the title of this poem connects it to other types of memorialization, Hahnemann focuses as well on how the blank spaces on the page serve as place holders for the names of all of the other soldiers (from past and present) who have been killed since that "first mythical conflict, the Trojan war, until today" (59).

<sup>4</sup>I have found Hahnemann's own figurative language critically interesting. She notes (as a supplementary side note to her broader discussion) how Oswald often "injects splinters of the modern world into the obituaries [...] by using anachronisms" (13).

<sup>5</sup>See for example Streeter. Haywood reads many of these same obituaries as fully sympathetic.

<sup>6</sup>Hahnemann conjectures that the obituaries thin out by Part C because the sheer effort of relating the names of the war dead has become overwhelming. The power of the images in Part C has inspired critics to argue that the poem's adapted epic similes sweep the reader into an environment in which human struggles and concerns simply get washed away; see Chisholm, for example, who argues that the "greater-than-human" images "clear" *Memorial* of "war-wracked" grief (5). Linne and Niederhoff focus on how the first stanza of Part C, in its emphasis on the wind that "blows [the leaves'] ghosts to the ground," can be connected meaningfully not



only back to the burial of Hector which immediately precedes it but also, in its query regarding “who could write the history of leaves,” metapoetically and self-reflexively to the poem as a whole. To their mind, the stanzas of the last section, in their eschewal of the individual and emphasis instead on entities in aggregate (groups of birds, wolves, bees, locusts), reflect a deep skepticism about the capacity of writing to serve as an antidote to mortality and time. Farrier, too, sees the last section of *Memorial* as marked by a “sense of exuberance” and yet “off-set by a lingering anxiety” (15). He calls the section “a series of envoi” that provides “reflections on the interconnectedness which informs the entire poem” and that invokes both “fragility and wonder” (15).

<sup>7</sup>Rader emphasizes how Oswald “repositions the human animal as part of the natural world, rather than apart from it” (82) and invokes Patsy Callahan’s call for a return to Kenneth Burke’s concept of humility as a means to remind us of our small part in a greater physical universe.

## WORKS CITED

- Chisholm, Dianne. “Sounds Like the Anthropocene: Alice Oswald’s Water-Stressed, Homeric Verse.” *Textual Practice* 37 (2023): 68-89.
- Farrier, David. “‘Like a Stone’: Ecology, *Enargeia*, and Ethical Time in Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*.” *Environmental Humanities* 4 (2014): 1-18.
- Hahnemann, Carolin. “More Context and Less: A Response to Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff.” *Connotations* 28 (2019): 42-64. <https://www.connotations.de/article/hahnemann-more-context-and-less-a-response-to-lena-linne-and-burkhard-niederhoff/>
- Haywood, Jan. “Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*: A New *Iliad*.” *A Special Model of Classical Reception: Summaries and Short Narratives*. Ed. Maria de Fátima Silva, David Bouver, and Maria das Graças Augusto. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2020): 73-90.
- Homer. *The Iliad of Homer*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961.
- Jaffa, Naomi. “A Conversation with Alice Oswald.” *Brick* 90 (2013): 17-20.
- Linne, Lena, and Burkhard Niederhoff. “‘[M]emories and similes laid side by side’: The Paratactic Poetics of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*.” *Connotations* 27 (2018): 19-47. [www.connotations.de/article/lena-linne-and-burkhard-niederhoff-the-paratactic-poetics-of-alice-oswalds-memorial](https://www.connotations.de/article/lena-linne-and-burkhard-niederhoff-the-paratactic-poetics-of-alice-oswalds-memorial)
- Oswald, Alice. “Interview with Water.” Oxford Professor of Poetry Lectures. U of Oxford Podcasts. 7 August 2020. <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/interview-water>
- Oswald, Alice. *Memorial: A Version of Homer’s Iliad*. New York: Norton, 2012. [First published as *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad*. London: Faber and Faber, 2011.]
- Pache, Corinne. “A Word from Another World: Mourning and Similes in Homeric Epic and Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*.” *Classical Receptions Journal* 10 (2018): 170-90.

- Rader, Pamela J. "'This is water's world/ And the works of men are vanishing'": Hydronymy & Anonymity Honour Water in Alice Oswald's *Dart & Memorial*." *Onoma* 58 (2023): 79-92.
- Scott, William C. *The Artistry of the Homeric Simile*. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 2008.
- Streeter, Hazel. "'Keeping to Its Clock': Temporality and Ecology in the Poetry of Alice Oswald." Dissertation. University of Bristol, 2022.

#### APPENDIX: MEMORIAL IN SCHOLARSHIP (2019-2024)

For scholarship published prior to 2019, see the Appendix to Hahnemann's article in issue 28 of *Connotations*: [www.connotations.de/article/hahnemann-more-context-and-less-a-response-to-lena-linne-and-burkhard-niederhoff](http://www.connotations.de/article/hahnemann-more-context-and-less-a-response-to-lena-linne-and-burkhard-niederhoff).

- Chisholm, Dianne. "Sounds Like the Anthropocene: Alice Oswald's Water-Stressed, Homeric Verse." *Textual Practice* 37 (2023): 68-89.
- Gibson, Richard Hughes. "On Women Englishing Homer." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 26 (2019): 35-68.
- Hahnemann, Carolin. "More Context and Less: A Response to Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff." *Connotations* 28 (2019): 42-64. <https://www.connotations.de/article/hahnemann-more-context-and-less-a-response-to-lena-linne-and-burkhard-niederhoff/>
- Haywood, Jan. "Alice Oswald's *Memorial*: A New *Iliad*." *A Special Model of Classical Reception: Summaries and Short Narratives*. Ed. Maria de Fátima Silva, David Bouver, and Maria das Graças Augusto. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2020): 73-90.
- Kennedy, Sarah. "'The Water Is in My Thinking Now': Alice Oswald, Poikilomésis and Classical Presences." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 51 (2021): 139-61.
- Middlebrook, Leah. "Amphionic Translation." *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 138.3 (May 2023): 775-81.
- Minchin, Elizabeth. "The Creation of a Storyrealm: The Role of Repetition in Homeric Epic and Alice Oswald's *Memorial*." *Repetition, Communication, and Meaning in the Ancient World*. Ed. Deborah Beck. Leiden: Brill, 2021. 373-92.
- Minchin, Elizabeth. "'Translation' and Transformation: Alice Oswald's Excavation of the *Iliad*." *Classical Receptions Journal* 7 (2015): 202-22.
- Rader, Pamela J. "'This is water's world/ And the works of men are vanishing'": Hydronymy & Anonymity Honour Water in Alice Oswald's *Dart & Memorial*." *Onoma* 58 (2023): 79-92.
- Reddick, Yvonne. *Anthropocene Poetry: Place, Environment, and Planet*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.
- Simmerer, Catherine Mary. "Memory, Nature, and the Futility of War in Alice Oswald's *Memorial*." *Humanities Bulletin* 3 (2020): 201-08.

- Streeter, Hazel. "'Keeping to Its Clock': Temporality and Ecology in the Poetry of Alice Oswald." Dissertation. University of Bristol, 2022.
- Yeung, Heather H. "Of Lyric Temporality and Materiality: Alice Oswald's Environmental Poetics." *Modern Ecopoetry: Reading the Palimpsests of the More-than-Human World*. Ed. Leonor Martínez Serrano Leonor and Cristina Gámez-Fernández. Leiden: Brill, 2021. 91-110.

# Color and Memory in *David Copperfield*: A Response to Georges Letissier

ANNETTE FEDERICO

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 181-189.  
DOI: [10.5263/conn33-federico-1](https://doi.org/10.5263/conn33-federico-1)

---

This response is a contribution to the debate on “‘The prismatic hues of memory’: Visual Story-Telling and Chromatic Showmanship in Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*.” (<https://www.connotations.de/debate/dickens-and-colour/>). Further contributions to this debate are welcome; contact [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

---

## Abstract

In his essay on memory and color in *David Copperfield*, Georges Letissier pays special attention to the construction of spatial memories. I build on this insight by showing how temporality is also represented through associations with color. Throughout *David Copperfield*, color recurs as a symbol or motif for both change and continuity, reflecting David’s perception of the swiftness of time—a reddening sundial, a room in twilight, a hill covered with snow—while also suggesting an implicit hope that the world will continue to turn, the years spin on for future generations. Letissier’s essay also invites me to think about how we remember books we have loved over time, and how our memories of colors we only see in the mind’s eye may shift and change with every reading. But this is not something we need worry about: rereading a novel, especially a novel of memory such as *David Copperfield*, may offer a consoling glimpse of the “prismatic hues” we cast upon our personal histories, and our reading lives.

I know almost nothing about color theory, but I am drawn to phenomenology as a way to approach the reading experience, and Georges Letissier’s essay opened a little door. This study of memory and color in *David Copperfield* feels like an invitation to walk through a few moments

in this novel where color is linked to perceptual experience—to memory and space, as Letissier demonstrates persuasively, and also to spatial perspective and to the way temporality is represented through associations with color that are almost archetypal. In *David Copperfield*, colors recur as symbol of or motif for both change and continuity. A reddening sundial, a room in twilight, a hill covered with snow—these poignant images register for David (and for the reader) the cycles of his life from childhood to adulthood.

In general, Dickens's deployment of color often feels theatrical and emblematic—Annie Strong's cherry-colored ribbons and Steerforth's red sailing cap, the red caps of the Paris revolutionaries and the red wine that stains the cobblestones, Coketown's red brick buildings and its black smoke, Rogue Riderhood's conspicuous spotted red neckerchief.<sup>1</sup> The palette in Dickens's novels feels bold and documentary to my visual sense, an analog to the vivid hues in some Pre-Raphaelite art, where color can be(come) a sign in a moral drama. And many Victorian novelists used color this way, both to conjure a complete picture for the reader and as moral signification.

The Victorian realist novel is governed by an aesthetic of accuracy. Yet description in nineteenth-century fiction is often both factual and evocative, documentary and dreamlike: things, rooms, faces, clothing all work as realistic details, but they also have a psychological function, often pointing to aspects of a character's perceptive reality. Georges Letissier is absolutely right to note that color in *David Copperfield* functions as more than mimesis. His essay also made me appreciate the overall painterliness of David's memories, and to think about Dickens's use of color more generally, whether atmospherically or didactically. John Ruskin thought that color in painting could precisely suggest the entire spectrum of moral feeling: "Affection and discord, fretfulness and quietness, feebleness and firmness, luxury and purity, pride and modesty, and all other such habits, and every conceivable modification and mingling of them, may be illustrated, with mathematical exactness, by conditions of line and colour" (Ruskin). Could not something like this also be said of Dickens's use of color?<sup>2</sup>

Color signals an emotional temperature and a mood, as well as a value. In Dickens's first-person novels, the narratives of time and self-discovery—*David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* (1861), and also perhaps Esther Summerson's narrative in *Bleak House* (1853)—the narrator's subjective associations with certain colors may indeed be "triggers in the process of remembering" (Letissier 35). Color is an essential layer in David Copperfield's recovery of the past, and as Gaston Bachelard has noted, the time of childhood is always something *pictured*:

Childhood sees the World illustrated, the World with its original colors, its true colors. The great *once-upon-a-time* (*autrefois*) which we relive in dreaming of our memories of childhood is precisely the world of the *first time*. All the summers of our childhood bear witness to the "eternal summer." The seasons of memory are eternal because they are faithful to the memory of the *first time*. The cycle of exact seasons is a major cycle of the imagined universes. It marks the life of our *illustrated* universes. In our reveries we see our illustrated universe once more with its *childhood colors*. (117-18)

I will briefly come back to Bachelard later, for his ideas apply beautifully to *David Copperfield*. Indeed, Dickens was a born phenomenologist, able to convey his experiences of things and places with great vividness, in memorably broad brushstrokes, but also with startling and moving intimacy.

Color and the use of light and shade, prismatically and metaphorically, as well as Dickens's acute awareness of perspective, all contribute to the effectiveness of the memory snapshots in *David Copperfield*. In his discussion of Chapter 2 ("I Observe"), Letissier mentions the narrator's "empirical stance" (29) as well as the "artistic competition" (22) that is played out between lines and colors in David's memory: the outline of Clara's youthful shape against Peggotty's black eyes and red arms. Dickens pays careful attention to the view of the child's eye here, which needs to sort and organize not only pigments and shapes but also sizes. David thinks he can remember his mother and Peggotty "*at a little distance apart, dwarfed to my sight by stooping down or kneeling on the*

floor" (18; emphasis added). He writes, "The first objects I can remember as *standing out by themselves from a confusion of things*, are my mother and Peggotty" (19; emphasis added). In the child's wondering observation of the material world sometimes he sees only patches of color. Thus David observes Peggotty as one associated mass: her red cheeks and arms and the red footstool in the parlor appear to be "one and the same thing" to him (22). In stark contrast, Mr. Murdstone is not seen "out of a cloud" of infancy (19) or as a soft shape slowly coming into focus but in tight and scary close-up. David gets a good look at Murdstone when he is sitting in front of this rather hairy adult man on the saddle of his horse. "I could not make up my mind to sit in front of him without turning my head sometimes, and looking up in his face. His hair and whiskers were blacker and thicker, *looked at so near*, than even I had given them credit for being" (27). David hunts for the right color to capture Murdstone's eyes: "He had that kind of shallow black eye—I want a better word to express an eye that has no depth in it to be looked into—which, when it is abstracted, seems from some peculiarity of light to be disfigured, for a moment at a time, by a cast" (27). He notes the "squareness about the lower part of his face, and the dotted indication of the strong black beard he shaved close every day"—the dotted stubble is exactly what a child would notice, but also splendid portraiture—and the "regular eyebrows, and the rich white, and black, and brown, of his complexion" (27; emphasis added). David will never forget this face.<sup>3</sup> He takes particular notice when Murdstone's complexion is drained of this rich coloration—for example, when Aunt Betsey tells him off in Chapter 14 ("My Aunt Makes Up Her Mind About Me"): "He had stood by the door, all this while, observant of her with a smile upon his face, though his black eyebrows were heavily contracted. I remarked now, that, though the smile was on his face still, his colour had gone in a moment, and he seemed to breathe as if he had been running" (187).

What most matters in the novel (and perhaps in life) is the color that is *remembered*, the first impression, whether of faces or of things. The dome of St. Paul's Cathedral on Peggotty's work-box will always be

pink for David—and maybe even for Peggotty, for when she actually visits St. Paul's she is rather disappointed: "from her long attachment to her work-box, [it] became a rival of the picture on the lid, and was, in some particulars, vanquished, she considered, by that work of art" (402). But time is the real vanquisher in *David Copperfield*. In Chapter 64 ("A Last Retrospect"), David notes, "The cheeks and arms of Peggotty, so hard and red in my childish days, when I wondered why the birds didn't peck her in preference to apples, are shrivelled now; and her eyes, that used to darken their whole neighbourhood in her face, are fainter (though they glitter still)" (735).

Letissier notes that primary colors seem to be in competition in Chapter 2. In one brief but quite important passage, though, green and red complement each other, as if harmoniously arranged:

There is nothing half so green that I know anywhere, as the grass of that churchyard; nothing half so shady as its trees; nothing half so quiet as its tombstones. The sheep are feeding there, when I kneel up, early in the morning, in my little bed in a closet within my mother's room, to look out at it; and I see the red light shining on the sun-dial, and think within myself, 'Is the sun-dial glad, I wonder, that it can tell the time again?' (21)

David's father is buried in this churchyard, and in Chapter 1 ("I Am Born"), David thinks about the "white grave-stone in the churchyard, and of the indefinable compassion I used to feel for it lying out alone there in the dark night" (10). In Chapter 22 ("Some Old Scenes, And Some New People"), when David takes a sentimental journey to Blunderstone, he cannot help but think back to "the rosy mornings when I peeped out of that same little window in my night-clothes, and saw the sheep quietly feeding in the light of the rising sun" (273). The green grass, the reddening sun-dial, the white tombstone glowing in the night—these are the colors that cycle most through David's memory. He mentions visiting or thinking about his parents' graves in the churchyard, the tree that shelters them, the reddening sky (sometimes dawn and sometimes dusk) more than twelve different times in his story. At one point David writes, "it pained me to think of the dear old place as altogether abandoned; of the weeds growing tall in the garden,



and the fallen leaves lying thick and wet upon the paths. I imagined how the winds of winter would howl round it, how the cold rain would beat upon the window-glass, how the moon would make ghosts on the walls of the empty rooms, watching their solitude all night. I thought afresh of the grave in the churchyard, underneath the tree [...]" (215). This is really a temporal image *tinged* with color, metonymically, as are so many images in this novel.

Letissier references Bakhtin's use of the term *chronotope* to describe the relationship between time and space in narrative. He suggests a new word, *chromatope*, to help us think about the ways color is used to represent or complement space—for example, Dickens's description of a fishing village as "pitch, and oakum, and tar" (78) evokes dull colors such as black and brown (see Letissier 28). But Dickens also uses color to convey how David perceives the passing of time, frequently linked through seasonal memories. Later in "I Observe," David sweeps away time in an almost cinematic prolepsis: "A great wind rises, and the summer is gone in a moment. We are playing in the winter twilight, dancing about the parlour" (22). In a similar way, Chapter 43 ("Another Retrospect") begins:

Weeks, months, seasons, pass along. They seem little more than a summer day and winter evening. Now, the Common where I walk with Dora is all in bloom, a field of bright gold; and now the unseen heather lies in mounds and bunches underneath a covering of snow. In a breath, the river that flows through our Sunday walks is sparkling in the summer sun, is ruffled by the winter wind, or thickened with drifting heaps of ice. Faster than ever river ran towards the sea, it flashes, darkens, and rolls away. (527)

The gold of summer days and the snows of a winter evening—this is how David measures time and how he remembers his life. Bachelard writes, "The pure memory has no date. It has a *season*" (116). And does not every season, and even every hour, have its special color?

Georges Letissier's original reading of *David Copperfield* invites many questions, some of which he succinctly addresses—how textile manufacturing created new colors, for instance, and what cognitive science

and psychology teach about color perception. His references to phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, and his attention to narrative technique stimulated me to think about the dynamics of the reading process more generally, and how reading fiction may assist us in our own acts of reverie and recovery. Elaine Scarry has written keenly and elegantly about how writers charge our visual imaginations by simulating movement, distance, texture. Literary works also assist in our perception of color. She notes, to take one example, that it is easier for a reader to picture a description that contains color if the visual field is small—thus it is much easier for a reader to see the face of a flower (or David's blue mug with the "nosegay of seaweed"; 33) than to see a whole landscape (see Scarry 53). I cannot prove it in this short response, but I strongly suspect that Dickens had an intuition about this, and took care to present certain colors in proportion to their objects.

Letissier concludes, "And in a novel underscoring the vulnerability of memories, always on the brink of the infinite indistinctness of oblivion, colours vindicate a form of resilience" (35). This is a hopeful claim. Reading and remembering—including remembering the books we have read—are mysterious and seductive processes. Scarry writes that we are continually surprised when we reread a book because we cannot help but follow different authorial instructions about what to visualize: "one recomposes all the pictures one made *the first time*, but now also finds new pictures turning up in the mind not noticed in the earlier encounter" (199; emphasis added).

The next time I read *David Copperfield*, thanks to Letissier, I will see more blue things than I had in any earlier reading (the staginess of Steerforth's red cap acting, perhaps, as a kind of blot on the retina). We can be haunted and saddened by our vulnerability as readers, humbled by how much we simply did not notice in our earlier reading. But we should also feel grateful to experience that visual world all over again at a later age and season—to see anew its lines and colors, like a familiar dream. "How can you be objective in the face of a book you love, which you have loved, which you have read at several different times of your life?" asks Bachelard. "Such a book has a *reading past*. In rereading it,

you have not always suffered in the same way—and above all you no longer hope with the same intensity in all the seasons of a life of reading” (75). Rereading a novel, and especially a novel of memory such as *David Copperfield*, may offer us a consoling glimpse of the “prismatic hues” we cast upon our personal histories, our reading lives, our hoped for futures.

James Madison University  
Harrisonburg, VA

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Charles Dickens Museum in London claims Dickens’s favourite color was “scarlet red.” <https://dickensmuseum.com/blogs/charles-dickens-museum/the-reading-desk-more-than-first-meets-the-eye>.

<sup>2</sup>In *Bleak House*, for example, the color yellow—oily, sour, decaying—has clear moral associations: Nemo’s face has “a yellow look” (165), greasy Mr. Chadband is “a large yellow man with a fat smile” (304), Krook’s body dissolves into “a thick, yellow liquor” (516), the vampirish Mr. Vholes picks at the “red pimples on his yellow face with his black glove” (696). Indeed, in a recent essay on Dickens’s color logic, Franziska Quabeck shows that Dickens consistently associates yellow with aging, deterioration, and manifestations of the uncanny—as a discoloring of what was once white.

<sup>3</sup>David cannot help interjecting, “confound his complexion, and his memory!” (27).

## WORKS CITED

- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*. 1960. Trans. Daniel Russell. Boston: Beacon P, 1969.
- Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. 1850. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001.
- Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. 1853. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Ruskin, John. *The Elements of Drawing in Three Letters to Beginners. The Complete Works of John Ruskin*. National Library Association, n.d. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/30325/pg30325-images.html>. 23 July 2024.
- Letissier, Georges. “‘The prismatic hues of memory’: Visual Story-Telling and Chromatic Showmanship in Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*.” *Connotations* 32 (2023): 17-38. <https://www.connotations.de/article/georges-letissier-the-prismatic-hues-of-memory-dc-769-visual-story-telling-and-chromatic-showmanship-in-charles-dickenss-david-copperfield/>.

Quabeck, Franziska. "The Yellow Leaf: Age and the Gothic in Dickens." *Connotations* 33 (2024): 1-17. <https://www.connotations.de/article/the-yellow-leaf-age-and-the-gothic-in-dickens/>.

Scarry, Elaine. *Dreaming by the Book*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.

# Lost and Found: Textual and Intertextual Retrieval in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Exhumation Letters and the "Willowwood" Sonnets

CARL PLASA

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 190-225.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-plasa-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-plasa-1)

---

This article is the first entry in a debate on "Lost and Found: Textual and Intertextual Retrieval in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Exhumation Letters and the 'Willowwood' Sonnets" (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/exhumation-letters-and-willowwood-sonnets>). If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

---

## Abstract

This article is divided into two sections, the first of which is concerned with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's letters, written between 17 December 1868 and 26 October 1869, in which he considers the exhumation of the manuscript of his poems that he buried with his wife, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, following her probable suicide in February 1862. While this macabre act of textual retrieval, carried out in Highgate Cemetery on 5 October 1869, is the most infamous incident in Rossetti's biography and mid-Victorian literary history in general, the argument here is that its epistolary construction has not received due critical examination, just as Rossetti's voluminous correspondence as a whole remains the least studied element of his intermedial *œuvre*.

In its second section, the article turns the critical focus from Rossetti's letters to his "Willowwood" sonnets, as first published in the *Fortnightly Review* on 1 March 1869, contending that this quartet of poems not only precedes the disinterment in a chronological sense but also contains several covert prefigurations of the episode, which it falls to the reader to uncrypt. Yet if the sonnets obliquely foreshadow the exhumation—and indeed are central to the very book (*Poems* [1870]) whose publication motivates the undertaking in the first place—they also have an ultimately more significant retrospective dimension, in the shape of their intertextual dialogue with John Keats's "Isabella; or The Pot of Basil" (1820). As the article demonstrates, Rossetti's turn to Keats's text is neither random nor surprising since "Isabella" is itself marked by lurid scenes of burial and disinterment, loss and

reclamation which would surely have resonated with the troubled artist-poet. What is surprising, however, is that "Isabella"'s presence in "Willowwood" has to date gone altogether unnoticed, despite the extensive critical debate which, in sharp contrast to Rossetti's correspondence, the sonnets have provoked.

## Introduction

Although better-known as an artist, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was also a poet of considerable stature, and at the end of 1861 his prospects in this latter regard seemed bright. He had just published *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri*, a book of translations of material "hardly kept alive through centuries of neglect" (D. G. Rossetti, "Preface" viii) and was on the cusp of publishing *Dante at Verona and Other Poems*, a collection of his own original verse, due to appear in the following year. Yet this dynamic publishing programme was dramatically upset by the likely suicide from a laudanum overdose of his wife, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, on 11 February 1862, less than two years after their marriage on 23 May 1860. Stricken with grief and guilt, Rossetti committed his unpublished manuscript to Siddal's coffin at the time of her funeral six days later, adding it to the gift of the Bible that had been lodged there too. According to report, he followed this grand gesture of poetic self-renunciation with an equally grand statement, telling Ford Madox Brown: "'I have often been writing at those poems when Lizzie was ill and suffering, and I might have been attending to her, and now they shall go'" (qtd. in W. M. Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* 1.225).

Rossetti's inhumation of his lost book, "bound in rough grey calf" with "red edges to the leaves" (D. G. Rossetti, *Correspondence* 281), was not, however, the last chapter in that book's story but only its first. Seven and a half years later he took the decision, encouraged by Charles Augustus Howell—friend, agent and accomplice—to exhume his poems, an operation duly performed in Highgate Cemetery on the night of 5 October 1869 at a cost of two guineas, paid to a Blackfriars funeral company.<sup>1</sup> While Rossetti himself was not present at this notorious event (it was supervised by Howell instead), he writes about it in his

letters, in a style ranging from the indirect to the taciturn and the detailed but business-like to the self-exonerating, and it is this correspondence, produced between mid-December 1868 and late October 1869, that provides the focus for this article's first section. In a departure from the critical norm, the approach to this epistolary corpus adopted here favours it with the same kind of close textual analysis usually reserved for Rossetti's poetry and, in a secondary critical swerve, also reads Rossetti's exhumation scheme alongside his concurrent desire for the return of another precious thing, Siddal's *Clerk Saunders* (1857), as announced in a letter of 19 April 1869 to Charles Eliot Norton, the drawing's American owner at the time. Why should Rossetti's wish to reclaim *Clerk Saunders* surface at this particular juncture? In what ways does Siddal's haunting watercolour tie in with the concerns of the evolving disinterment project?

In its second section, the article shifts the spotlight onto Rossetti's "Willowwood" sonnets, completed on 18 December 1868 (see Lewis 119), one day after Rossetti makes his initial epistolary allusion to the idea of the exhumation, coded, in a reply to Howell, as "the poem question" (*Correspondence* 131). These four interlinked texts (often conveniently grouped under the rubric of "Willowwood") first appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* on 1 March 1869 at and as the beginning of a larger sequence titled "Of Life, Love, and Death: Sixteen Sonnets." Subsequently they became the literal and figurative centrepiece of *The House of Life*, a greatly augmented version of the original series included in Rossetti's *Poems* (1870), the volume in whose service the exhumation had been carried out. This version of the sequence was in turn more than doubled in size (rising from fifty to 101 sonnets) when published in definitive form in *Ballads and Sonnets* in 1881, one year before Rossetti's demise.

Unlike the exhumation letters, which turn upon the fetishistic desire to retrieve a lost book and concomitantly bring about Rossetti's rebirth from the poetic silence in which he had entombed himself, "Willowwood" is animated, in the first instance, by a more radical yearning, as

its speaker hallucinates reunion with his late wife, before finally conceding the impossibility of ever actuating such a goal.<sup>2</sup> Yet even as these poems are thus thematically concerned with a different type of loss to that navigated in the letters, they nonetheless contain a number of anticipatory traces of the exhumation incident which can be uncovered by close attention to the specific features of Rossetti's language, from words and images (some of which are perhaps puzzling or unexpected) to the phonetic patterning of his verse.<sup>3</sup>

While these curiously prospective traces are an important facet of "Willowwood," they are ultimately secondary to the sonnets' intertextual dialogue with John Keats's "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil" (1820). It is perhaps not surprising that Rossetti should gravitate towards this particular text at the time since it shares his own preoccupations with burial and exhumation; yet what is surprising is that "Isabella"'s presence in "Willowwood" has to date gone altogether unnoticed, despite the extensive critical debate which, in sharp contrast to Rossetti's letters, the poems have generated. "Isabella" might thus be construed as a lost or buried text that invites its own kind of retrieval, a secret counterpart or companion, as it were, to the book hidden underground with Siddal in Highgate.

### 1. The Exhumation Letters: "Bogies" and Revenants, an Owl and a Worm

Rossetti's eyes desire some feverish thing, but the mouth and chin hesitate in pursuit. All Rossetti is in that story of his *MS.* buried in his wife's coffin. He could do it, he could repent of it; but he should have gone and taken it back himself: he sent his friends.

Eleanore Duse, qtd. in Symons 51 (*italics in original*)

During the year or so leading up to the retrieval of his manuscript, Rossetti's letters repeatedly refer to a "spell of ill health" (*Correspondence* 153), mentioning, in particular, "a break-down in eyesight." This causes him to experience "a tendency to waving and swimming in all that [he looks] at" (*Correspondence* 106) as well as "[w]hirling [and] flickering" (*Correspondence* 95)—symptoms that implicitly threaten the son with



the blindness which the father, Gabriele Rossetti, himself constantly feared.<sup>4</sup> These ocular disorders prove to be psychosomatic and, in the words of Henry Treffry Dunn, Rossetti's studio assistant, are part of what makes him "at times [...] a veritable *Malade Imaginaire*" (qtd. in D. G. Rossetti, *Correspondence* 3; italics in original), even as they have far-reaching consequences both negative and positive. They oblige Rossetti to limit his activities as painter, on the one hand, and turn (or return) to the art of poetry as his creative outlet, on the other.

The first public sign of this reorganisation of imaginative energies takes the form of the sonnets in the *Fortnightly*, which, as Rossetti wrote to William Allingham on 23 December 1868, were a combination of "ravelled rags of verse" (*Correspondence* 136) stretching back to the early 1850s and new work written up to within a few days of the letter's festive dating and which of course includes "Willowwood." When he proudly encloses these compositions in a letter written to his mother on the day of their publication, however, Rossetti introduces them in a language far less matter-of-fact than that used for Allingham—a peculiar mix of the skittish and the ghoulish:

I send you my sonnets, which are such a lively band of bogies that they may join with the skeletons of Christina's various closets, & entertain you by a ballet. Their shanks are rather ghastly, it is true, but they will keep their shrouds down tolerably close, and creak enough themselves to render a piano unnecessary. As their own vacated graves serve them to dance on, there is no danger of their disturbing the lodgers beneath, and, if any one overhead objects, you may say that it amuses them perhaps and will be soon over, and that as their hats were probably not buried with them these will not be sent round at the close of the performance. (*Correspondence* 156-57)

As Rossetti's editor, William E. Fredeman, speculates, "[p]erhaps the overwrought *danse macabre* imagery here reveals DGR's dread of his mother finding out about the projected exhumation" (D. G. Rossetti, *Correspondence* 157n1; italics in original), a fear compounded by the fact that Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti was the owner of the family grave (which Siddal shared with Rossetti's purblind father, interred there in 1854), and would need to grant her consent before it could be unsealed. Yet if the "imagery" of this passage "reveals" a "dread" of maternal

discovery, it might be wondered why Rossetti should feel moved to deploy it. Perhaps—to extend Fredeman's speculations—it is that, far from wanting to keep his nascent plans a secret, he wishes to confess them, or, to be more precise, to do both things at once? Such ambivalence expresses itself in the chain of gothic tropes which dominates this passage and which functions as a form of screen, in the double sense of the word as something which both hides and displays. For Rossetti's mother, the metaphors of "bogies," "skeletons," "shrouds" and "graves" conspire to form an innocent if disquieting pantomime, applying, as they do, to the poems her son had just published. For the knowing reader, conversely, these sinister figures are burdened with associations pointing unequivocally towards Plot No. 5779 in Highgate Cemetery and the "disturbing" of the "lodgers beneath"—or one of them, at least—that will take place some seven months later. As Angela Leighton puts it, there is "[s]omething in the show of the writing [that] signals the very thing [Rossetti] would hide" (3).

This passage is a "rare" moment of "verbal flamboyance" (Leighton 3) in Rossetti's epistolary archive and has two further aspects to be considered here. The first entails a certain parallel between Rossetti's "sonnets," defined as a "lively band of bogies," and the letter in which they appear, which, as William Michael Rossetti notes, is itself written in "so deadly-lively a style" (*Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 2.200). This highly charged maternal missive is, in other words, just as entertaining as the "ballet" Rossetti imagines his poems performing in concert with his sister's; and the "show" is rendered all the more appealing, in turn, because it is not being put on for financial gain. The "hats" belonging to the troupe of creaking sonnet-bogies "were probably not buried with them," Rossetti jests, and so are unlikely to be circulated for money when the dance is done.

The second and more complex of these additional aspects, which no critic has so far remarked upon, is the strange *pas de deux* which the passage enters into with an anecdote recounted in William Bell Scott's *Autobiographical Notes* (1892). Here Scott, who was one of the few whom

Rossetti was to tell about the “projected exhumation,” recalls an exchange with his friend when he was staying with him at Penkill Castle in Scotland in the autumn of 1868:

It was now midsummer, and [Alice Boyd], finding D. G. R. in a depression of mind from the idea that his eyes were failing, prevailed upon him to accompany me to Ayrshire for an autumn vacation. He did so; we were a party of four—Miss Boyd’s cousin, Miss Losh of Ravenside, being a visitor at that time. This old lady—she was about seventy years of age—had somehow or other taken a jealous dislike to me, thinking I had too much influence over her younger cousin, who entertained me so much and who lived with us in London in the winter. She had therefore looked forward to Rossetti’s appearance, fully intending to play him off against me, which accordingly she did in the most fantastic way, without in the least knowing anything of the fearful skeletons in his closet, that were every night, when the ladies had gone, brought out for his relief and my recreation. These skeletons, which were also made to dance along the mountain highroad during our long walks, would have surprised the old lady not a little. They shall not be interviewed here, and without them we got on pretty well, although his talk continually turned upon his chance of blindness and the question, why then should he live? “Live for your poetry,” said I. Strangely enough, this seemed never to have occurred to him as a possible interest or resource. Live for your poetry was echoed by the ladies. (108-09)

Scott’s language resonates strongly with the gruesome yet exuberant flight of imagination in Rossetti’s letter, making it clear that the unruly “skeletons” Rossetti bundles into Christina’s “closet” more truly belong in his, even as she is the author of poetic “bogies” of her own, the most celebrated of which is “Goblin Market” (1862). It is not that Scott echoes Rossetti here, since Rossetti’s letter did not appear in print until 1895, but rather that Rossetti echoes Scott; or rather the conversation which took place between them during his troubled autumnal retreat at Penkill.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time as engaging in the exhumation scheme, which the letter to his mother both masks and “signals,” Rossetti embarks upon the pursuit of Siddal’s *Clerk Saunders* (Fig. 1). Here is how he frames that pursuit in the letter to Norton mentioned at the start of this article:

I have long wished to make a proposal to you. It would be a great satisfaction to me to possess the drawing you have by my late wife of “Clerk Saunders”

to add to those of hers which are now mine, and which every year teaches me to value more & more as works of genius, even apart from their personal interest to me. None would ever have been parted with, of course, had we not then hoped that these little things were but preludes to much greater ones,—a hope which was never to be realized. (*Correspondence* 175)

The "drawing" to which Rossetti refers in this passage was one of seven works that Siddal first displayed as part of the Pre-Raphaelite Exhibition held at Russell Place in 1857 and that Norton purchased after viewing it in "the British Art Show that toured the United States later that year" (Dunstan 25). It is not an original creation, but inspired, like so much Pre-Raphaelite art, by a medieval source, in this instance the eerie and eponymous folk ballad, "Clerk Saunders." As Nat Reeve observes, Siddal would have found a version of this ballad in her 1807 edition of Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-03) (see Reeve 77).

Rossetti's respective quests for *Clerk Saunders* and his far-flung book are not just linked in terms of their chronological overlap, however, but intimately imbricated in other ways, even as they are in some respects at odds. The first of their connections is that both Siddal's picture and Rossetti's manuscript constitute material symbols of creative potential abruptly truncated and laid waste, albeit temporarily in his case. The second is that the picture Rossetti would like returned to him is itself based on a tale of revenancy, in which Saunders comes back from his grave to visit his lover, Margaret, after he has been murdered by one of her seven brothers for having sex with her outside wedlock.

As much as it is about a visitation from the grave, "Clerk Saunders" is a story that ends, all the same, with a "troth-breaking ritual" (Reeve 86n35) and a leavetaking, and it is this decisive rupture between lovers on which Siddal chooses to focus. As Reeve glosses the picture:

May Margaret kisses a willow wand for her lover Clerk Saunders. Saunders is a revenant, stabbed the day before by Margaret's brothers, back from his grave to set the couple free from their binding lovers' vows. The pair enact [sic] a ritual separation, where Margaret's gift of the willow wand releases Saunders from his spectral state. (73)

*Clerk Saunders* thus heralds a return to the grave that is antithetical to the path Rossetti has staked out for his lost manuscript.

Nonetheless, *Clerk Saunders* includes other elements that once again link it to the exhumation, since, like Siddal's coffin, the picture contains two texts, each of which is a Book of Hours, with neither featuring in the original ballad. The first lies on a lectern towards the drawing's bottom-right corner and appears to be in immaculate condition, its clasp unopened, while the second is less obtrusively located in the "alcove over Margaret's bed" (Reeve 78). As Reeve elaborates, this item:

is a similar size to the Book of Hours on the lectern, but its covers are a drab green and faded at the edges, and a rough brushstroke technique has been used to depict loose pages poking out of the top. The second book's devotional accoutrement—a small wooden crucifix—is not as grand as the decorated lectern. Yet, unlike the lectern book, the painting [sic] emphasizes that the second book is battered with use. (78)

In terms of the story that *Clerk Saunders* reimagines, the ghostly doubling of the first book by the second can be read as symbolising Margaret's passage from virgin to fallen woman. Yet in the context of the exhumation, it assumes another significance and figures another fall, as the calf-skin volume Rossetti initially insisted his "late wife" take with her as she heads on into the afterlife eventually comes back to him in a "bad state" and is a "sad wreck" (D. G. Rossetti, *Correspondence* 312, 311).

As can be inferred from a letter to Jane Morris of 14 August 1869, Rossetti's desire for the return of *Clerk Saunders* has been met by that date, prompting him to describe the picture as a "water-colour by poor Lizzy" that "looks very fine though certainly quite quaint enough" (*Correspondence* 232), an appraisal noticeably more muted than that given in the letter to Norton, where the drawing is catalogued among Siddal's "works of genius." Be that as it may, two days after this letter and with the image safely back in his hands, Rossetti redirects his attentions to his more ambitious salvage operation. He resumes the exchange with Howell on the matter that the two had begun some eight

months earlier and haltingly informs his interlocutor that he now finally "feel[s] disposed, if practicable [...] to go in for the recovery of [his] poems if possible" (*Correspondence* 235).

Nicknamed "Owl" among Pre-Raphaelite circles, Howell was Rossetti's agent not only in the mid-Victorian art-world, selling a large number of his paintings and drawings (see Cline vii), but also in the underworld realm of the exhumation plot, offering him various forms of "friendly aid" (D. G. Rossetti, *Correspondence* 235). These included asking the Home Secretary, Henry Austin Bruce, to waive the permission for the opening of Siddal's grave that would ordinarily have been required from its proprietress and presiding over the exhumation itself, in the company of several others. These were the lawyer, Henry Virtue Tebbs, recruited to assure the "Cemetery authorities" that the "removal" of the "papers" from Siddal's coffin was not being perpetrated in the name of a "fraud" (D. G. Rossetti, *Correspondence* 303); a doctor, Llewellyn Williams, who served as the exhumation's "medical witness"; and "two [...] workmen" (Matthews 20) to do the digging.

But as well as operating as his client's surrogate in the "trying task" (D. G. Rossetti, *Correspondence* 303) of the disinterment, Howell was widely reputed during his lifetime to have a "*fatal gift for romancing, or inability to discriminate between fact and fiction*" (Angeli xi; italics in original) and is commonly regarded as the likely source of the well-known cover story that arose after Rossetti's grave-goods had been reclaimed. That story was designed to palliate both the enormity of the desecration that had occurred and the realities of post-mortem decay (as charted more fully below) and involved two related assertions. Firstly, that when Siddal's tomb was pried open, her "body" was "still beautiful" (Matthews 25); and, secondly, that "her red hair had grown in death until it filled the coffin," its "glowing colour" (Marsh, *Legend* 28) matching the decorative "red edges" of the "leaves" of the book her husband had entrusted to her care.

Rossetti embraces these fabrications uncritically, overtly echoing the second, in particular, in the final line of "Life-in-Love," Sonnet XVI from the 1870 iteration of *The House of Life*, where the poem's speaker

finds himself dazzled by his beloved's "golden hair" as it "[l]ies [...] undimmed in death" (l. 14). He also echoes them, albeit more laconically, in his correspondence, as, for instance, in a confessional post-exhumation letter to William Michael of 13 October 1869. After advising his brother, about halfway through his account, that "the thing is done," Rossetti writes:

All in the coffin was found quite perfect, but the book, though not in any way destroyed, is soaked through & through and had to be still further saturated with disinfectants. It is now in the hands of the medical man who was associated with Howell in the disinterment, and who is carefully drying it leaf by leaf. There seems reason to fear that some minor portion is obliterated, but I must hope this may not prove to be the most important part. I shall not I believe be able to see it for at least a week yet. (*Correspondence* 302-03)

Here it is not only that Rossetti elides any reference to the fiery miracle of Siddal's hair, but also that he seems reluctant to dwell upon her post-mortem appearance *per se*, gliding past it in one tight-lipped statement—"[a]ll in the coffin was found quite perfect"—as if anxious not to allow the recipient of such a remarkable report the chance to dwell upon or challenge it. Leaving aside its questionable provenance, the statement is hardly persuasive, especially as it is immediately contradicted when Rossetti switches the focus to the "book" that is his main concern and laments its dilapidated condition. Even considered in isolation, the statement is "actually [...] ambiguous" (Lutz, *Pleasure* 22), since "quite" has two senses which are at odds with one another: the word can mean "entirely" (*OED*; sense I.), on the one hand, and "relatively" or "reasonably" (*OED*; sense III.) on the other.

The meretricious and self-serving stories concocted by Howell and replicated by Rossetti are not difficult to dismantle, especially when juxtaposed with sources the artist-poet would know well. One such source is "Clerk Saunders" and specifically the dialogue towards the ballad's end, where Margaret implores her revenant-lover to accommodate her in the grave into which he is about to vanish:

'Is there any room at your head, Saunders?  
Is there any room at your feet?  
Or any room at your side, Saunders,  
Where fain, fain, I wad sleep?'

'There's nae room at my head, Marg'ret,  
 There's nae room at my feet;  
 My bed it is full lowly now:  
 Among the hungry worms I sleep.

'Cauld mould is my covering now,  
 But and my winding-sheet;  
 The dew it falls nae sooner down,  
 Than my resting-place is weet.' (ll. 109-20)

Or there is Christina Rossetti's "Death" (1848), whose chilling opening offers a yet more pertinent evocation of the posthumous outrages Sidal's corpse might have sustained during its slumbers beneath the earth:

"The grave-worm revels now"  
 Upon the pure white brow,  
 And on the eyes so dead and dim,  
 And on each putrifying limb,  
 And on the neck 'neath the long hair;  
 Now from the rosy lips  
 He damp corruption sips,  
 Banquetting everywhere.  
 Creeping up and down through the silken tresses  
 That once were smoothed by her husband's caresses,  
 In her mouth, and on her breast. (ll. 1-11)

From these terrifying perspectives, it is clear that Rossetti's fraternal disclosure of the fact of the exhumation produces its own secrets, as he disavows the processes of physiological decomposition the two excerpts just cited so graphically dramatise, purging them from his prose with the same diligence as the "medical man" disinfects the cherished "book" of the contagions in which it is "soaked."

Yet even as Rossetti refuses explicitly to acknowledge such processes, they are still active beneath the surface of his language, concealed and revealed at once. This is perhaps most strikingly evident when he writes to Brown the day after penning the confessional letter to William Michael:



I went today to see those M.S.S. at the Doctor's, and I shall be able to have them in a few days. They are in a disappointing state,—the things I have already seem mostly perfect, and there is a great hole right through all the leaves of 'Jenny' which was the thing I most wanted. A good deal is lost but I have no doubt the things as they are will enable me with a little re-writing & a good memory & the rough copies I have to re-establish the whole in a perfect state. (*Correspondence* 304)

In this mixed review of Rossetti's "M.S.S."—they are "disappointing" but have the potential to return to a "perfect state"—the worm that bores the "great hole through all the leaves of 'Jenny'" does double duty: its ruinations metaphorise those to which Siddal's dead body would have been exposed and which are gruesomely glimpsed in "Clerk Saunders" and "Death" alike.

This reading is strengthened when it is recalled that "Jenny" is itself a poem in which the boundaries between books and bodies are often porous. For example, when the "young and thoughtful man of the world" (D. G. Rossetti, "Stealthy" 338) who speaks this dramatic monologue vacates his book-lined study to spend the night with the poem's drowsy-headed prostitute-heroine, it is only to transform her, by ironic implication, into an electrifying volume of pornography spread out for his voyeuristic delight:

Why, Jenny, as I watch you there,—  
For all your wealth of loosened hair,  
Your silk ungirdled and unlac'd  
And warm sweets open to the waist,  
All golden in the lamplight's gleam,—  
You know not what a book you seem,  
Half-read by lightning in a dream! (ll. 46-52)

Similarly, when he considers sharing his unspoken thoughts by verbalising them for his exhausted and perhaps indifferent companion, he again turns Jenny into a bookish figure:

What if to her all this were said?  
Why, as a volume seldom read  
Being opened halfway shuts again,  
So might the pages of her brain  
Be parted at such words, and thence  
Close back upon the dusty sense. (ll. 157-62)

But as Rossetti's intrepid if invisible book-worm penetrates "Jenny"'s "leaves," its actions not only remind the reader of the similarly unseen fate that befalls Siddal's remains. They also assume an erotic, not to say necrophiliac dimension, as the violations suffered by the material "thing" that is Rossetti's poem mirror those suffered by that poem's heroine as the inevitable consequence of her profession. At the same time, those actions recall the "revels" enjoyed by the "grave-worm" in Christina Rossetti's "Death," a creature which "[b]anquet[s]" on, but also down, the dead wife's blazoned body, travelling with alliterative purpose from "brow" to "breast"—and entering her "mouth" *en route*. Such a trajectory tacitly leads back, in a further chronological and corporeal descent, to Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (1681) and the moment when yet other "worms," rather than Marvell's coercive first-person suitor, will "try" the mistress's "long preserved virginity" (ll. 27, 28), reducing her "quaint honour" to "dust" (l. 29).

As Rossetti's letter to Brown indicates, his chagrin at the mess of his "M.S.S." is aggravated by the fact that the section he is keenest to secure is the one most severely vitiated: "there is a great hole right through all the leaves of 'Jenny' which was the thing I most wanted," to recall his formulation. Yet while the obvious meaning of this comment makes it an expression of complaint and dismay, the text is open to a supplementary reading which gives it an opposite sense, with the phrase "which was the thing I most wanted" applicable not to "Jenny" itself but to the "great hole" that has been tunnelled "right through" it. Rossetti's exhumation correspondence officially defines his overriding priority as the pursuit and reclamation of the talismanic calf-bound book, but what is suggested here, by contrast, is an unexpected collusion with and celebration of the lowly agent of that book's defacement. Such a reading is a long way from overturning the dominant sense of the comment under consideration. After all, when it reappears in Rossetti's next letter to his brother of 15 October 1869, it is reworded in such a way as fully to remove its ambiguity, while also making explicit the species of creature responsible for such thoroughgoing literary vandalism: "[t]he poem of 'Jenny' which is the one I most wanted, has got a great worm-

hole right through every page of it" (*Correspondence* 304). Even so, the textual slippage is worth recording, not least because it is consistent with and symptomatic of the self-destructive remorse for Siddal's death with which Rossetti initially relinquishes his work: "'I have often been writing at those poems when Lizzie was ill and suffering, and I might have been attending to her, and now they shall go.'"

This conflict between the desire, on the one hand, to restore "Jenny" (and the book of which it is so vital a part) and, on the other, to have them both violated is spelt out in Rossetti's language. As the letter closes, he assures Brown (and himself) that "with a little re-writing & a good memory & the rough copies" which he has, he will be able "to re-establish the whole in a perfect state." But the terms in which he anticipates this utopian moment undermine and reverse it, as "whole" is not only a homophone of but also infiltrated by "hole," the very word that signifies the book's currently disfigured and sorry condition. As if in secret recognition of the one who assisted Rossetti in recovering his manuscript, "whole" at the same time offers a near-anagram of Howell's owlsh and ill-omened surname.

The contradictions that worm their way into Rossetti's comment to Brown about the damage done to "Jenny" recur elsewhere in the course of his post-exhumation confessions. They can be seen, for instance, in the last of the letters to be considered here, sent to Algernon Charles Swinburne on 26 October 1869:

I want to tell you something lest you should hear it first from any one else. It is that I have recovered my old book of poems. Friends had long hinted such a possibility to me, but it was only just lately I made up my mind to it. I hope you will think none the worse of my feeling for the memory of one [Siddal] for whom I know you had a true regard. The truth is, that no one so much as herself would have approved of my doing this. Art was the only thing for which she felt very seriously. Had it been possible to her, I should have found the book on my pillow the night she was buried; and could she have opened the grave, no other hand would have been needed. (*Correspondence* 312)

Here Rossetti delivers a masterclass in speaking for the other. First he calls on the victim of the exhumation to legitimate it and then asserts that she would surely have sent his "old book of poems" back to him

almost immediately, out of a high-minded concern that "Art" not be deprived of a "treasure" (D. G. Rossetti, *Correspondence* 313)—to use Swinburne's term, in response to this letter two days later. But does Rossetti's cosy bedtime fantasy behave quite as he would like it to do? Is Siddal's imagined gesture driven by the motivations he ascribes to it? Or is her swift return of the coveted book rather the sign of its disdainful rejection?

As this passage makes clear, Rossetti's ultimate concern is not for reunion with Siddal but with his "old book of poems": Siddal is invoked here merely as the means to that end, a kind of surrogate for Howell, who is himself a surrogate for Rossetti. "Willowwood," conversely, is dominated by the possibility of just such a reunion between the poems' widower-speaker and his late wife, the mourner and the mourned, even as such a notion is eventually renounced. As becomes evident, however, the story told by these four sonnets is far too complex to be delimited by its explicit theme, articulated as it is in a language which both looks forward to "the projected exhumation" (to cite Fredeman again) and back to Keats's "Isabella."

## 2. The "Willowwood" Sonnets: Prospect and Retrospect

Eyes that last I saw in tears  
Through division  
Here in death's dream kingdom.  
Eliot, "Eyes That Last I Saw in Tears" (ll. 1-3)

In an early twentieth-century reading of "Willowwood," Paull Franklin Baum makes the striking (if strikingly undeveloped) assertion that the place that gives this quartet of sonnets its name "is a grave [...] sacred to those who have loved and lost and cannot forget" (141). More precisely, though, it is less Willowwood itself that fits that designation than the well introduced in sonnet one. This provides the mystical focus for the "Willowwood" sequence overall and is, by extension, at the heart of *The House of Life* in both its iterations:

I sat with Love upon a woodside well,  
 Leaning across the water, I and he;  
 Nor ever did he speak nor looked at me,  
 But touched his lute wherein was audible  
 The certain secret thing he had to tell:  
 Only our mirrored eyes met silently  
 In the low wave; and that sound came to be  
 The passionate voice I knew; and my tears fell.  
 And at their fall, his eyes beneath grew hers;  
 And with his foot and with his wing-feathers  
 He swept the spring that watered my heart's drouth;  
 Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,  
 And as I stooped, her own lips rising there  
 Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth. ("Willowwood I," ll. 1-14)<sup>6</sup>

As observed above, one of the stories emerging from the exhumation of Rossetti's lost book was that, in contrast to the book itself, when Siddal's coffin was opened, she was "said to have appeared radiantly beautiful, a figure of fine pallor among an abundance of red golden hair" (Bronfen 177), and these conditions seem loosely prefigured here by the phantom woman who picks her way back piecemeal from the dead. As if to underline such prescient parallels, the surname of the one reputed to have propagated the story is half-submerged in the "well" of the sonnet's opening line, just as his avian soubriquet equips him with "wing-feathers" to match those Love uses to whisk "dark ripples" into "waving hair."

As Rossetti reads it, this sonnet "describes a dream or trance of divided love momentarily re-united by the longing fancy" ("Stealthy" 337), bearing witness to a "resurrection" celebrated by a kiss "that resembles a champagne toast" (Bullen 431, 435). This intoxicating moment of miraculous return is immediately followed, at the start of "Willowwood II," by Love's commencement of its "song," even as, far from being jubilant or forward-looking, the song is sorrowful and "meshed with half-remembrance" (ll. 1, 2). It draws the speaker into doleful recollections of the past and, specifically, the past selves belonging both to him and his beloved as they materialise uncannily around him, in the eponymous and claustrophobic setting of Willowwood, as "mournful

forms" (l. 7) with "one" stationed "by every tree" (l. 6). But while these ubiquitous and funereal figures constitute the traces of seemingly interchangeable identities gone by ("for each was I or she," l. 7), they are also bound up with the affliction of the present. What they summon back to mind and symbolise, as they stand "aloof" from one another, is an intermittent silence and separation between the spouses when both of them were alive, represented as "those [...] days that had no tongue" (ll. 6, 8), that has been rendered far more difficult to circumvent now that one partner in the marriage is dead.

At the same time, however, to read the phrase in this way is not to exhaust its meaning, since it can also be taken as a gloss on the Rossetian song that is "Willowwood" itself and the manner in which the sequence is "meshed" with "Isabella," a text based on the fifth story from the fourth day of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (c. 1349-1351). Although critics so far have not examined "Isabella" as an intertext for "Willowwood," a brief reprise of Keats's poem suggests there are good reasons why Rossetti might have been attracted to it while composing these sonnets, during a period which feeds into the time in which the disinterment plot was hatched, developed, executed and selectively disclosed. The first two thirds of "Isabella" tell a gothic story of illicit love between its two principals, the eponymous heroine and Lorenzo; Lorenzo's murder by his lover's two avaricious merchant-brothers and their burial of his body in a "sylvan grave" (Lutz, *Relics* 39); and the return of the "murder'd man" ("Isabella" l. 209) to Isabella as a revenant in a dream. This part of the narrative has clear affinities with "Clerk Saunders," but "Isabella" diverges from the ballad in its last third, as the heroine follows the instructions of Lorenzo's "Spirit" to visit his "tomb" (ll. 321, 304), before going on to exceed those instructions in startling fashion. She not only exhumes Lorenzo's body with the help of her "aged Dame" but also decapitates it, reburying the severed head in a "garden-pot" covered with "[s]weet Basil, which her tears kept ever wet" (ll. 346, 414, 416). The head, "vile with green and livid spot" (l. 475), is finally re-exhumed by the watchful and guilt-ridden brothers, who take it with them into self-imposed exile.<sup>7</sup>

Yet while Keats's poem would have a broad thematic resonance for Rossetti, there is an important sense in which "Isabella" and "Willowwood" do not marry up with but are diametrically opposed to one another. For J. B. Bullen, "Willowwood" offers an imaginative staging of "Rossetti's need to come to terms with the death of his wife" (432), fictionalising the painful psychic labour Freud describes in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), whereby the love-object is gradually deconstructed in a process whose completion allows "the ego" to become "free and uninhibited again" (Freud 245) and hence at liberty to form new emotional attachments. In "Isabella," however, no such felicitous psychic destiny presents itself, as the heroine is unable to let go of Lorenzo's memory—or perhaps it will not let go of her?—and, finally overwhelmed by her sense of loss, descends into madness.

"Isabella"'s subterranean role in "Willowwood" can be initially detected by looping back to the opening sonnet. Here Love's "eyes" are not just "mirrored" in the waters of the well-grave or grave-well into which they look but also catch a glancing reflection from the "eye" belonging to the corresponding amatory personification who appears in the first stanza of Keats's text and regards Lorenzo as a "young palmer" (l. 2) or pilgrim. Similarly, the "lute" whose "sound" comes to be imagined by Rossetti's speaker as his wife's "passionate voice"—an instance of what Freud calls "hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (244)—harmonises with Isabella's own medieval "lute-string" which, in the second stanza of Keats's poem, yields "an echo" of Lorenzo's "name" (l. 15).

Along with these details from "Isabella"'s opening two stanzas, "Willowwood I" incorporates as well as revises further and more significant elements from three much later moments in Keats's poem. The first of these moments involves the visit the slaughtered Lorenzo pays his dreaming lover in stanza 35, at a point in the narrative when Isabella is as yet in "ignorance" (l. 265) of her brothers' crime:

It was a vision.—In the drowsy gloom,  
The dull of midnight, at her couch's foot  
Lorenzo stood, and wept: the forest tomb  
Had marr'd his glossy hair which once could shoot

Lustre into the sun, and put cold doom  
 Upon his lips, and taken the soft lute  
 From his lorn voice, and past his loamed ears  
 Had made a miry channel for his tears. (ll. 273-80)<sup>8</sup>

Rossetti reworks this supernatural "vision" in at least two ways. Firstly, he alters the source of Keats's "tears" so that they do not flow from the revenant- but the mourner-figure, falling "from octet into sestet" (Remoortel 468). And, secondly, he limns a portrait of the dead thoroughly cleansed of what "Isabella" elsewhere calls "wormy circumstance" (l. 385). Although Lorenzo retains "eyes [...] all dewy bright / With love" that keep "all phantom fear aloof" (ll. 289-90, 290), his experience of the "tomb" has otherwise taken its toll and results in disfigurements smoothed out and corrected in the fetching look of "Willowwood"'s returning and ebullient beloved: his "marr'd" "hair" is buoyantly restyled as an undulating Pre-Raphaelite coiffure, and "lips" laden with "cold doom" become the vibrant bearers, at the end of "Willowwood I," of "brimming kisses."

The second moment occurs in stanza 46 of Keats's text, after Isabella has entered the "dismal forest-hearse" (l. 344) and kneels at the site of Lorenzo's burial. Here, as "[s]he gaz[es] into the fresh-thrown mould" (l. 361) that composes his grave, "fully" seeing "all its secrets" at "[o]ne glance" (l. 362), her x-ray-like ocular powers are compared to those possessed by "other eyes" that "would know / Pale limbs at bottom of a crystal well" (ll. 363, 363-64). In "Willowwood I," however, the simile is reversed, as still other eyes (those of Rossetti's weeping speaker) peer into a well that seems like a grave, rather than a grave that seems like a well.

The third moment is located in stanzas 50-51, as Keats's mourner, assisted by her "old nurse" (l. 377), severs Lorenzo's head from his body and carries off the grisly spoils:

With duller steel than the Perséan sword  
 They cut away no formless monster's head,  
 But one, whose gentleness did well accord  
 With death, as life. The ancient harps have said,



Love never dies, but lives, immortal Lord:  
 If love impersonate was ever dead,  
 Pale Isabella kiss'd it, and low moan'd.  
 'Twas love; cold,—dead indeed, but not dethroned.

In anxious secrecy they took it home,  
 And then the prize was all for Isabel:  
 She calm'd its wild hair with a golden comb,  
 And all around each eye's sepulchral cell  
 Pointed each fringed lash; the smeared loam  
 With tears, as chilly as a dripping well,  
 She drench'd away:—and still she comb'd, and kept  
 Sighing all day—and still she kiss'd, and wept. (ll. 393-408)

Rossetti's speaker is no Perseus, but it is nonetheless the case that the vision he conjures up in "Willowwood I" focuses exclusively on his dead beloved's head—which can perhaps be seen to have a Medusan aspect to it—as if he has performed a metaphorical version of the decapitation that is here so abruptly literal. But while the scene in Keats has affinities with that in Rossetti, there are some salient differences. In Rossetti's sonnet, the beloved's head is fully revived—returning "alive from the abyss," as "Willowwood II" puts it (l. 10)—whereas in Keats's poem there is no doubt that the "love impersonate" whom "[p]ale Isabella kiss[es]" is "dead indeed." Even so, she does her best to make Lorenzo's appearance more lifelike by grooming and cosmeticising it: she incessantly combs his "wild hair," "[p]oint[s]" his eyelashes and washes away the "loam" "smeared" over his face with "tears" that are, ironically, "as chilly as a dripping well."

A sense of how "Willowwood" echoes "Isabella" beyond the opening sonnet can be gleaned, first of all, by taking a fresh look at the three phrases previously cited from "Willowwood II." As already suggested, one of the ways of reading the first of these ("meshed with half-remembrance") is to see it as a shorthand for "Willowwood"'s intertextual memory of "Isabella" in general. Equally, though, the phrase can be viewed as providing a specific example of that memory at work, recalling stanza 58 of Keats's poem. Here Isabella's "brethren," unaware that she now knows about Lorenzo's murder and is herself dying of

grief, are mystified by the spell the "[b]asil-pot" has cast over their sister—a charm so strong, they surmise, as to have distracted her from Lorenzo's absence on the business he is supposedly carrying out on their behalf in "foreign lands" (l. 457, 473, 226). As the poem puts it:

They could not surely give belief, that such  
 A very nothing would have power to wean  
 Her from her own fair youth, and pleasures gay,  
 And even remembrance of her love's delay. (ll. 461-64)

The second phrase ("those [...] days that had no tongue") looks back to "Isabella"'s first six stanzas and the point in the narrative when the love between Isabella and Lorenzo is already "[f]ever'd" and yet denied sexual expression by dint of how Lorenzo repeatedly defers until "[t]o-morrow" the opportunity to make his feelings known, letting "[h]oneyless days and days" (ll. 46, 27, 32) slip by. The narrator comments:

all day  
 His heart beat awfully against his side;  
 And to his heart he inwardly did pray  
 For power to speak; but still the ruddy tide  
 Stilled his voice, and puls'd resolve away. (ll. 41-5)

As these lines suggest, Isabella's memory of "her love's delay" is thus not just to do with an overdue return from a spurious trip abroad, but reaches back to the tongue-tied ordeal which Lorenzo suffers at the poem's outset and that reduces him to a state of "sick longing" (l. 23). That tongue-tiedness is in turn recalled in "Willowwood II," as the speaker remembers and laments the times when he and his beloved did not or could not communicate with one another, enduring "days" that were similarly bereft of verbal exchange.

The third phrase ("alive from the abyss") takes the reader to stanza 40 of Keats's poem and to Lorenzo's valedictory address to Isabella, just before her dream dissolves, in which he figures her as "[a] Seraph [. . .] from the bright abyss" whom he has "chosen" "[t]o be [his] spouse" (ll.

317, 318). This is an image that "Willowwood" turns upside down, associating the space from which its speaker's own spouse reappears not with airy and seraphic heights but aquatic and regenerative depths, which Marianne van Remoortel describes as "amniotic" (470). As Keats's narrator notes in stanza 36, one of the effects of Lorenzo's murder is to make his voice sound "[s]trange," such that when it speaks from beyond the grave it seems accompanied by a "ghostly undersong" (ll. 281, 287). But "Isabella" is itself, it might be said, such an accompaniment and undersong to "Willowwood," as Keats's own poetic voice returns in these sonnets in distorted form.

While "Willowwood" announces the beginning of Love's "song" in the first line of its second sonnet, it is not until the first line of its third that the song itself becomes finally "audible." Despite being "hard to free" ("Willowwood II" l. 2) from "half-remembrance," the song has, it seems, been temporarily (and ironically) forgotten:

'O ye, all ye that walk in Willowwood,  
 That walk with hollow faces burning white;  
 What fathom-depth of soul-struck widowhood,  
 What long, what longer hours, one lifelong night,  
 Ere ye again, who so in vain have wooed  
 Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite  
 Your lips to that their unforgotten food,  
 Ere ye, ere ye again shall see the light!  
 Alas! The bitter banks in Willowwood,  
 With tear-spurge wan, with blood-wort burning red:  
 Alas! If ever such a pillow could  
 Steep deep the soul in sleep till she were dead,—  
 Better all life forget her than this thing,  
 That Willowwood should hold her wandering!" ("Willowwood III" ll. 1-14)

With its multiple exclamations and inclusiveness of address, this song sounds more like the proclamation of a town crier than a personified Love, and one who is prepared, moreover, to take audacious verbal risks (rhyming "Willowwood" with "pillow could," for example) and to emphasise his message with the sonnets' only closing couplet. And perhaps it is that message that accounts for the belatedness of the song's

appearance on the textual scene, since it is one the speaker might be reluctant to hear or heed. At this juncture, he is in the same attitude as in "Willowwood I," still "stoop[ing]" to kiss his late wife—or at least her ardent simulacrum, as it "ris[es]" from the abysmal well to meet him face-to-face—"invit[ing]" his own "lips" to feast upon hers as if the latter were an "unforgotten food." Yet in cleaving to this visionary figure in this self-gratifying way, the speaker adopts an approach to his bereavement that is at loggerheads with Love's severe counsel that, in the end, it is "[b]etter" "to forget" the one he mourns—permanently, if necessary—than to court the "vain" "hope" that they will again meet one another in any sphere beyond that forged by "the longing fancy." To entertain such a possibility is to join the ranks of those distracted somnambulists who "walk in Willowwood, / [...] with hollow faces burning white," entering a place that is not in fact a place at all but a potentially self-destructive psychological state defined by a mixture of grief, self-delusion and emotional fixation. This indeed is the kind of anguished condition in which the lachrymose Isabella is to be found in the wake of Lorenzo's death as, rather than obliterating the memory of her lover for "all life," she obliterates the memory of "all life" for her lover:

And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,  
 And she forgot the blue above the trees,  
 And she forgot the dells where waters run,  
 And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze. (ll. 417-20)

In her reading of "Willowwood I," Isobel Armstrong draws attention to that sonnet's predilection for the "l" consonant. This phonetic unit, she writes, "appears in almost every line [...] as if the poem is afloat in the medium of [its] liquid sounds" (466). Such consonantal saturation is yet more noticeable in "Willowwood III," but in this sonnet the "l" sound competes for primacy with "w," with both phonemes featuring in the opening "well," which, in turn, and at the risk of repetition, contains an echo of "Howell." The soundscape of this sonnet, that is, provides another cryptic or cryptographic example of "Willowwood"'s

prefigurative link with the exhumation. Such a link is further evidenced by the metaphorical “pillow” which enters the sonnet’s sestet and is infused with the power to “[s]teep deep the soul in sleep till she were dead.” This uncanny item, complete with its hypnotic and murderous play of assonance and sibilance, looks forward to the wishfulness of the letter to Swinburne, in which Rossetti imagines Siddal as ghostly handmaiden, returning his “book” to him on “the night she was buried” and placing it, in her own cryptic gesture, on a “pillow” that is this time literal.

Yet as much as it creates anticipatory links with that letter, the pillow featured at line eleven of this sonnet also establishes retrospective connections with “Isabella.” In stanza 4 of that poem, for example, both Lorenzo and Isabella use pillows of their own as a means of confessing the feelings they cannot confess to one another:

‘To-morrow will I bow to my delight,  
 To-morrow will I ask my lady’s boon.’—  
 ‘O may I never see another night,  
 Lorenzo, if thy lips breathe not love’s tune.’—  
 So spake they to their pillows [...]. (ll. 27-31)

And in stanza 41 yet another pillow appears, as the narrator strives to capture the sense of visual disturbance produced by Lorenzo’s ghost as he withdraws himself from Isabella’s dream:

The Spirit mourn’d ‘Adieu!’—dissolv’d, and left  
 The atom darkness in a slow turmoil;  
 As when of healthful midnight sleep bereft,  
 Thinking on rugged hours and fruitless toil,  
 We put our eyes into a pillowy cleft,  
 And see the spangly gloom froth up and boil. (ll. 321-26)

In this instance, the pillow in question is paradoxical, exacerbating insomnia by surely keeping weary “eyes” awake as the “spangly gloom” revealed in its “cleft” “froth[s] up” and “boil[s]” before them. Either way, it takes its place alongside the other pillow-images adduced above, as one more indication of Rossetti’s sonnets and Keats’s poem as intertextual bedfellows.

Although "Willowwood IV" begins with the rather curt or dismissive "[s]o sang he," the action of the octet unfolds in accordance with Love's bitter injunction to "forget" the beloved rather than continue to hold on to her:

So sang he: and as meeting rose and rose  
 Together cling through the wind's wellaway  
 Nor change at once, yet near the end of day  
 The leaves drop loosened where the heart-stain glows,—  
 So when the song died did the kiss uncloze;  
 And her face fell back drowned, and was as grey  
 As its grey eyes; and if it ever may  
 Meet mine again I know not if Love knows. (ll. 1-8)

Here the fading of Love's "song" is simultaneous with the termination of the spouses' "kiss" and the reabsorption of the beloved into the water from which she had initially emanated. As a result of the vision's dissolution, it is implied, the speaker is able to escape the terrifying emotional petrification symbolised by Willowwood. In so doing, he also implicitly avoids the grief-stricken insanity that overtakes the dying Isabella at the end of Keats's poem, as she cossets Lorenzo's "fast mouldering head," feeding with constant "tears" the "[b]asil sweet" that grows over and out of it, before her brothers rob her of her reliquary and the "jewel" (ll. 430, 425, 488, 431) it contains once and for all.

As Rossetti's fourth and final sonnet closes, however, there are indications that the divorce between speaker and beloved is less clear-cut than it might seem:

I leaned low and drank  
 A long draught from the water where she sank,  
 Her breath and all her tears and all her soul:  
 And as I drank I know I felt Love's face  
 Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and grace,  
 Till both our heads were in his aureole. (ll. 9-14)

While he may have given up the "food" that the beloved's lips and kisses once proffered him, it is only to incorporate her all the more greedily, taking "[a] long draught from the water where she sank" and

gulping down “[h]er breath and all her tears and all her soul.” The sense of unity rather than separation that these lines evoke is supported by the way in which the speaker’s posture at this point—he is “lean[ing] low” over the well—mirrors the position he was in at “Willowwood”’s beginning, where he “[l]ean[s] across the water,” as if the “Willowwood” sequence were actually a cycle (and sonnets one and four have an identical rhyme scheme). That sense of unity is also underscored by the ambiguous closing image of the “heads” included in Love’s “aureole.” To whom do these heads belong? Are they those of the speaker and Love himself, alone together once again as they were prior to the onset of the vision, as would seem to be the obvious meaning? Or can they be assigned to the speaker and the beloved, as if the latter had somehow survived or defied the drowning to which “Willowwood IV” subjects her?

It would perhaps be overingenious to suggest that there is also space in Love’s “aureole” for the intertextual memory of Lorenzo’s head, but “Willowwood IV” includes some three rather more definite echoes of “Isabella.” The first can be unearthed by returning to the speaker’s comprehensive last-gasp incorporation of his late wife’s “breath,” “tears” and “soul,” an image which itself returns to and incorporates Lorenzo’s thirsty vow, in stanza 5 of Keats’s poem, to “drink” Isabella’s “tears” (l. 39). The second takes the more incidental form of Rossetti’s invocation of the “wind’s wellaway,” an archaic turn of phrase indebted to stanza 61 of “Isabella” and the narratorial instruction to the “Spirits in grief” that have been silently assembling on the poem’s margin since stanza 55: “sing not your ‘Well-a-way!’ / For Isabel, sweet Isabel, will die” (ll. 437, 485-86). The third and most significant echo involves the rose-simile trellised across the sonnet’s first five lines. This is a conceit that Rossetti has transplanted, once more, from “Isabella” and, specifically, stanza 10:

Parting they seem’d to tread upon the air,  
 Twin roses by the zephyr blown apart  
 Only to meet again more close, and share  
 The inward fragrance of each other’s heart. (ll. 73-6)

But while Rossetti's simile recalls or "meet[s]" with Keats's, it revises the original in one important respect: in Keats, the roses are "blown apart" from one another only to be rejoined, whereas, in Rossetti, the opposite is the case, as the flowers at first "cling" valiantly "[t]ogether" against the wind's ominous cry but eventually and inevitably are torn asunder.<sup>9</sup>

In its echoes and reworkings of "Isabella," "Willowwood IV" conforms to the pattern of the three sonnets that precede it, as Rossetti takes up a range of threads from Keats's poem and weaves them into his own textual tapestry. But the sonnet also provides more signs of "Willowwood"'s *sotto voce* links with the exhumation episode. In addition to its Keatsian echo, Rossetti's "wellaway" is still another verbal reminder of the shadowy Howell, while the "grey eyes" and "grey face" of the "drowned" beloved look forwards—even as they recede and disappear—to the tantalising manuscript, "bound in rough grey calf," that Rossetti will reach out to repossess.

## Conclusion

As Federica Mazzara phrases it, Rossetti's letters are an "unexplored world" (115), rarely attracting the kind of sustained close analysis that this article has sought to offer and that seems particularly exigent when it comes to Rossetti's exhumation of his poems, given the degree to which, rightly or wrongly, "[t]o many [...] this act defines" the artist-poet "and has never been forgiven" (Marsh, "Grave" 14). One advantage of so closely tracking Rossetti's epistolary representation of this episode is that it throws into relief the conflicts, disavowals and contradictions it induces in the one it most concerns. It allows the reader to think through the evolution and immediate aftermath of the episode from something akin to what Rossetti, writing of "Jenny," calls an "*inner standing-point*" ("Stealthy" 337; *italics in original*) and thus adds fresh texture to our understanding of what is the most egregious incident in Rossetti's biography and mid-Victorian literary history more broadly.



Together with providing new perspectives on the disinterment (including its relationship with *Clerk Saunders*), the article has endeavoured to alter the angle of critical vision with respect to “Willowwood.” In diametric contrast to Rossetti’s letters, these sonnets have been critically much-traversed but still have their reserve of secrets and surprises, taking the form of the links with the events in Highgate, on the one hand and, on the other, with “Isabella,” Keats’s own hide-and-seek tale of alternating burials and exhumations, as discussed in this article’s second section. As it exposes these clandestine connections—and draws out the instabilities and slippages in Rossetti’s writing of the disinterment in his letters—the article implicitly casts the practice of reading in a different light, suggesting that perhaps it too, under certain circumstances, can be considered a kind of exhumation in itself.

Cardiff University  
Cardiff

## FIGURES



Fig. 1 Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, *Clerk Saunders* (1857). Watercolour, body colour, coloured chalks on paper laid on a stretcher. 28.4 x 18.1 cm. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum. Photograph @The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.

<https://data.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/id/object/13598>





Fig. 2. William Holman Hunt, *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1866-68). Oil on canvas. 187 x 116.5 cm. Tyne and Wear Archives & Museums/Bridgeman Images.

<https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en-US/hunt/isabella-and-the-pot-of-basil-1868-oil-on-canvas/oil-on-canvas/asset/426912>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A facsimile reproduction of the invoice for the exhumation, made out to Howell, can be found in Troxell, between pages 124 and 125.

<sup>2</sup>The "Willowwood" speaker's quest for such reunion is perhaps informed by Rossetti's own extra-textual desire to make contact with his wife in the world of the spirit, as manifested, for example, in his participation, between 1865 and 1868, in some eight séances, some of which were held in his own studio at 16 Cheyne Walk (see Bullen 433). In the last of these sessions, held on 14 August 1868, the conversation turns at one point to Howell, Rossetti's future go-between in the exhumation venture. When asked by William Michael, who meticulously records a total of twenty such sessions over this period, if she considers Howell a "very disgraceful character," Siddal's spirit replies with an emphatic and seemingly premonitory "'Yes'" (Bullen, White, and Beaky 105).

<sup>3</sup>In suggesting a proleptic connection between "Willowwood" and the exhumation, this article follows Bullen, the only critic hitherto to have proposed such a link. At the same time, however, it draws only sparingly on the psychoanalytic theory which he places at the centre of his approach. The article also resists the temptation to conflate the figure of the beloved in "Willowwood" either with Siddal (see Drew 46) or Jane Morris, Rossetti's other great passion, from whom he was at this time separated not by death but her marriage (albeit an unhappy one) to William Morris. For a brief overview of this debate, see McGann.

<sup>4</sup>Gabriele Rossetti's anxieties about sight-loss, which he dates to 1843, are set in perspective by William Michael in a note to his translation of his father's *Versified Autobiography* (1901):

My father lost totally, and very suddenly, the sight of one eye. After that he was in constant danger of losing also the sight of the other eye, and he often expected that this would soon be lost. He did, however, to the end of his life, retain a much enfeebled modicum of eyesight. In the expectation of becoming wholly blind, he often spoke and wrote of himself as blind—an *exaggeration*, but a pardonable one. (102n; italics in original)

<sup>5</sup>The "fearful skeletons" that join Scott and Rossetti on their "long walks" at Penkill in the autumn of 1868 seem set to accompany the latter on the occasion of his second visit in the late summer of 1869 (not long before the exhumation) and emerge, with new companions of their own, in the gap between physical and psychological topographies. Concluding a letter to Scott of c. 18 July 1869, Rossetti writes: "[i]t will be delightful to see the beautiful glen again & feel that the world is shut out. Why can one not have a glen out of oneself too?—or at least out of the way of one's ghosts & skeletons?" (205).

<sup>6</sup>When Rossetti publishes the "Willowwood" sonnets as part of *The House of Life* in his *Poems* of 1870, he makes an important modification to their format, introducing a gap between the octet and sestet of each sonnet which works to visualise the sense of severance between the speaker and his dead wife on which the sequence

pivots. This formatting change is retained when "Willowwood" reappears in Rossetti's *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881). The only other significant difference between the original and later printed versions of "Willowwood" occurs at line twelve of "Willowwood IV," where "[a]nd as I drank" (1869) is changed to "[a]nd as I leaned" (1870 and 1881).

<sup>7</sup>Rossetti would no doubt have been reminded of Keats's poem by the contemporary appearance of William Holman Hunt's similarly titled *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1866-68) (Fig. 2), first exhibited in London in mid-April 1868; and indeed he wrote about the painting (somewhat disparagingly) on two occasions in the course of the correspondence he produced around this time. In a letter to Alice Boyd of 7 July 1868, Rossetti pokes fun at both the technique and the content of Hunt's picture: "I suppose," he reflects, "people don't like such tragic subjects," subsequently quipping that "the very way in which the paint is laid on is certainly a tragedy in itself, to say nothing of the mere sentiment" (*Correspondence* 79). Hunt's *Isabella*, it should be added, has its own acute further relevance for Rossetti, since it was during its composition that the artist lost his first wife, to whom he had been married for under two years (as was Rossetti to Siddal). Fanny Holman Hunt (née Waugh) died of "military fever" (Bronkhurst 216) on 20 December 1866, aged thirty-three (one year older than Siddal), following on from the birth of the couple's son, even as she lives on in her bereaved husband's artwork as the model for its central figure, who, ironically, mourns a lost love of her own (see Cole 357). This context lends Rossetti's comments a somewhat distasteful (and distastefully class-based) edge when he writes to the same correspondent about the painting once again almost a year later on 27 June 1869:

[Hunt's] horrible daub representing apparently a half-crazed charwoman removing the chimney-ornaments before a hard scrub is appalling to every inner & outer sense. How grimy and sweaty is the poor thing's face, and how she must yearn for her beer. (*Correspondence* 197)

<sup>8</sup>If only by coincidence, Lorenzo's supernatural appearance before Isabella prefigures the nocturnal visitations Siddal is reputed to have made to Rossetti in the early aftermath of her death. These are recorded, in the year of Rossetti's own passing, in the diary of Jeanette Marshall, elder daughter of the surgeon and anatomist, John Marshall, whom Rossetti (habitually) calls his "habitual doctor" (*Correspondence* 97, 102, 145). For the diarist, however, such visitations are not to be welcomed, as in "Isabella," but take on a persecutory cast:

No doubt he had a wretched life since his wife's death fr. poison she took herself! They had only been married 2 years, & she found herself superseded, & took laudanum. No doubt his grief was remorse, & for 2 years he saw her ghost every night! Serve him right too! (qtd. in Shonfield 112; abbreviation and underlining in original)

<sup>9</sup>Just as "Willowwood" is secretly inscribed at various points with Howell's name, so the image of the two roses fleetingly wed to one another has its own covert resonance, recalling the onomastic transformation which befalls Siddal when eventually she marries Rossetti and assumes his patronymic, briefly becoming a Rossetti herself.

## WORKS CITED

- Angeli, Helen Rossetti. *Pre-Raphaelite Twilight: The Story of Charles Augustus Howell*. London: Richards, 1954.
- Armstrong, Isobel. "D. G. Rossetti and Christina Rossetti as Sonnet Writers." *Victorian Poetry* 48.4 (Winter 2010): 461-73.
- Baum, Paull Franklin. *The House of Life: A Sonnet-Sequence by Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1928.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992.
- Bronkhurst, Judith. "William Holman Hunt." *The Pre-Raphaelites*. Ed. Leslie Parris. London: Tate Gallery, 1994. 216-18.
- Bullen, J. B. "Raising the Dead: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Willowwood' Sonnets." *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: OUP, 2013. 429-44.
- Bullen, J. B., Rosalind White, and Lenore A. Beaky, eds. *Pre-Raphaelites in the Spirit World: The Séance Diary of William Michael Rossetti*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022.
- "Clerk Saunders." *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, with Notes and Introduction by Sir Walter Scott*. Vol. 3. Rev. and ed. T. F. Henderson. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1932. 222-29.
- Cline, C. L., ed. *The Owl and the Rossettis: Letters of Charles A. Howell, Dante Gabriel, Christina, and William Michael Rossetti*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1978.
- Cole, Mark. "A Haunting Portrait by William Holman Hunt." *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 77.10 (December 1990): 354-65.
- Drew, Rodger. *The Stream's Secret: The Symbolism of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Cambridge: Letterworth, 2007.
- Dunstan, Angie. "Stunner: Elizabeth Siddal, the Evolution of a Sensation." *Literature and Sensation*. Ed. Anthony Uhlmann et al. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009. 24-33.
- Eliot, T. S. "Eyes That Last I Saw in Tears." *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*. London: Faber, 1969. 133.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 14. Trans. James Strachey et al. London: Hogarth, 1957. 239-58.
- Keats, John. "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil." *John Keats: The Major Works*. Ed. Elizabeth Cook. Oxford: OUP, 1990. 185-201.
- Leighton, Angela. "Buried Deep: The Wandering Ghosts behind Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Words." *Times Literary Supplement* 5394 (18 and 25 Aug. 2006): 3-4.
- Lutz, Deborah. *Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism*. New York: Norton, 2011.
- Lutz, Deborah. *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Cambridge: CUP, 2015.

- Marsh, Jan. "Grave Doubts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Exhumation Poems." *Times Literary Supplement* 5681 (17 February 2012): 14-15.
- Marsh, Jan. *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal*. 2nd ed. London: Quartet, 2010.
- Marvell, Andrew. "To His Coy Mistress." *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*. Ed. Nigel Smith. Rev. ed. London: Pearson Education, 2007. 81-84.
- Matthews, Samantha. *Poetical Remains: Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: OUP, 2004.
- Mazzara, Federica. "Rossetti's Letters: Intimate Desires and 'Sister Arts.'" *Interfaces: Image Texte Language* 28 (2008-09): 115-24.
- McGann, Jerome. "Scholarly Commentary." *Rossetti Archive*. <http://www.rossetti-archive.org/docs/14-1869.raw.html>. 27 Jan 2024.
- Reeve, Nat. "'An Hour before the Day': The Dismembered Book of Hours in Elizabeth Siddal's *Clerk Saunders*." *Word & Image* 38.2 (2022): 73-87.
- Remoortel, Marianne van. "Metaphor and Maternity: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'House of Life' and Augusta Webster's 'Mother and Daughter.'" *Victorian Poetry* 46.4 (Winter 2008): 467-86.
- Rossetti, Christina. "Death." *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*. Ed. R. W. Crump; with notes and intr. by Betty S. Flowers. London: Penguin, 2005. 688-89.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Jerome McGann. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Ed. William E. Fredeman. Vol. 4: The Chelsea Years, 1863-1872: Prelude to Crisis, 1868-70. Cambridge: Brewer, 2004.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *The House of Life: A Sonnet-Sequence by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Variorum Edition with an Introduction and Notes*. Ed. Roger C. Lewis. Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2007.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. "Jenny." *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Jerome McGann. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003. 60-69.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. "Life-in-Love." *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Jerome McGann. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003. 143.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. "Preface." *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300) in the Original Metres, Together with Dante's Vita Nuova*. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1861. Vii-xii.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. "The Stealthy School of Criticism." *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Jerome McGann. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003. 335-40.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. "Willowwood." *Fortnightly Review* 27 (new series) (1 March 1869): 266-67.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. "Willowwood." *The House of Life. Ballads and Sonnets*. London: Ellis, 1881. 211-14.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. "Willowwood." *The House of Life. Poems*. London: Ellis, 1870. 212-15.
- Rossetti, Gabriele. *A Versified Autobiography*. Trans. William Michael Rossetti. London: Sands & Co., 1901.

- Rossetti, William Michael. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family-Letters with a Memoir*. 2 vols. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1895.
- Scott, William Bell. *Autobiographical Notes of the Life of William Bell Scott: And Notices of His Artistic and Poetic Circle of Friends, 1830 to 1882*. Vol. 2. Ed. W. Minto. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892.
- Shonfield, Zuzanna. *The Precariously Privileged: A Professional Family in Victorian London*. Oxford: OUP, 1987.
- Symons, Arthur. "The Rossettis: Dante Gabriel and William Michael—and Their Friendship with Meredith and Swinburne." *Vanity Fair* 12.3 (May 1919): 51-70.
- Troxell, Janet Camp, ed. *Three Rossettis: Unpublished Letters to and from Dante Gabriel, Christina, William*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1937.



# “Vancouver Walking”: Contemporary Canadian Urban Poetry

CECILE SANDTEN

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 226-258.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-sandten-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-sandten-1)

---

This article is the first entry in a debate on “‘Vancouver Walking’: Contemporary Canadian Urban Poetry” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/vancouver-walking-contemporary-canadian-urban-poetry>). If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

---

## Abstract

As one of the most important Canadian metropolises, Vancouver is characterized in equal parts by its settler-colonial history, with its dominating industries, and its pre-colonial indigenous population and environment. Since writers often focus on these aspects in conjunction with present-day problems, I will discuss a selection of Vancouver writers who portray the city through their historical, cultural, and poetic renditions. More precisely, I will introduce the poet Meredith Quartermain and her poetry collection *Vancouver Walking* (2005), which appears in the title of my essay. In many of her poems, Quartermain’s poetic “counter-flâneurs” (Carrera Suárez 854) move through sensations of history and place as they find themselves at the coordinates of perceptible and historical sites, drawing attention to a plethora of colonial and settler-colonial as well as indigenous locations. Michael Turner’s *Kingsway* (1995) is a collection of poems centred around Vancouver’s oldest thoroughfare, Kingsway, both a destination and a point of departure, while Bud Osborn’s *hundred block rock* (1999) presents the world of Vancouver’s disempowered: criminals, drug addicts, and prostitutes. Accordingly, the emphasis of this essay will be on different flâneur figures roaming and perceiving the streets of Vancouver, a postcolonial metropolis, with its historical, architectural, social, and cultural complexities. The city will be analysed within the context of the poems’ formal-aesthetic components as well as its history, rendered visible and perceptible through a specific urban poetisation and a counter-flâneur perspective. The focus of the analysis will thus be on the representation of historical and contemporary

figures, with a view to the spaces they prefer(red) and in which they move(d), of the historical and poetic imaginaries that often draw attention to Vancouver's colonial legacy.

## 1. Introduction: Perceptions of the City

Generally, cities and, more prominently, metropolises, have been described by what, in the 1960s, Henri Lefebvre termed "a sociology of the everyday" and by what Rem Koolhaas defined as "the generic city." As a follow-up on this thought, in his city biography *Mumbai Fables*, Gyan Prakash writes:

It is undeniable that certain generic urban forms and architectural designs are visible in city after city across the world. Shopping malls, cafes, restaurants, multiplex theatres, entertainment complexes, tall office towers, and apartment buildings dot the urban landscape worldwide. These are spaces that invoke a feeling of placelessness. (21)

Even if this diagnosis of metropolitan design is true in many respects, I argue that these generalizations do not take into consideration the specificities and individual perceptions of cities beyond the common characteristics that Prakash has identified. To be more precise, Vancouver and, in particular, its contemporary poetry, exemplify the connection of the respective poems' lyrical personae with its postcolonial cityscape: the history of the city is explored and is visually and metaphorically reflected on for the present day, as if on a city tour. Within this framework, the images evoked function as a medium of intense personal experiences. Meredith Quartermain (\*1950) is depth-oriented in terms of the many historical contexts she discloses on her poetic city tours in *Vancouver Walking* (2005). Michael Turner (\*1962) also provides us with concrete names and places in the poems of his *Kingsway* collection (1995), a compilation of linked poems that revolve around Kingsway, Vancouver's oldest thoroughfare. Turner addresses encounters with ordinary local people, such as a taxi driver, a shop owner, and a young girl, and his speakers mentally meander or drive through the streets, providing anecdotal and abstract glimpses as well as sketches

of experiences, thereby documenting the eponymous street, Kingsway. By contrast, Bud Osborn's (1947-2014) poems in *hundred block rock* (1999), are characterized by the rhythm of the spoken word as well as the influence of jazz music. Osborn's poems centre around Vancouver's downtrodden: drug addicts, hookers, petty criminals—the marginalized in an otherwise prosperous and glitzy metropolis. Within this framework, a selection of poems from the poetry collections will be read as postcolonial literature, since they show a special awareness of concepts such as race, class, gender, economics, and power structures within the framework of Vancouver's colonial past and present.

The reference to the city of Vancouver is underlined by the poets' particular visual and linguistic arrangements. For instance, some of the poems are written in the shape of a diagonal line, resembling a street, or housing blocks (Turner), or zigzag walking (Quartermain), or with the words arranged as if in rhythmical patterns, thus visually reminding the reader of jazz music (Osborn). It can be argued that the vitality and expressiveness of these poems go hand in hand with the formal presentation, and that the flow of a poem frequently emphasizes the writing strategy employed by each of the three poets, epitomized in the sensual activity of walking, in search of history and community. In conjunction with formal aspects, the emphasis on the particularities of the city clearly stands out as the poems' defining feature, i.e. the local and regional, especially in relation to Vancouver's cartography, colonial history, and present-day life, and the notion of movement in the city (i.e. walking).

I argue along the lines of Michel de Certeau, who claims that the unmanageable and impenetrable city is transferred into a text from two perspectives, namely of Icarus and of the Wandersmann (92), that is, the spectacle and the everyday life. However, while the former implies the position of a "voyeur-god" (de Certeau 93), allowing the totality of the city to be comprehended, the latter relates to the "ordinary practitioners of the city" since they "live 'down below,'" that is, below the threshold at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are wanderers, "*Wandersmänner*" (de

Certeau 93). By contrast, as de Certeau explains, it is the "voyeur" who is able to see "the whole" (92). This is when the voyeur is lifted up to the "summit of the World Trade Centre" and becomes "a solar Eye, looking down like a god" (de Certeau 92). In what follows, I maintain that each of the poets under discussion emphasizes the notion of walking, or what may be referred to as contemporary postcolonial flânerie—what Isabel Carrera Suárez has termed: counter-flânerie. The city is thereby perceived not in its totality but as being "shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces" (de Certeau 93), that is, through walking at ground level.

## 2. Flânerie and the Appropriated Legacy of Pedestrian Aesthetics

The figure of the flâneur, conceived by Charles Baudelaire in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863) and, half a century later, explored by Walter Benjamin in his unfinished collage work *The Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk* in German, written between 1927 and 1940, and published posthumously in 1982), remains a literary and cultural icon of the modern city (see Bock and Vila-Cabanes x). The flâneur, a figure embodying the principle of urban walking, observing, and detachment, has left an indelible mark on literature, especially that of the modernist period, and has fascinated writers across cultures and periods. It must be noted, however, that Benjamin's often-cited text on "The Flâneur" from his *Arcades Project* (417-55), like the project more generally, is a collection of notes and fragments. It presents its readers with a mosaic of ideas and observations rather than a linear account that would provide a coherent theory. Thus, the figure of the flâneur remains open to interpretation.

Yet, the emergence of the literary figure of the flâneur is inextricably connected to the heyday of European imperialism, when the metropolis, in particular Paris and London, flourished at the expense of the subjugated colonies. This period saw the rise of the male, middle-class dandy flâneur evoked by Benjamin, who strolled, keenly observing the spectacle of the rising metropolis and the commodity culture that sustained it. The flâneur came to be the representative figure of expanding

urbanity and modernity, as it is through his *flânerie* that he captures a particular moment of history. The enduring appeal of this literary figure and its later incorporation into literary and urban studies owes to the figure's effectiveness in rendering the interconnection between the subject and a given space, and the movement-generated dialectic of that relationship.<sup>1</sup>

However, it is not only in literature that the figure of the *flâneur* is transformed and re-articulated to accommodate and account for the changing realities of the globalized transnational metropolis (see Bock and Vila-Cabanes x). The *flâneur* has received varied interpretations in critical scholarship, including postcolonial studies. For example, in my examination of *flânerie* in fictions of contemporary Indian metropolises, in what can be termed the "postcolonial *flâneurs*," I detect a "persistent search for belonging"; what is more, in many instances, these postcolonial *flâneurs* no longer walk (Sandten, "Challenging and Reconfiguring *Flânerie*" 197). This is made apparent through a fusion of the representation of historical and contemporary events, through specific historical figures and urban designs, and through the experiences and perceptions of the poetic *flâneur*. Extending this line of thought, Alexander Greer Hartwiger asserts that

the postcolonial *flâneur* is the figure whose critical gaze provides a way to read the legacies of colonialism, oppression, and exploitation back into globalization and the economic, social, and political frameworks that shape the global city. The postcolonial *flâneur* is simultaneously a chronicler of history, a keen observer of the present, and an augur of the future. The contrapuntal reading that the postcolonial *flâneur* provides of the urban landscape leads to a polyvocal representation of a city and the voices that make up its history and its present representation. In order for that critical gaze to get established, the vantage point of the postcolonial *flâneur* becomes an integral part of reading the city. (7)

Greer Hartwiger's definition provides a conceptual framework for understanding the ways in which *flânerie* functions in a postcolonial context. While these ideas will resonate in the poems discussed in the subsequent sections of this essay, there is also an area of divergence that

underscores the situatedness of *flânerie*. Greer Hartwiger's theorizations of postcolonial *flânerie* in relation to Teju Cole's acclaimed debut novel, *Open City*, entails the idea of privilege possessed by the postcolonial *flâneur* in terms of their mobility and access to "culture and consumerism" (Sandten, "Challenging and Reconfiguring *Flânerie*" 199). In the poems under discussion, however, what is striking, in particular in Osborn's poems, is the postcolonial *flâneurs'* precariousness, a condition that corresponds to the time and places in which they traverse.

When focussing on Vancouver, in the context of both history and the activity of walking, the most arresting aspect, according to Glenn Deer, is "[t]he displacement of civic interaction by the urban garrisons of the glass residential tower, and the rise of the new regimes of surveillance and visual culture, [which] are figured in different, even contradictory ways" (Deer 122). This highlights the two sides of Vancouver. Apart from focussing on modernization and urbanization, many Canadian writers discuss the challenges that come with living in a multicultural society. They often use irony to reflect on issues related to divisions, exclusions, and inequalities that disproportionately affect the Indigenous population and those living in precarious conditions.

Noticeably, a more recent trope employed frequently in Canadian literature on cities is that of city walking,<sup>2</sup> often in conjunction with female *flâneurs* in precarious situations (i.e. prostitutes). This writing strategy of city walking is accompanied by more general characteristics, such as literary self-reflexivity, the search for a Canadian literary identity, the ethnic and the regional, and writing by women authors (Löschnigg and Löschnigg 9). The reason for my particular focus on the poems of Quartermain, Osborn, and Turner is their shared historical and local engagement with poetic *flâneurs* in the postcolonial setting of Vancouver. Through this particular constellation, they become what Carrera Suárez has called "counter-*flâneurs*" (854).<sup>3</sup> The urban explorations of these counter-*flâneurs* differ from those of modernist *flâneurs* in the sense that they observe, question, and re-imagine a number of different boundaries and urban identities in Vancouver—literally and metaphorically. As such, it is through their depiction, generated

through their *flânerie*, that boundaries are both explored and then blurred. Alongside these overlapping concerns of an aesthetics of historical exploration as well as local and personal experiences, all three writers imbue *flânerie* with a sense of loss, irony, intersecting histories, histories of violence, and poetic traversal. This particular idiom of historical digging, deployed in conjunction with the trope of *flânerie* as a pedestrian aesthetics, is politically resonant; it manifests in the subject positions of the lyrical personae as individuals strolling through a glitzy, global, and simultaneously declining and downtrodden Vancouver. Through walking, observing, mapping, and the notion of making sense of the city, all three poets—albeit to different degrees—establish a link to the history of the place, to its myths of origin and its contemporary state.

It is crucial to point out that “Vancouver has been called a city without a history,” as Vancouverite historian Daniel Francis (4) avers. According to Francis, this is “partly because of its youth but also because of the way that it seems to change so quickly that it leaves no trace of itself behind” (4). Within the scope of this essay and in what follows, I shall attempt to point out how the historical and poetic imaginaries of Meredith Quartermain, Michael Turner, and Bud Osborn, through the lens of counter-*flâneurs*, have voices deeply grounded in a historically, culturally, and architecturally rich environment founded and inhabited long before European settlers arrived. Moreover, since the literary figure of the nineteenth-century *flâneur* has transformed from the anonymous Parisian dandy to the postcolonial *flâneur*, the conceptualization of Vancouver’s diverse poetic counter-*flâneur* figures requires the examination of differing approaches to walking through a conjunctive reading.

### 3. Meredith Quartermain: *Vancouver Walking*—Zigzagging the Metropolis Through Time and Space

Meredith Quartermain’s poems stand in the tradition of the long narrative poem prominent in Anglo-Canadian literature. Her poetry deals with historical themes, as in “Thanksgiving” (Quartermain 3-7), which

the poet uses to address the historical contexts of Vancouver through time and space,<sup>4</sup> thus transforming them in a postmodernist manner into multi-perspectival assemblages. The poet provides descriptions of historically significant persons and the environment, including buildings and concrete infrastructure, but focuses on those that seem uninhabited or disowned. As the title of her collection, *Vancouver Walking*, suggests, and as the titles of some of the poems also indicate, many of the poems are about walking.<sup>5</sup> However, all the poems explore historical facts, juxtaposed with contemporary everyday aspects and experiences. A sense of loss and irony infuses her poems, created through a connection with the Indigenous people and their claim to the land. In many of the poems in her collection, Quartermain's poetic counter-flâneurs move through Vancouver by means of specific references to history, places, and people, while situated at the coordinates of perceptible and historic buildings or the remains of their former homes, drawing attention to a variety of both settler-colonial and indigenous sites, and even contemporary locations that create a palimpsestic cityscape.<sup>6</sup> Quartermain's flâneur wanders through the urban landscape, perceiving it step by step and word by word, traversing the metropolis with its grids and layers that overlap in time and space.

The poem "Thanksgiving" is written in free verse with, however, strong use of internal rhymes. Most strikingly, it is presented as an authentic walk through Vancouver; the poem is written as if its speaker was strolling in a zigzag manner, presenting an insider's perception and chain of associations while walking. Places, names, and situations appear in rapid succession, visually reflected by the poem in its formal presentation on the page. The poem reveals an implicit speaker: a "girl in Ontario" (l. 1),<sup>7</sup> who, however, remains obscure (Wunker 16).<sup>8</sup> The title of the poem expresses an ironic reading of history, since it signifies the first Thanksgiving celebrated by Sir Martin Frobisher and his crew in the Eastern Arctic in 1578 (see McIntosh, Mills, and Bonikowsky). Through the poem's rather critical tone of voice, the zigzagging movement through time (history and the mention of historically significant



persons) and space (concrete buildings, abandonment, and dereliction), Quartermain re-assesses Canada's colonial legacy.

The implicit speaker guides us through the streets of Vancouver which she explores by wandering from street to street and building to building, calling up historical pasts and simultaneously explaining the present moments she perceives as she strolls. In doing so, she sketches the city of Vancouver via a zooming-in, that is—similarly to de Certeau's *Wandersmann*—not opening up a view of the city from above, but rather from the sea (from “down below”). Uncharacteristically for city literature, the speaker first lists the names of the landscape's bird-life along with man-made items, “sawmills, sewage, shacktown” (l. 15) that represent Vancouver's founding era. The natural environment, the specific (Canadian) sea birds, and the early town life are listed in a disparate spatial-semantic clustering, thus exemplifying the aspects that were eventually destroyed by the railway line, another symbol of colonial industrialization and erasure. In the poem's opening lines, “Gore Avenue—track of an old skid” (l. 5), the speaker addresses the dilapidated urban area, with its large, impoverished population, before giving some specifics of the location:

Gore Avenue—track of an old skid  
                     Surveyor General of British Columbia  
                             ran from a True Lagoon  
                             to a place between first and second narrows  
 the Spanish said people called Sasamat  
                             —no translation—  
 teals, widgeons, shovelers, buffleheads  
 scoters, redheads, golden-eyes  
 blue herons and the *Branta canadensis*  
                     lagooned at Ka wah usks—Two Points Opposite  
                             sawmills, sewage, shacktown  
 till the railways paved it over. (ll. 5-16)

Vancouver was founded in 1867 as “Gastown,” then renamed “Granville” and, finally, in 1886, Vancouver, after British Navy officer and explorer George Vancouver (Francis 12, 13, 32-35). The city was settled due to the establishment of lumber mills, particularly Hastings Mill, which holds a powerful significance in the establishment of Vancouver

and is implied in the poem by multiple indications of the street name, "Hastings Street" or "Hastings and Main," as well as recurrent references to the sawmill. By mentioning the "Battle of 1066" (l. 68), Quartermain digs even deeper into history, implying a connection between the Battle of 1066, when the Normans under William the Conqueror fought the Anglo-Saxons in the English sea town of Hastings, and the Hastings Mill Company, which she thus signifies as another battleground that paved the way for the contemporary city of Vancouver. In addition to Hastings Street, many other streets, as well as important historical buildings and personalities, are mentioned by name to establish the story of Vancouver's colonial settler founding, referring back to

[the] sawmill owner [...] Edward Stamp, a sea captain from Northumberland who, impressed by what appeared to be the limitless abundance of the coastal forest, launched the British Columbia and Vancouver Island Spar, Lumber and Saw Mill Company on the south shore of Burrard Inlet in 1865. (Francis 13)<sup>9</sup>

In many instances, however, this traditional founding myth is balanced by the inclusion of ironic comments, set pieces of memories, and present-day as well as intertextual references. The title, "Thanksgiving," while not referring to Vancouver itself, also ironically alludes to the supposed achievements of the city's founding fathers and their critical view of the city's population. Thus, "Gassy Jack's saloon and hookers" (l. 58) were criticized by the then-authorities for supposedly having had negative effects on the local workers, while the construction of a library, the "Carnegie Library" (l. 78), was intended to impart knowledge to the workers but is used differently today: "People up and down the steps to the public toilets" (l. 79). Comments like this from the implied speaker, but also a comment such as "people have lived here 10,000 years—" (l. 41), call into question the man-made city, which has expanded and taken over land previously inhabited by an Indigenous people who were ultimately exploited and are now neglected, as represented by lines such as: "Rag man on a bicycle steers outrigger shopping-cart of rubbish" (l. 94) or "sagging stoops, rags in dirty windows" (l. 117).

The formal structure of the poem, with its 136 lines and approximately 19 sections (there are occasional one- or two-liners that are not read as sections or stanzas), often uses indented lines, resembling both a visual and content-based zigzag course through Vancouver, much like the movement of the counter-flâneur, which is reflected in the poem's formal structure.

The European history of the ideology of discovery, starting with the Spanish, who arrived in 1791, is invoked by the word "Sasamat" (l. 9) for which there is no translation (l. 10), as well as by reference to the magnificent Nevsky boulevard in Saint Petersburg, Russia.<sup>10</sup> The excess of simultaneous semiosis in both city and text (see Gurr 21), as well as multiple intertextual references (e.g. "cakeshops in the Nevsky," ll. 116, 135—from Ezra Pound's *Cantos*), trigger allusions to battles, including daily battles in contemporary Vancouver. For example, the "Keefer Bakery" (l. 95) is mentioned, which sells "bean cakes, almond cakes" (l. 95) and the "[a]lmond cookies, in packages—not cakes" (l. 100). This reference to the bakery and the cookies is addressed in conjunction with a question and the speaker's personal memory: "Do you have the melting ones like ... / like a memory of 30 years ago" (ll. 101-02). In the next instance, these memories are contrasted immediately with the contemporary situation: a barefoot beggar rides a rusty bicycle in Maclean Park "through the gulls and pigeons, / and plastic bags" (ll. 108-09).

The cultural idiosyncrasies, e.g. "Thanksgiving" as a reference to and critical assessment of European colonialism, and "cakeshops in the Nevsky" (l. 116) in contrast to "Sagging stoops, rags in dirty windows / rowhouse Jackson / Vancouver Improvement Company prominent shareholder" (ll. 117-19), constantly juxtapose a supposedly glorious past with a downtrodden present that speaks of exploitation and the annexation of land. Placing the word "Bloodshed" after the longer quotation from Ezra Pound's *Canto*, in which the Russian Revolution is depicted, triggers the speaker to bemoan Vancouver's lost past:

Thickened, clotted, dried cloth set into our garment.  
Land cut in gore-shaped pieces  
to furnish with wedges

the flats Khahtsahlano called sk'wa chice—  
deep hole in the bottom (ll. 129-33)

Jumping around again in time and space, Quartermain recalls the battles of the Russian Revolution on the one hand, but by referring to "Khahtsahlano" and "sk'wa chice" (see Francis 6-7)<sup>11</sup> she addresses the battle of the "English Bay" and "Kitsilano Beach" in 1891, when the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) sought to expand on disputed territory (McCuaig). This battle and bloodshed are part of the people's cultural memory, underlined by the notion of "set into our garment."

Another historically important person referred to in the poem is "Chart-man Richards" (l. 18) and his "*Plumper*" (l. 19),<sup>12</sup> who, as the speaker suggests, was responsible for the selection and designation of place names along the coast of British Columbia. In Vancouver, for instance, he named one of the inlets "False Creek," upon which the speaker ironically comments: "Richards called it False—not a true creek" (l. 18). Moreover, Quartermain mentions significant historical figures, including Captain Raymur, Stamp, Gassy Jack, and Rear-Admiral George Fowler Hastings, as well as street names such as "Gore Avenue," "Keefer Street," "Hastings Street," "Main," and "Georgia." In addition, she refers to buildings and locations, such as "Chau Luen tower" (l. 24), "Fan Towers South" (l. 27), "New Chong Lung Sea Foods" (l. 36), "the Ford Building" (l. 81), "the Toronto Dominion towers / and terracotta fortress of Hudson's Bay Co." (ll. 87-88), "Keefer Laundry" (l. 92) and "Maclean Park" (l. 104). These references, along with concrete dates and times, show how the counter-flâneur navigates an invoked mental and concrete map of the city over time and space.

Through the semantic cluster of food and several other aspects that can be identified as Asian, the implicit speaker, on her walk, also addresses the presence of the Chinese in Vancouver. Initially arriving as laborers for the construction of the transcontinental railway, many Chinese settled in Vancouver during the earliest days of the city's history (see Francis 69); they are acknowledged in the lines below:

Plump! a dozen fans open-brooms beating rugs  
Tai chi brush knee—

Cloud-ears pile up a wall—black and curly.  
 Sacks of dried mushrooms, dried fish and shrimp.  
 Red roasted seeds. Durian. Prickly fruit.  
 Barbecue duck and pork. Tanks of crabs, shell-fish.  
                     A shiny fungus you see ledged out from trees  
 that clouds hear... (ll. 42-49)

This quotation underlines that the implicit speaker, who uses the personal pronoun “you” (l. 48), is speaking directly to an addressee, as if taking the reader through the streets like a city guide. She thereby describes the supposed stalls with different foods on display rather than rendering other senses. Without making direct mention of it, the Chinese community is portrayed as having become part of downtown Vancouver’s cityscape, like everything else the implicit speaker perceives and indicates on her alternative guided tour—a tour that stands in contrast to typical city tours in which tourists are taken to usual sightseeing sites. Quartermain employs a similar writing style in other poems in her *Vancouver Walking* collection. In these poems, she references historical figures, street names, and other material sites. By doing so, she effectively brings to light the multi-layered, socially and historically significant geography of the city of Vancouver. However, she does this through a counter-flâneur perspective.

Accordingly, in Quartermain’s poem “Walk to commercial drive” (Quartermain 8-13), “the speaker layers inequities of the past onto the landscape of their present” (Wunker 26). In this poem, the persona again addresses a past event, namely the “600 Chinese killed in the Fraser Canyon—/ landslides, careless dynamite” (ll. 91-92) while walking from “Union Street and Vernon’s drive—” (l. 108), where she sees “Scarlet creeper twining up a telephone pole / at the Happy Planet juice factory” (ll. 109-10). The persona, in palimpsestic style, reveals past atrocities suffered by the Chinese workers, a situation in which the speaker, being in the present and showing quotidian objects of the city, simultaneously addresses the “[a]ntipathy toward the Chinese [which] was motivated by a combination of racial prejudice and economic rivalry” (Francis 71).<sup>13</sup>

The analytical category of the walking counter-flâneur figure (e.g. "Back to Gore—The Skid—" ("Vancouver Walking" l. 103) aids in identifying the city setting via the various temporal and historical levels, discourses, and spatial-semantic references to Vancouver. These can be materialized with, for instance, the help of a map, images, or other auxiliary objects in order to fathom the layered structure (see Wachinger 272), that is, the palimpsestic space of Vancouver in the historical, textual, and discursive dimensions of meaning invoked here. Nearly every line in Quartermain's poem provides the reader with palimpsestic overwrites and deviations, surprising turns, and ironic comments, reminding us that historical facts can be erased, interpreted and commented upon, and that they essentially are transmitted through human agency. Through her counter-flâneur, Quartermain renders her poems into discursive approaches to history that allow her to juxtapose facts with present-day experiences in the city, and thus create an alternative archive. Quartermain's counter-flâneur subverts Vancouver's official history since these official archival records frequently maintain colonial ideologies in their collection of cultural knowledge.

#### 4. Michael Turner's *Kingsway*: Walking Through Past and Present on Vancouver's Oldest Thoroughfare

Michael Turner's poetry collection *Kingsway* is subdivided into three parts: The first, "Kingsway," consists of ten poems, numbered with lowercase Roman numerals. Poem number "(iv)" (Turner 5) runs across the entire page, from top left to bottom right, in a diagonal line, each line including two or, at the most, three words. In addition, the closer the poem reaches to the bottom of the page, the denser it becomes in terms of paragraphing and number of letters. The other poems in this section are presented in blocks that seem to have been allocated around poem "(iv)," thus poetically visualising the longest diagonal road in Vancouver, Kingsway. Section two of the collection is titled "15 Poems about Kingsway"; here the poems are numbered 1-15 and are about the

everyday experiences (e.g. karaoke, a blow job, eating at restaurants, etc.) of people that include the second-generation Italian taxi driver Lorenzo, an art student, a Mr Browning, and a migrant who does not even speak English. The implicit speaker observes and describes these people and situations, thus giving us glimpses into life in a seemingly ordinary city. The third section, entitled “Kingsway: A Re: Development Project,” is comprised of 21 poems with individual titles, some of which are taken from poems by other writers.

The entire collection, as well as each of the three sections, opens with a copy of a black-and-white photo: the first photo displays a blurry excerpt from the map of Vancouver, showing the typical grid structure and the area around Kingsway, which is indicated by a black diagonal line. Within this framework, Turner incorporates typographical idiosyncrasies into his poetry project, resulting in poems reminiscent of “concrete poetry.”<sup>14</sup> He does this in his metapoetic poems, e.g. his poem “1,” in which he relates the housing blocks to the “stanza blocks” (Turner 16, l. 12). Through the use of visual composition and ironic contrasts, a spatial-temporal walk is implied, during which the speaker, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, reveals his perceptions of the cityscape.

Besides evoking a present-day walk on Kingsway, Turner’s poems also reflect on Vancouver’s history, especially with reference to street names that go back in time to Canada’s settler-colonial history, as, for instance, in poem “(i)” (Turner 2):

1 a.m. this road, this way  
 diagonal, in opposition  
 2 the grid, the monarchy  
 of streets: Beatrice, Sophia  
 3 princes, Earls, a Duchess, lords  
 & ladies waiting at  
 45 degrees with soldiers, explorers  
 businessmen, saints  
 6 places in Australia, a Salish  
 name that means “people of many names” from  
 7th to 10th Avenues, indefinitely  
 a taxi driver drives the whole  
 8 miles with a carload

of offshore investors  
 9 times before giving up  
 looking for the historic Gladstone Inn  
 10 hours later swerving to  
 avoid a fallen man sleeping off

Princess Beatrice, for example, was the fifth daughter and youngest child of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Princess Sophia was the twelfth child and fifth daughter of King George III and Queen Charlotte. William Ewart Gladstone served as Prime Minister for four separate periods in the English Parliament. Thus, street names also tell Vancouver's colonial history. The "historic Gladstone Inn" (l. 16), which the taxi driver is not able to find, serves as an ironic comment that hints, on the one hand, at the colonial history and, on the other, at the fact that it is ridiculed, since an inn named after Gladstone eventually can no longer be found in the city today, thus also signifying that the colonial times have become elusive to contemporary city dwellers. In this poem, moreover, Turner integrates numerals that replace words. This is done to emphasize Vancouver's grid structure which is characterized by a hierarchical structure through the "monarchy" (l. 3), through which the diagonal Kingsway cuts in a seeming counter-movement.

Further, in lines 9 and 10 of poem "(i)," the Salish are mentioned. The Salish were members of a group of North American peoples who inhabited areas of the north-western United States and British Columbia. Since the poem is strongly characterized by the use of enjambment, several expressions convey a double meaning, as shown by the following example in the context of referencing Canada's First Nations: "6 places in Australia, a Salish / name that means 'people of many names' from / 7th to 10th Avenues, indefinitely / a taxi driver drives" (ll. 9-12). On the one hand, Turner refers to a street named after the Salish, which he does not identify directly. On the other hand, through the use of the word "indefinitely," he re-constructs an ever-existing place for the Salish in the topography of Vancouver, more precisely, in a certain area around Kingsway: The Salish have always been there and will remain there, as underlined by the unidentified street name, since colonial



naming has involved taking possession of that which is named. By contrast, the taxi driver drives “indefinitely” through Vancouver’s night-life in search of the Gladstone Inn. Thus, the double use of “indefinitely” indicates that multiple layers of names and meanings exist simultaneously. Turner thus creates a palimpsestic cityscape that connects past and present through historical and poetic renderings. Moreover, his implicit speaker, a flâneur character who appears in each of the poems throughout the entire collection, opens up the opportunity to integrate the material world, the city—by referencing the street names, as if guiding us through this specific part of town—and the process of reimagining this same city poetically and aesthetically.

In poem “(iii)” (Turner 4), Turner also hints at the construction of Vancouver, and, more specifically, of Kingsway as an important commercial and transport-related thoroughfare: “the British cleared the way / to link the navy in the inlet / with the business of New West” (ll. 9-11). He again alludes to the colonial past which he deconstructs in the next two short lines: “now people get on / just to get off” (ll. 12-13), emphasising the constant change epitomized by the coming and going of seemingly disillusioned people in the city.

In poem “(v)” (Turner 6), the idea of a simultaneously existing past and present is addressed when the implicit speaker turns to trucks that transport goods: “the first trucks / of the new day / are yesterday’s trucks” (ll. 4-6). And these “yesterday’s trucks” carried a specific cargo: “2-by-4s / of Douglas fir / Fur coats made / of beaver, bear / mink, seal / sealed palates / of minced salmon / containers of / office supplies like / waybills, staples / bags of briquettes / for barbecues” (ll. 13-24). With this linguistically and vocally interwoven enumeration of goods from past and present times in these short, clipped lines Turner reiterates the continuation and transformation of the flowing of past and present over the Kingsway thoroughfare.

However, by simply implying certain aspects rather than spelling them out, Turner, through the semantic cluster of a diversity of items, ironically addresses continuation. The notion that the cityscape still

holds the memory of the past that the counter-flâneur-like voice presents guides the speaker to meditate on everyday items and relics and to make the worlds of the past and the present blend in ironic fashion, as underlined by the numerous uses and variations of the verb "meet" in poem "(ii)" (Turner 3). Poem "(ii)" is almost entirely without punctuation, except for a colon in the first line, after which the perception of the movements through the street begins. With regard to the formal construction of the poem, there are no sentences, and the words all flow into one another. Thus, at the content level, the meetings are always ephemeral and often absurd ("where / pink neon meets a robin's egg blue" (ll. 2-3). The poem's irony also stems from the idea of "meeting,"—written as "meat" at one point. Everything and everyone seem to constantly "meet" on Kingsway, often without having any specific connection. The irony is produced by the use of the homophonic word "meet" which occurs ten times in the 15-line poem. Generally, the overall structure of the poem can be seen as ironic, as there are no real divisions between things, moments, and the past, all of which are loosely connected by "meeting," made evident in the seemingly arbitrary enjambments. The past is made present through the street names, which, with "King Ed," "Victoria," and even Kingsway itself, imply Vancouver's colonial past. The poem's structure is thereby broken up; everything is in constant flux. The notion of "ways / like me" (ll. 14-15) can be read as a personification of Kingsway, which is thereby presented as the meeting place/space of material, cultural, economic, and immaterial items (e.g. "deep blue summer night sky," l. 12) along with people (e.g. "a single/Chinese/family," l. 4; slashes in original) in a palimpsestic urban environment. The lyric persona thus wanders simultaneously through time and space.

In Turner's poems, which are free of standard punctuation, time is unmarked and slips rapidly, moving from past to present or present to past, with unpredictable enjambments, with internal rhymes and repetitions, resulting in a sense of inescapable walking or traversing. Turner's poems also often register a speaker's position within a real (Kingsway's past and present) and metaphoric cityscape (poetry). By

allowing his poems to register perceived senses of space, Turner becomes both a witness and an agent of Kingsway as a response to the exterior space. The counter-flâneur figure experiences the cityscape on his walk and through his memories and insinuations about Vancouver's oldest thoroughfare, Kingsway.

Turner's poetry differs from Quartermain's as he attends less to the historical events, figures, buildings, and sites, and more to the city's everyday life, especially in the third part of the collection "Kingsway: A Re: Development Project." Through his emotionless, often invisible, counter-flâneur figure, once again, numerous people and places, including shops, restaurants, and names of people, are conjured up in his meandering mode of writing—and yet, these people's dreams and aspirations are barely visible. By contrast, the ordinary citizens are shown as struggling with their everyday life tasks, as in "Anticipate. Our Drive Doubles as a Device of Future" (Turner 63), in which the map becomes "useless" (l. 1), because the addressee is "ripping it still / useless you can't / read it you won't / find Pearl or Cherry / that way you won't / find anyone around / to help you" (ll. 4-10). Moreover, the "dead ends" (l. 20) "will / only further contribute to / your frustration where / your decision to do something / only compounds your sense / of abandon" (ll. 21-26). Life in the metropolis seems to become more and more exhausting, so that the advice the implicit speaker gives his addressee is to "lease a new car every year / so you'll never have to / get it tested then / stop driving" (ll. 32-35). The notion of the "dead end" and, ultimately, automotive immobility—within the framework of intertwined lines and words—represents, in an interlinked way, the experience of urbanism and, in particular, the specificity of the area around Kingsway. By focussing on different people and their experiences, differing perspectives and perceptions, Turner shows that Kingsway is a place of disillusionment and hope but also a place where one can get lost, as the final poem in the collection makes unmistakably clear: Kingsway is a thoroughfare of people, lives, ideas, and movement; it is a starting point, a destination, and even a "dead end." Consequently, through his intertwined critical reading of past and present, Turner's persona can

be read as a counter-flâneur, in the sense that he provides, in a post-modern and ironic mode, poetic nuances of perceptions of Vancouver that are intimately connected through the Kingsway thoroughfare and its everyday life trajectories.

##### 5. Bud Osborn's *hundred block rock*: Voicing and Picturing the Down-trodden in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

While Quartermain and Turner's poems navigate the relationship between place, time, and history, although to different degrees and in differing fashion, Bud Osborn's poems depict place as a concrete space of rejection for his flâneur figure. "I'm so amazingly alive, I'm dancing on my own grave!" Osborn writes in his bio-note "testament to survival" ("100 Block Rock"). In transforming home into street, and thus an unfixed place, everyday life in Vancouver's downtown—including sounds and other sensual perceptions in lines that are reminiscent of jazz music—he creates a space that reflects on the precarious conditions of life in this Canadian metropolis. According to Erin Wunker, Vancouver's Downtown Lower Eastside is known as the "poorest postal code in Canada" (16). Within this framework, it is the most marginalized community in the otherwise most expensive North American city portrayed by Osborn.

Moreover, Osborn's poetry emphasizes the sound quality and the typographical appearance of the spoken word, as in the title poem "hundred block rock" (Osborn 101-05) and other poems that are written in block form and thereby resemble blocks in streets. The breaking of conventional linguistic restrictions through repetition, as in song, abandonment of standard punctuation, and the use of lowercase letters, is done for the purpose of highlighting undesirable subjects, mirroring the visible gentrification in the urban space of Vancouver. The focus in his poems is on a lyrical persona who self-referentially and self-reflexively addresses themes such as poverty, drug addiction, violence, prostitution, marginalization, loss, and, ultimately, survival. His people, as

Osborn put it in one of his poems, are “junkies winos hookers cripples crazies thieves welfare buns and homeless freaks” (40), thus alluding to the ugly side of the Downtown Eastside. According to Francis, “[t]he downtown’s East End had always attracted a population of the poor, the transient and the elderly to its cluster of old hotels and rooming houses” (218). In addition, “Vancouver had long been home to a flourishing drug trade” (Francis 218).<sup>15</sup> However, as Kofi Campbell (274) points out, though Osborn does eschew historical aspects, he does so only partially, since in his poem “jackson avenue and east hastings” (Osborn 56), the poet also openly addresses a more contemporary part of Vancouver’s history, namely the sex workers who were murdered between the mid-1970s and the autumn of 2001, a series of murders now known as the “Pickton case” (see n8). According to Francis, “the missing women left a horrible stain on the reputation of the city. Pickton may have been the murderer, but the community was complicit in his crimes” (222-23). Moreover, as Wunker points out, “[m]any of them [the missing women] were Aboriginal; all of them were living on the margins of society” (16). Thus, Osborn also addresses indigenous predicaments, especially those of women, reading them in line with other marginalized people in the community.

On an extra sheet included in my copy of *hundred block rock*, there is a handwritten note reading “Vancouver Folk Music Festival Program, July 99,” an advertisement for the event “Vancouver—Bud Osborn with Davis Lester & Wendy Atkinson.” Its contents are revealing, showing Osborn also as a community worker:

In the two years since poet Bud Osborn last performed here, almost a thousand of his neighbours have died from heroin overdoses. In his neighbourhood, the tuberculosis rate has risen to 232 cases per 100,000 people. The national rate is nine. More women have “disappeared” from the streets, never to be seen or heard from again.

During this time, Bud has been the head of a task force on the epidemics in the Downtown Eastside and has been advocating the need for safe shooting spaces for addicts. [...]

His work brings to life voices which aren’t heard much amidst the cries for lower taxes and the sound of high-rise lofts under construction. He has continued to teach writing workshops in the neighbourhood. He recorded a new

CD, *Hundred Block Rock*, on the roof of a building at Hastings and Main. He was reunited with his son, who he hadn't seen in almost 30 years. He says that reunion was the most powerful experience of his life. In a life that has included his father's suicide, his own attempts, the murder of his grandmother, years of addiction and years of being clean [...]. Bud says "I never thought I'd live long enough to get my teeth done."

This longish account can also be read as a historical document, since Osborn died in 2014, and since heroin has been replaced by crystal meth. Osborn's poetry, written from the perspective of a counter-flâneur, highlights those who are often silenced. His poems vary in style, from short free-verse pieces to longer narratives, all of which capture the struggles faced by the residents of his neighborhood at street level. Some of these poems are written in block form, whereas others are written in the form of haikus. With none of the poems using standard punctuation, and with all poems exclusively written in lowercase letters, Osborn's poems that include the author's own experiences as a former drug addict, are on a peer level with "those whom society has cast aside" (Campbell 266), "the baddest and most undeserving of poor people" (Osborn 126). His poems, consequently, speak of squalor, intimacy, and humility, and give a concrete response to space—material space—or rather, the lack of it: "4 adults / 2 children / 17 cats / a million cockroaches / a turtle in the bathtub / petey the big dog on a chain in the kitchen area / and a falcon in a large cage" (Osborn 52). Osborn's poetry covers a diverse range of topics, including "gentrification" (34) and a girl named Marie, who was Cuba Duyer, a Cherokee from the hills of Oklahoma (39). Osborn walks in the streets of the disenfranchised, which is often also revealed in his typographical choices, such as in his title poem "hundred block rock", or "jazz at midnight along granville street" (22).

In particular, Vancouver is seen and perceived through the eyes of a persona who is the poet's alter ego. Thus, Osborn performs the role of a flâneur who, however, reveals himself not as a bourgeois and dandy-like figure but a figure diving into the crowd of those people he describes, of whom he is part, whom he observes and writes about.

Campbell argues that Osborn's poems can be interpreted in the framework of "internal colonization" (265-78). According to Campbell, oppression occurs within a nation-state when one independent group dominates another independent group; this dynamic is characterized by power imbalances, which are perpetuated by the dominant culture (see 266). Within this framework, Campbell employs the notion of "sub-populations" (267) as well as concepts pertaining to postcolonial theories such as that of diaspora (see 270).<sup>16</sup> In contrast to Campbell, I will turn to the question of how Osborn's poems, through an explicit counter-flâneur, create a poetics of Vancouver. He gives voice to those who have not been seen or heard, such as those "illegal / latino / black / aboriginal / white / trash" (Osborn, "hundred block rock" 102, 105, stanzas 3 and 12) who are increasingly rejected within a more and more gentrified urban space. In Osborn's poems, the counter-flâneur's walking experience becomes a survival strategy in which feelings of displacement and marginalization merge with feelings of memories of a difficult childhood and the transitory, represented by the recounting of his father's suicide, his mother's rape and drug addiction, and the poet's own suicide attempts, drug addiction, and disenfranchisement.

Most of the poems in Osborn's *hundred block rock*, from a counter-flâneur's perspective, describe the raw reality of Vancouver's street life, including drug abuse, police brutality, prostitution, homelessness, madness, and utter frustration. A lyrical persona essentially narrates his experiences as situations occur, not as something in the past. This is unlike Quartermain's poems in which the poet constantly meanders between past and present with regard to Vancouver's history. In addition, Osborn's poems do not so much reflect but rather tell and show, thereby providing an account of people and situations as if in narratives. Thus, storytelling, through the use of swear words, internal rhymes, and repetitions, as well as long narrative poems, becomes Osborn's primary mode. Like Turner's linguistically interlocked poems and Quartermain's zigzag poems, several of Osborn's poems reflect Downtown Eastside through their concrete form, as stanzas take on the

literal contours of streets, blocks, and rocks. This is particularly the case in the poem "jazz after midnight along granville street" (Osborn 22-24).

This 47-line poem, dedicated to the musician Graham Ord, is characterized by the notion of the showing and telling of a particular scene at a particular time, "after midnight," through the repetition and variation of lines or word clusters as well as through a format that resembles jazz music. Jazz music is often characterized by syncopated rhythms, that is, an accentuated offbeat, as well as a heavy emphasis on improvisation, and this is how the poem appears on the page. One line is repeated several times in variation:

a saxophone moans on granville street (l. 1)  
 [...]  
 a mournful solo after midnight (l. 4)  
 [...]  
 saxophone solo on granville street (l. 14)  
 [...]  
 and a saxophone floats      above granville street (l. 20)  
 [...]  
 and a saxophone wails      on granville street (l. 27)  
 [...]  
 and a saxophone sings      a lonely song  
 and a saxophone dreams      somewhere      to call home  
 and a saxophone screams      on granville street  
 (ll. 44-46; spacing in original)

The personification of the saxophone is achieved through the verbs that emphasize the saxophone's actions, which, at the end of the poem, vary and increase in intensity quite obviously until, in the last line, the saxophone even "screams." The poem's story, revealed through an explicit lyrical persona, is about a man "standing in the middle of the block / he holds a telephone in one hand / and in the other / a long knife" (ll. 5-8). When the police arrive to search him, he threatens them with his knife. The situation escalates, accompanied by the wailing saxophone, and then, "a gunshot    POP!" (l. 30) goes off, and the man goes down. However, he has only been shot with "a rubber bullet    he'll be all right" (l. 35), the "cop" says (l. 36). After this incident, the buses are allowed to pass through again, and the lyrical persona, who even



prayed to the "lord" (l. 21) to "have mercy," comes back to the "two little white boys" who—as the poem begins—"sit on the sidewalk / knees pulled up under their chins" (ll. 2-3), but now in a variation, since the speaker imagines himself: "I look at the stars      the stars look shy / like little white boys      running away / with their knees pulled up under their chins" (ll. 41-43; spacing in original).

The story of the poem is simple but effective, since it is dramatic and gripping, and thereby also reminiscent of what de Certeau refers to as the "ordinary practitioners of the city." They "live 'down below,'" that is, below the threshold at which visibility begins. With this poem, however, Osborn makes both the saxophone player and the man who is searched by the police seen and heard. The ordinary people of Vancouver are thus perceived differently, through rhythm and internal rhyme, that is, through this sound poem, in which Osborn not only imitates sounds, but the sounds equally imitate the feelings of the speaker, thus calling into question the role of the marginalized residents of the city who are prone at any time to being subjected to a police search. Simultaneously, through the critically observing and narrating counter-flâneur, he seeks to undo the dominant discourse, the discourse of what Campbell has referred to as the oppression of one group of another within one nation-state. What Osborn does here, as he does in much of his other work, is to place these marginalized characters at the centre of his poetic explorations.

Many of his poems are autobiographical renderings. For instance, in the poem "four years old" (Osborn 25-26), he recounts in poetic form his experiences of having had to watch his mother being raped by "another bad actor from the bar / but this guy was different / he was dangerous" (ll. 1-3). Unfortunately, four-year-old Osborn is not able to help his mother but has to watch and listen to his mother being raped. He also narrates, in poetic form, stories about his encounters with other people who are as downtrodden as he who try to survive, as outcasts, in the city of Vancouver, as is revealed in "steel" (Osborn 27-31), a poem about begging.

As in Turner's poems, standard punctuation is abandoned. The only punctuation Osborn uses are quotation marks for speech or exclamation and question marks within these spoken recountings. Osborn's specific writing style is perhaps a strategy, on the one hand, for evading the use of hierarchical structures, and, on the other, for instead emphasizing equality at the lower stratum of society. The poetry collection *hundred block rock* is based in Vancouver's Eastside, also known as "Hundred Block Rock," and specifically at the intersection of Main and Hastings. Even though the author only implies the spatial registration of the area in his poems, it still reflects the constitutional isotopy of Vancouver (see Mahler 17).

This is frequently done in conjunction with Osborn's invocation of the degree of intimacy and intensity of his own experiences, recalling specific times from his past. His exploration is not architectural nor geometrical, as perhaps in Turner's poetic depiction of the diagonal Kingsway or Quartermain's rendition of a zigzag walk through time and place, but is a matter of direct encounters with others who share his experiences of being "a burned-out junkie on the corner of / main and hastings" (Osborn 114, "wow," stanza 2) or "a junkie on the corner / stuck in the street" (118, "wow," stanza 17). The activities of the flâneur, epitomized in walking and observing, are reduced to the mere will to survive in a specific part of the city. The impoverished, packed apartment in Downtown Eastside, the intimate inhabited space, and the street, are that which Osborn captures and shares as someone who has walked there for many years. From this position, Osborn creates a different mode of zooming in on Vancouver—in the form of the everyday life of a drug addict. He illustrates the brokenness of the postmodern city dwellers whose stories he tells through the figure of the counter-flâneur: he criticizes the disenfranchisement of these people, of whom he apparently is one, until the end of the collection.

In the second stanza of the poem "wow," for example, the speaker suggests an impending shift in his life: "yesterday / I was a burned-out junkie on the corner / main and hastings / today / I wake up in the strong and slender arms / of a beautiful young woman" (Osborn 114).

The poem would seem to consist of two parts: the direct memories of the past in the city, passing physical locations that were part of a most downtrodden and impoverished life as a drug addict, indicated by the temporal signifier “yesterday,” which is repeated many times, and the imaginary walk into a moment of current sensations, traversing into a life that is characterized by normalcy: “today / I live in a large clean apartment / on the 6th floor of social housing” (Osborn 114, stanza 4). This poem is an homage to the young woman who rescued him from his drug addiction and misery. It also celebrates life and love. As the one voicing his own concerns and the predicaments of those to whom he once belonged, he performs what Campbell terms “oppositional readings” (272). This is also revealed in how he conceptualizes those who are apparently in power and those who are the disenfranchised, as he does, for instance, in his poem “gentrification” (Osborn 34-39). The poem is linguistically innovative and formally challenging, conveying an urgent sense of community commitment and redress. Collectively, Bud Osborn’s poems are testament to his poetics of what might be called awareness-raising.<sup>17</sup> His work often foregrounds the mess and grime of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, the contradictions, failures, and disappointments of those whom we do not want to see or hear living in a city, and who yet struggle to make a living, to find a home or, sometimes, even just a place to sleep, a city still deeply entrenched in gentrification, referred to as “Vancouverism” (Francis 216).<sup>18</sup> Rejecting the idea of poems that would address the beauty of the city, Osborn’s personal verse pierces the veneer of decorum in Canadian society. His poems are almost painful in their explicit honesty and unbending in their political critique.

## 6. Conclusion

Hardly any other topic raises more questions about the function of poetry in the face of the extremes of an urban landscape and of the relationship between the historical, the Indigenous, and the aesthetic than

does the issue of the city. The interaction between form and space in the Vancouver poems discussed in this essay allows for a reading that considers the ways in which the poems present poetic texts that can be termed urban poems, since they are "answerable" (Bakhtin 1) to the quotidian objects, forms, places, history, and characters they critically aestheticize through the lens of what I, in line with Carrera Suárez, have termed counter-flâneurs. The three poets, Quartermain, Turner, and Osborn, achieve this counter-reading through the unique shapes of their verse forms and their critical, ironic approach to places, history and significant historical figures, which, unlike that of the nineteenth-century bourgeois flâneur figure, is not affirmative. Each writer's poems address externally perceived impressions, e.g. buildings, streets, people, and history, that lead to an internal correspondence with the place and space, lending a voice to the marginalized, Indigenous, migrants and disenfranchised. The historically aware, formally, and linguistically experimental works of Meredith Quartermain, Michael Turner, and Bud Osborn underline what Ben Hickman writes: "To read Vancouver's contemporary poetry is to be located" (74).

It is, nevertheless, the current twenty-first-century socio-political situation—and Vancouver's ongoing gentrification—that has provided the impetus for historically informed poetries from the metropolis. In keeping with a claim made by Greer Hartwiger, the counter-flâneur figures embodied in the poems are simultaneously chroniclers of history, keen observers of the present and augurs of the future (see Greer Hartwiger 7). It can be argued that all three poets engage in what Greer Hartwiger has called a "contrapuntal reading" that "leads to a polyvocal representation of a city and the voices that make up its history and its present representation" (7). The poems reflect on the outward form of Vancouver's cityscape in the shapes, ideas, and historical details that make up Vancouver. Quartermain, Turner, and Osborn's poems do not advocate escape; instead, the speakers situate themselves within the physical dimensions of city life, both daily and historical, rendering them at times ironic while also bemoaning them, expressing a certain feeling of loss brought on by what has been termed "Vancouverism."

They each address a specific area in Vancouver, critically traversing and interjecting a sense of walking—trying to create an alternative sense of history and community.

Technische Universität  
Chemnitz

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>There is abundant literature on the literary figure of the flâneur, and it is hardly possible to present even a representative selection here. The edited volume by Oliver Bock and Isabel Villa-Cabanes on *Urban Walking: The Flâneur as an Icon of Metropolitan Culture in Literature and Film* (2020) offers thematically focussed comprehensive bibliographies in each chapter. Eva Ries in *Precarious Flânerie and the Ethics of the Self in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction* (2022) investigates the literary figure of the flâneur and negotiates models of the self in conjunction with the general human condition of precarity in a selection of Anglophone novels.

<sup>2</sup>Other Canadian poets who focus on the city, Vancouver, or industrialization as a poetic topic of their works are, for instance, Stephen Collis with his Barricades project *To the Barricades* (2013), Daphne Marlett with her poem “Steveston” from the collection *Steveston* (2001), Christine Leclerc with her editorial collaboration *The Enpipe Line* (2012), or Cecily Nicholson with her collection *From the Poplars* (2014). For a discussion of a selection of short stories on these topics see Sandten, “Vancouver’s ‘Unhomely Women’” 197-208.

<sup>3</sup>Carrera Suárez writes: “the figure of th[e] postcolonial, post-diasporic pedestrian necessarily occupies a different place in the real and fictive worlds, acting as counter-flâneurs/flâneuses, writing against the grain of their modernist counterparts, and therefore must be conceptualized—and named—differently, in keeping with the modified urban discourses and genres from which they emerge” (854).

<sup>4</sup>In Canada, “Thanksgiving” is celebrated on the second Monday in October.

<sup>5</sup>Quartermain, *Vancouver Walking*: “Walk to commercial drive,” 8-13; “Walk for beans,” 20-28; “Night Walk,” 58-59; or “Nightwalk on Ferguson Point,” 64-65). The titles, including “Night Walk” and “Nightwalk on Ferguson Point” appear this way in the original.

<sup>6</sup>I argue that urban space functions like a palimpsest: it presents, as did parchment in Antiquity, a space upon which the script is erased, yet—as is the case in a faultily made palimpsest—the older, earlier script, like an earlier layer, is still partly visible. From a postcolonial perspective, this earlier layer in a cityscape can be interpreted as the colonial and neo-colonial white male hegemonic oppression of Indigenous peoples, migrants and other marginalized subjects, histories, cultures, languages and landscapes. Writing about the city’s past brings forth these earlier layers. This is in line with Tobias Wachinger’s idea of reading stratification as a

paradigm of the contemporary British city novel. Wachinger focuses on postmodern detective fiction and reads the novels with the help of what he calls "spacial-semantic layering"; see Wachinger 266; also Malinowski, Nebelin, and Sandten 171-205.

<sup>7</sup>As is customary when quoting from poems, the lines are numbered and given in brackets after the quotation.

<sup>8</sup>Erin Wunker relates this to the mass killings of sex workers in Vancouver's Downtown Lower Eastside: "Beginning in June of 1983, sex workers in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside began to disappear [...]; and they continued to disappear; approximately sixty-nine women vanished from the streets. Many of them were Aboriginal; all of them were living on the margins of society" (16). According to Kofi Campbell "numerous sex-trade workers who worked along Hastings on Hundred Block Rock in Vancouver" disappeared, "disappearances in which Robert Pickton has now been implicated; everyone in the area knew what was going on but, because the victims existed on the extreme margins of society, the law, which those in the centre take for granted, did not investigate for about fourteen years" (274). See also Sandten, "Vancouver's 'Unhomely Women'" 197-208; and Francis 222. In addition, the 100 Block of Hastings in Vancouver is also considered "the stolen and unceded territories of the Coast Salish People" ("100 Block Rock" online blurb).

<sup>9</sup>Francis begins his history of Vancouver with the establishment of the first mill company. Although he does not exclude the Indigenous population and their land rights in his study, he does not elaborate greatly on the history of Vancouver prior to the first settlements, nor does he refer to any foundational myths of the Indigenous people. To elaborate on the Indigenous foundational myths here would exceed the scope of this essay.

<sup>10</sup>As Quartermain explains in her Notes (111), "the Nevsky" is a "broad avenue that leads into the large square in St Petersburg," which provided the "scene of the February 1917 bread protests that started the Russian revolution."

<sup>11</sup>Francis writes that August Jack Khahtsahlano "was one of the most important informants about the early, Indigenous history of the Vancouver area," who at the request of Major James Skitt Matthews created a map of Burrard Inlet, entitled "Before the Pale-Face Came: Indian Names for Familiar Places" (6-7). Francis writes "sk'wa chice" as "Skwa-Yoos," which is the name of "Kitsilano Beach" (56, 164).

<sup>12</sup>Richards is "Captain George Henry Richards, in command of the steam sloop HMS Plumper," who in 1859 "carried out a survey of Burrard Inlet for the British Administration" (Francis 18).

<sup>13</sup>Francis further elucidates that "[t]he Chinese were not the only victims of racial animosity in early Vancouver. The British/American majority targeted anyone who it believed threatened its hegemony and the mores of what it considered its community" (71).

<sup>14</sup>Concrete poetry is poetry in which the typographical arrangement of words is as important in conveying the intended effect as the conventional elements of the poem, such as meaning of words, rhythm, rhyme or meter (Sandten, "Politics, Plurality and Parody," 87n2).

<sup>15</sup>As Francis points out, drug trading and addiction had already taken hold of Vancouver in the late 1940s, increasing in the 1980s, and then becoming even more dramatic with the onset of the HIV / AIDS crisis (218-19).

<sup>16</sup>As Campbell argues, his reading of Osborn's poetry is done by "foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their [the outsiders'] differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre," and "based on the notions of the centre / margin and civil / savage binaries, which are still, in many ways, at the heart of postcolonial studies, and on the ways in which Osborn understands the centre as constructing the margins" (270).

<sup>17</sup>On the back cover of *hundred block rock* it states: "Bud Osborn is a poet and poverty-rights activist whose work has been published in numerous magazines and anthologies." Osborn was engaged in community work in Vancouver's Downtown, and as Yolande Cole writes: "Overdose deaths in the Downtown Eastside had reached epidemic levels when activist and poet Bud Osborn flew to Ottawa with MP Libby Davies to advocate for a supervised injection site."

<sup>18</sup>According to Francis, Vancouver had managed to successfully transform "from provincial centre to global metropolis," through what became known as "Vancouverism," an entire set of "principles that drove the new urbanism" (216). This included development in the areas of: "high-density downtown living; safe, attractive streetscapes; ethnic and socio-economic diversity; plentiful green spaces; revitalized waterfront areas; the maximization of scenic views; a balance of heritage preservation and urban renewal; and a sustainable environmental footprint" (Francis 217).

## WORKS CITED

- Bakhtin, Michael. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunow. Austin: U of Texas P, 1990.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life*. Trans. P. E. Charvet. London: Penguin, 1972. 1-56.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999. 416-55.
- Bock, Oliver, and Isabel Vila-Cabanes. Introduction. *Urban Walking: The Flâneur as an Icon of Metropolitan Culture in Literature and Film*. Ed. Oliver Bock and Isabel Vila-Cabanes. Wilmington: Vernon, 2020. ix-xv.
- Campbell, Kofi. "Internal Colonization and the Culture of Street Life in Bud Osborn's *hundred rock block*." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 37.2 (Summer 2007): 265-81. [doi.org/10.3138/cras.37.2.265](https://doi.org/10.3138/cras.37.2.265).
- Carrera Suárez, Isabel. "The Stranger Flâneuse and the Aesthetics of Pedestrianism: Writing the Post-Diasporic Metropolis." *Interventions* 17.6 (2015): 853-65. [doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.998259](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.998259).
- Cole, Yolande. "Downtown Eastside poet and activist Bud Osborn remembered as 'hero.'" *The Georgia Straight* 7 May 2014. [straight.com/news/84941/downtown-eastside-poet-and-activist-bud-osborn-remembered-hero](https://straight.com/news/84941/downtown-eastside-poet-and-activist-bud-osborn-remembered-hero). 16 Oct. 2022.

- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.
- Deer, Glenn. "Remapping Vancouver: Composing Urban Spaces in Contemporary Asian Canadian Writing." *Canadian Literature* 199 (Winter 2008): 118-44.
- Francis, Daniel. *Becoming Vancouver: A History*. Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 2021.
- Greer Hartwiger, Alexander. "The Postcolonial Flâneur: *Open City* and the Urban Palimpsest." *Postcolonial Text* 11.1 (2016): 1-17.
- Gurr, Jens Martin. "The Modernist Poetics of Urban Memory and the Structural Analogies between 'City' and 'Text': *The Waste Land* and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*." *Recovery and Transgression: Memory in American Poetry*. Ed. Kornelia Freitag. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. 21-37.
- Hickman, Ben. "Location and Address in Vancouver's New Poetries of Place: Wayde Compton, Peter Culley, Meredith Quartermain." *Canadian Literature* 234 (2017): 74-90.
- Hughes, Josiah. "Artists from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside Come Together for '100 Block Rock' Compilation." *Exclaim* 5 Oct. 2020. [exclaim.ca/music/article/artists\\_from\\_vancouvers\\_downtown\\_eastside\\_come\\_together\\_for\\_100\\_block\\_rock\\_compilation](https://exclaim.ca/music/article/artists_from_vancouvers_downtown_eastside_come_together_for_100_block_rock_compilation). 15 Oct. 2022.
- "100 Block Rock." *Bandcamp*, uploaded by Various Artists, 11 Dec. 2020. [incidentalpress.bandcamp.com/album/100-block-rock](https://incidentalpress.bandcamp.com/album/100-block-rock). 15 Oct. 2022.
- Koolhaas, Rem. *The Generic City*. New York: Monacelli, 1995.
- Lefebvre, Henry. *Critique of Everyday Life II: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*. Trans. John Moore, preface by Michel Trebitsch. London: Verso, 2002.
- Löschnigg, Maria, and Martin Löschnigg. *Uni-Wissen: Kurze Geschichte der kanadischen Literatur*. Stuttgart: Klett, 2001.
- Mahler, Andreas. "Stadttexte—Textstädte: Formen und Funktionen diskursiver Stadtkonstitution." *Stadt-Bilder. Allegorie, Mimesis, Imagination*. Ed. Andreas Mahler. Heidelberg: Winter, 1999. 11-36.
- Malinowski, Bernadette, Marian Nebelin, and Cecile Sandten. "Von der Schichtung zur Palimpsestierung: 'Palimpsest' als kulturwissenschaftlicher Grundbegriff." *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 43.1-2 (2022): 171-205.
- McCuaig, Patricia. "The Battle For Kitsilano." *Kitsilano.ca* 13 April 2019. <https://www.kitsilano.ca/2019/04/12/the-battle-for-kitsilano/>. 25 Sept. 2023.
- McIntosh, Andrew, David Mills, and Laura Neilson Bonikowsky. "Thanksgiving in Canada." *The Canadian Encyclopedia* 5 July 2019. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/thanksgiving-day>. 25 Sept. 2023.
- Osborn, Bud. *hundred block rock*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 1999.
- Prakash, Gyan. *Mumbai Fables*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010.
- Quartermain, Meredith. *Vancouver Walking*. Edmonton: NeWest, 2005.
- Ries, Eva. *Precarious Flânerie and the Ethics of the Self in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022.
- Sandten, Cecile. "Challenging and Reconfiguring Flânerie in Fictions of Contemporary Indian Metropolises." *Urban Walking: The Flâneur as an Icon of Metropolitan*



- Culture in Literature and Film*. Ed. Oliver Bock and Isabel Vila-Cabanes. Wilmington: Vernon, 2020. 195-214.
- Sandten, Cecile. "Vancouver's 'Unhomely Women': The Female Flâneur in Nancy Lee's *Dead Girls* (2003)." *Home: Concepts, Constructions, Contexts*. Ed. Cecile Sandten and Kathy-Ann Tan. Trier: WVT, 2015. 197-208.
- Sandten, Cecile. "Politics, Plurality and Parody: Postmodern Experiments in Contemporary Scottish Poetry by Edwin Morgan, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead and Jackie Kay." *Anglistik: Mitteilungen des Deutschen Anglistenverbandes* 19.1 (2008): 85-98.
- Turner, Michael. *Kingsway*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 1995.
- Wachinger, Tobias. "Stadträume/Stadttex-te unter der Oberfläche: Schichtung als Paradigma des zeitgenössischen britischen 'Großstadtromans.'" *Poetica* 31, (1999): 263-301.
- Wunker, Erin. "The Archive and the Alleyway: The Spatial Poetics of Sachiko Murakami and Meredith Quattermain." *Inhabiting Memory in Canadian Literature/Habiter La Mémoire Dans La Littérature Canadienne*. Ed. Benjamin Authers, Maïté Snauwaert, and Daniel Laforest. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2017. 15-36.

# The Providential Rose: Herbert's Full Cosmos and Fellowship of Creatures

PAUL DYCK

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 259-284.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-dyck-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-dyck-1)

---

This article is the fourth entry in a debate on "George Herbert and Nature" (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/george-herbert-and-nature>). Further contributions to this debate are welcome, please contact [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

---

## Abstract

Though Herbert's writing is full of references to creatures and to human life in relation to non-human life, Herbert criticism has predominantly read his work as inner and devotional, often to the exclusion of the external and environmental. Richard Strier's claim that Herbert's deepest impulses require an empty cosmos, empty of all but him and God, is the most striking instance of this consensus. However, Wendell Berry finds in Herbert's poem "Providence" the choice expression of a very different theological view, one that celebrates not private intimacy with God, but rather a public and creaturely intimacy, shared with all creation. This article traces a line of thought inspired by Berry's observation, one that begins with Herbert's instructions to parsons on gardening and cultivating herbs, through Herbert's poem "The Rose" and its surface rejection of pleasure, to "Providence," where we find a deeply formed and provocative picture of a cosmos in which humanity serves as priest, in a priesthood defined not by mastery but by attention and articulation. Returning to "The Rose," we see that the poem grants the flower itself a mastery in which it teaches us, via its shared flesh and mind, as it participates with us in a fellowship of creatures.

Now, if I do not give every thing its end, I abuse the Creature.  
*A Priest to the Temple* (265)<sup>1</sup>

In chapter 23, "The Parson's Completeness," of *A Priest to the Temple, or The Country Parson*, George Herbert gives parsons the beginnings of a list of plants to grow in their gardens, a list that includes roses. It is easy to lose sight of how essential gardening was to Herbert. Herbert writes about plants often, both as plants and as vehicles for other things, but this speech is easily overlooked, like plants themselves, for (I will venture) two reasons. One, we tend to read Herbert as a poet moving from vehicle to tenor. No matter how sharp and strikingly material Herbert's verse gets, we proceed as if knowing that he has his poetic mind on other things. He appears to tell us so himself, for instance in "Vertue," which celebrates the day, the rose, and Spring before declaring that only the seasoned soul "chiefly lives," though the world "turn to coal" (15-16). And this leads us to the second reason: we proceed as if Herbert's Christianity tells us that material life does not ultimately matter. It seems that Herbert's poetic Christianity doubly informs us that we should look past the plants to that which they signify. But we are inclined to overlook the stubbornly persistent doctrine of bodily resurrection, a resurrection Herbert names as fleshly and which makes it impossible to privilege the spiritual over against the material.<sup>2</sup> As "Faith" says, though the body turns to dust, Faith "cleaves unto it [...] [R]eserving all for flesh again" (42-44). And, as Jessica Rosenberg points out, "Vertue" does not simply contrast the material world and the soul but balances the moral and material senses of the word "virtue," first celebrating "the seasonal flux of material 'vertue'" (or power) before turning "to the 'season'd timber' of the virtuous soul" (Rosenberg 94). The poem's attention to the gathering and compacting or combining of plants suggests not the hard divide between nature and grace that characterizes Puritan and later Protestant thought, but rather that such attention itself has spiritual value. In Herbert's *Temple* and *Priest to the Temple* we find a manifestly bodily sense of the plant, a shared humoral nature key to human health. And we find that plants share with humanity not only a kindness (both a shared nature and a fellow-feeling)

of the flesh but also a kindness of mind.<sup>3</sup> For Herbert, nature serves grace, and natural virtue becomes party to the transforming work of grace in producing virtue as seasonal life itself helps season not only the body but also the soul.

The reconsideration of Herbert as gardener addresses a crux in readings of Herbert's poetry and religion, a crux I will show here by considering two very different readers of Herbert. Richard Strier, weighing the various concerns of Herbert, finds that his "orientation is fundamentally devotional" (167) and that, while Herbert does write about the world, his "deepest religious impulses require an empty rather than a 'full' cosmos" (168). Strier means something specific by this, to which I will return, but my point here is that in his reading the turn away from vehicle toward tenor and the turn away from the world toward God fit each other exactly. His is a particularly sharp articulation of Protestant and secular thought since Herbert: faith is private and inward and concerned with heaven and not earth. The other reader, Wendell Berry—not a Herbert critic but a farmer, writer, and environmental activist—pictures Herbert in a way exactly opposite to Strier's view:

We and all other creatures live by a sanctity that is inexpressibly intimate, for to every creature, the gift of life is a portion of the breath and spirit of God. As the poet George Herbert put it:  
*Thou are in small things great, not small in any [...]*  
*For thou art infinite in one and all.* (Berry 98)

Both Strier and Berry recognize in Herbert a poetic capacity to produce a real sense of intimacy with God. They differ sharply though: Strier says that Herbert's intimacy with God happens as he turns away from everything else, while for Berry that intimacy happens as Herbert realizes it is shared with all life, all creatures.

In this article, I will reconsider one of Herbert's "world-renouncing" poems, "The Rose," in light of the poem from which Berry quotes, "Providence." My argument in a nutshell is that "The Rose" is indeed a poem of renunciation, but that the renunciation it achieves is not a turn from the world or from the rose itself but rather a turn from the appetitive posture that consumes the world. Its turn from appetite for

pleasure is a turn toward the rose as a plant and as a fellow creature, one that can be broken down into remedies, but one that is better recognized as a teacher. "Providence" crucially fills in the picture that makes this turn possible by showing that Herbert's intimacy with God happens as he recognizes his own creatureliness, becoming open in body and spirit to the ministrations of fellow creatures. And, paradoxically, this work of recognition happens in Herbert through the hierarchical figure of the priest.

### The Parson's Garden

In Chapter 23 of *A Priest to the Temple*, "The Parson's Completeness," Herbert addresses the variety of knowledge required of a country parson, including a working familiarity with both law and medicine. Of the two, it is medicine that most attracts Herbert's theological imagination, and within medicine it is the herbal that he delights in, for many reasons: herbal knowledge and practice is readily affordable and available to all, it is located in the immediate environment, and it most readily lends itself to spiritual insight, as it is in itself the presence of the wisdom of God:

In the knowledge of simples, wherein the manifold wisdom of God is wonderfully to be seen, one thing would be carefully observed; which is, to know what herbs may be used in stead of drugs of the same nature, and to make the garden the shop: For home-bred medicines are both more easie for the Parsons purse, and more familiar for all mens bodies. So, where the Apothecary useth either for loosing, Rubarb, or for binding, Bolearmena, the Parson useth damask or white Roses for the one, and plantaine, shepherds purse, knot-grasse for the other, and that with better successe. (261)

Natural vertue—the knowledge of simples—does not compete with Grace but rather serves it:

Now both the reading of [the method of phisick], and the knowing of herbs may be done at such times, as they may be an help, and a recreation to more divine studies, Nature serving Grace both in comfort of diversion, and the benefit of application when need requires; as also by way of illustration, even

as our Saviour made plants and seeds to teach the people: for he was the true householder, who bringeth out of his treasure things new and old; the old things of Philosophy, and the new of Grace; and maketh the one serve the other. (261)

Nature serves Grace as the parson reads and knows herbs, a practice that assists his studies in Divinity. The parson in this way follows the example of Christ, the true householder. For Herbert the parson's work brings together the old knowledge and the new: the Adamic priesthood and the Christian ministry join. Herbert observes that one reason Jesus used plants and seeds to teach the people was to "set a Copy for Parsons" (261). For Herbert, the parson follows Christ in part by making the garden the shop. To put this in terms of current concerns, we might say that for Herbert priesthood involves knowing oneself as a body in a particular place and in relationship to other bodies, understanding a local boundedness felt not as limitation but as constituting the familiar relationships that make well-being. Here is Wendell Berry's Herbert.

### Thinking with and about "The Rose"

We see the gardener-parson's sensibility in action in "The Rose." The poem presents as a religious voice we might expect, one renouncing pleasure and the world.<sup>4</sup> Upon further reading, though, we might hear a renunciation not of the world but of the appetite that gluttonously feeds upon it, and instead of that gluttony, a call to attend to a plant, a rose. We might ask whether a plant is good to think with or good to think about.<sup>5</sup> Herbert offers a third choice: that a plant might school us. For my purposes, I will name "thinking with" as the emblematic and symbolic reading of the rose and "thinking about" as the humoral reading of the rose. We can think with a rose about other things (beauty, love, Christ) or, thinking about a rose, consider how its parts might be medicinally reconstituted for our health. And both of these Herbert does. But to stop at either would be to miss how thoroughly Herbert takes us to plant school, to have us learn from our kin.

The poem's speaker responds to an offer of pleasure with a flat refusal. We do not hear the offer, only the sharp trochaic response:

Presse me not to take more pleasure  
     In this world of sugred lies,  
 And to use a larger measure  
     Then my strict, yet welcome size. (1-4)

Whatever the offer, the speaker has immediately reframed it as to "take more pleasure," and to "use a larger measure" than his own strict size. Our strictly regulated speaker refuses the offer, following his forthright "press me not" with a supporting logic:

First, there is no pleasure here:  
     Colour'd griefs indeed there are,  
 Blushing woes, that look as cleare  
     As if they could beautie spare.

Or if such deceits there be,  
     Such delights I meant to say;  
 There are no such things to me,  
     Who have pass'd my right away. (5-12)

There is no pleasure in this vision of the rose, only beautified suffering, or alternately, any delight is no delight to the speaker who has surrendered his right to such delight as the world offers. Herbert fashions himself a disciplinarian, rejecting earthly delights, creating an awkward situation by contrasting his own discipline with his host's hospitality, which he equates with deceit. The poem—and social situation—turns on the volta of the following stanza:

But I will not much oppose  
     Unto what you now advise;  
 Onely take this gentle rose,  
     And therein my answer lies. (13-16)

Until its turn in line 13, the poem sounds much like the overly-scrupulous demands of "Conscience": "Not a fair look, but thou dost call it

foul: / Not a sweet dish, but thou dost call it sowre" (2-3). No matter how welcome the size, the first three stanzas work by negation only. But then the speaker stops his opposition and instead offers the gift of a gentle rose. The lesson changes. It no longer denies pleasure but itself becomes pleasurable, a delightful rebuke:

What is fairer then a rose?  
     What is sweeter? yet it purgeth.  
 Purgings enmitie disclose,  
     Enmitie forbearance urgeth.

If then all that worldlings prize  
     Be contracted to a rose;  
 Sweetly there indeed it lies,  
     But it biteth in the close.

So this flower doth judge and sentence  
     Worldly joyes to be a scourge:  
 For they all produce repentance,  
     And repentance is a purge.

But I health, not physick choose:  
     Onely though I you oppose,  
 Say that fairly I refuse,  
     For my answer is a rose. (17-32)

The pleasures of the rose are a kind of trap: it is fair and sweet, and yet it bites and purges. These stanzas develop an argument in two parts: the rose is fairest and sweetest, and yet the rose also purges, discovering enmity and urging forbearance. More particularly, the "if" of line 21 sets out a condition: *if* worldly desire be contracted to a rose, then the rose sweetly lies and bites. Both meanings of "lies" pertain. Imagine the rose as an object of desire, and it will deceptively appear passively available, but when one grasps it, its thorns bite. Likewise, both senses of "contract" are in play. "Worldlings" can bind themselves to the rose as an object of desire and simultaneously shrink their desires to that object. But in this action, the plant itself resists contraction to object of desire and insists on a different relationship. It corrects its misuse, turning worldly joy to a scourge.



Is the poem thinking with or about the rose? Helen Vendler celebrates the poem as an achievement of gentle rejection, arising from Herbert's "more-than-delicate conscience" (86). Vendler shows Herbert thinking with a rose. In her reading the speaker has been offered a rose and returns a rose (see 84). What changes is the rose's emblematic meaning: an emblem of pleasure is poetically transformed into an emblem of health.

While Vendler demonstrates how Herbert thinks *with* a rose, Coburn Freer shows how he thinks *about* a rose. He offers a reading tonally different from Vendler's, in which Herbert tells an earthy joke "at his questioner's expense," one that his "parishioners might well have understood and appreciated [...]. Disclaiming all general interest in physic, he offers a common laxative" (163-64). Herbert delicately says something indelicate, reminding the audience of the effects of overeating, lightly tracing the outline of the scatological, leaving it to the hearer to figure out. Even as the speaker chooses words that rise above the physicality of digestion, the syntax suggests the bodily tension of indigestion: "Purgings enmitie disclose, / Enmitie forbearance urgeth" (19-20). Overindulgence obstructs the body, producing a close that bites, whereas purging discloses.

As we have seen, Herbert certainly thinks about roses. As he writes in "Providence," "A rose, besides his beautie, is a cure" (78). John Gerard's *Herball* praises the rose as deserving "the chieftest and most principall place among all floures" for its beauty, "vertues," and fragrant smell, as well as its symbolism of the English scepter (1259), but is mostly interested in the second of these, its vertues or uses in treating illness. These vertues arise from the plant's humoral "temperature." Like the humoral human body, the body of the rose has an overall complexion combining humours.

If we for a moment take Vendler's picture, that the speaker has been offered a rose, then the speaker, thinking about roses, mentally breaks down the rose into its parts, identifying those parts by their medicinal effect on the human body, in which its sweetness gives way to purging, disclosing enmity. He avoids/voids the rose's beauty by reducing it to,

as Freer says, a laxative. This reading gives insight, but not enough. Herbert offers back the best of flowers, beautiful and fragrant and good for loosening the obstructed human body. But the poem decidedly does not reduce the whole rose to its remedial parts, but, rather, having drawn attention to the remedying effects of the rose, returns to the rose in its wholeness. To understand how our gardener-parson is thinking with and about the rose, we need to read "Providence."

### The Full Cosmos of "Providence"

"Providence" gives us the cosmic setting in which "The Rose" and the gardener-parson dwell. But its status is contested. Strier downplays the poem as presenting a philosophical picture that gives no spiritual consolation. His conclusion that Herbert prefers an empty cosmos arises from a reading that splits Herbert's cosmological and devotional concerns, prioritizing the latter over the former. The philosophical problem of the full cosmos is that it paradoxically leaves no room for the freedom of God. God rules over it but has left himself with no space to move. Arthur O. Lovejoy, in his classic study *The Great Chain of Being*, quotes Herbert's "Providence" in order to illustrate this fullness (see 60):

Thy creatures leap not, but expresse a feast,  
Where all the guests sit close, and nothing wants.  
Frogs marry fish and flesh; bats, bird and beast;  
Sponges, non-sense and sense; mines, th'earth & plants. (133-36)

The Chain of Being has the qualities of plenitude, continuity, and unilinear gradation; it has no lack and cannot have lack. Herbert's "feast" of creation is full: there are no empty spaces, and the in-between creatures such as frogs and bats show that every possibility has been realized, in one continuous hierarchy. Strier argues that this idea of fullness—a closed and full universe already containing all possibilities—answers a cosmological question but not Herbert's devotional one. The

latter demands a different solution, for which Strier points to "Longing," a poem that evokes the Great Chain as well as the Book of Nature but finds in them no satisfaction and demands instead the radical and decisive movement of God, a God who will drop all things and attend to Herbert. The difference, as Strier puts it, is between "the static cosmos of philosophical theology and the dynamic world of practical devotion. A full cosmos leaves no room for movement or response" (171).

But to put "Providence" and "Longing" in a contest is to misread both. "Providence" is a hexameral poem, a hymn of creation that does not mean to also account for redemption, but that rather assumes this redemption. And "Longing" does not turn from a picture of cosmic harmony to a devotional remedy but rather utters a cosmic agony, one registering deeply in the heart. The two must be read together.

To be clear, I agree entirely with Strier that Herbert cannot be consoled by a philosophy of cosmic fullness. Notably, the "guests sit close" of "Providence" becomes in "Longing": "Thy board is full, yet humble guests / Finde nests" (53-54). The "yet" is profound: when one does not feel kindness, then fullness turns to exclusion; "Longing"'s desire for the kindness of Christ shifts the vision of a full nature to one of exceptional inclusion, thus breaking the rule of fullness. Herbert ultimately is less interested in demonstrating the beauty of the Chain of Being than in the difficulty and possibility of finding a place of kindness, of intimacy, of belonging. But for Herbert the relationship of beauty and belonging is not a contest. "Longing" does not only find the Great Chain unsatisfying; it presents the Gospel story itself, in the most direct of terms, and finds *it* unsatisfying: "Lord, didst thou leave thy throne, / Not to relieve?" (61-62). For Herbert, Christ must be the Lord of creation *and* of salvation, a fact powerfully affirmed by the answering poem "The Bag," which presents a picture of the Son of God spontaneously descending, "undressing all the way," through not an empty space but a full one, being made glorious through the descent itself. Crucially, Herbert does not answer the love cry of "Longing" with the one-on-one experience of "Love (III)" but with a story of the Lord of the Cosmos who becomes flesh, reveals his heart, and joins creaturely humanity

with God. In "The Bag," the Son moves radically and decisively through a full universe. Everything he touches becomes blessed, becoming fuller in his descent.

In Herbert's hands the Chain of Being does not chain God and does not prevent intimacy, and so Strier's claim that Herbert prefers an empty cosmos rings hollow. In fact, the moment that Lovejoy quotes him, Herbert turns and defies the Chain's constraining logic:

To show thou art not bound, as if thy lot  
Were worse then ours; sometimes thou shiftest hands.  
Most things move th' under-jaw; the Crocodile not.  
Most things sleep lying; th' Elephant leans or stands. (137-40)

The human philosophical problem of a God bound by the fullness of his own creation gives way to an active and engaging sense of wonder, where exception becomes not only natural but also theologically and devotionally delightful.<sup>6</sup> And here we see a deep Herbertian commitment to trouble logical structures that would bind or convert God to a structure or principle.

Herbert's insistence on the intimacy of God, irreducible to formulation, can be felt from the beginning of "Providence," which figures Providence itself not within a picture of a diachronic eye in heavens watching history unfold (as Raleigh's *History of the World* frontispiece 1614) but as experienced in a synchronic creaturely closeness, felt in quill in hand.

O sacred Providence, who from end to end  
Strongly and sweetly movest! shall I write,  
And not of thee, through whom my fingers bend  
To hold my quill? shall they not do thee right?

Of all the creatures both in sea and land  
Onely to Man thou hast made known thy wayes,  
And put the penne alone into his hand,  
And made him Secretarie of thy praise. (1-8)

Herbert comments on the physical action of writing not often but to striking effect, such as in "Jordan (I)": "there is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd: / Copie out onely that" (17-18). But only in this poem—

in which he asks the characteristic Herbertian question “shall I write, / And not of thee?”—does he use the word “quill.” He looks at his hand and sees the flight feather of a bird, crafted by hand into a pen, and he sees his fingers curving around it.<sup>7</sup> The materiality of writing matters in this passage, and more particularly, the interrelatedness of creatures matters at this moment. He is about to sing of creatures, and he cannot do so without an instrument made of another creature, and he cannot do so without the strong and sweet movement of Providence through his fingers as through all things.<sup>8</sup>

It is the creaturely closeness of “Providence” that Strier most crucially misses. Herbert sings of creatures as a creature. To be sure, Herbert is clear on the uniqueness of humanity. God has, of all the creatures, put the pen only into man’s hand. But the particularity does not trump the commonality; it rather entirely depends upon it. The central action of the poem is its offer of worship, an offer made on behalf of all creatures:

Wherefore, most sacred Spirit, I here present  
*For me and all my fellows* praise to thee. (25-26; italics mine)

Tellingly, Strier says of these lines that “Herbert *speaks not for himself* but for ‘all the creatures both in sea and land’” (169; italics mine). However, this is not what the poem says. Herbert presents praise for himself *and* others. And what is more, the everyday affection of “me and all my fellows” expresses not just connection but friendly intimacy and, indeed, solidarity. Herbert speaks as one of a fellowship, and this fellowship of creatures spells out a sensibility gently present throughout his work.<sup>9</sup> To miss it is to miss how profoundly embodied a poet Herbert is, with consequences both for how we read his poetry and what we might learn from him about Christian spirituality and ecology.

Strier himself has best pointed to the centrality of creation doctrine to Herbert, showing how “Love (III)” depicts *agape*, the love that creates its object (see 78-83). “Who made the eyes but I?” Love asks (12). At its most intimate, most personal, Herbert’s poetry discovers creation; at its greatest moment of grace, the poetry finds nature redeemed. That this redemption should not be understood exclusive of the rest of the world

is registered in Herbert's use of "creature": "Providence" includes five of the eleven times that Herbert uses the word in *The Temple*. For Herbert, "creature" marks not only a distinction but ongoing relationships: humanity is to God creature to Creator, in which creation is not complete but rather the condition of existence.<sup>10</sup> As he says in *A Priest to the Temple* "Preservation is a Creation; and more, it is a continued Creation, and a creation every moment" (*Works* 281). In *The Temple* this relationship-acknowledging distinction between Creator and creature unites creation. Herbert either applies it directly to himself, to humanity, or to all creation. Herbert's extraordinary sense of intimacy with God is profoundly of a piece with his fellowship of creatures.

Joel Swann has pointed out the tenderness Herbert has for herbs, a sharing of names that he seems to have enjoyed.<sup>11</sup> In "Man" Herbert writes that "Herbs gladly cure our flesh; because that they / Finde their acquaintance there" (23-24). This sharing of flesh with herbs comes as no offense to Herbert but as friendship, one humans are apt to overlook, forget, and abuse:

More servants wait on Man,  
Then he'l take notice of: in ev'ry path  
He treads down that which doth befriend him,  
When sicknesse makes him pale and wan. (43-46)

Herbert here goes further than scripture, which in Genesis 2 declares herb life the common food of man, beast, fish, and fowl (see Shannon 4). While the great "what is man?" psalm, Psalm 8, declares that all things are under man's feet, the herb being under foot in Herbert's "Man" refigures mastery as oafishness. This inter-species friendship is not only figurative, and not only material:

All things unto our *flesh* are kinde  
In their *descent* and *being*; to our minde  
In their *ascent* and *cause*. (34-36)

Herbert works in neither a human-animal dualism nor in a spirit-flesh dualism. While another poem, "Dulnesse," describes the condition of dullness as being lost in flesh, unable to find mind, "Man" confirms that what humanity shares with all creation is both flesh and mind. Herbert does not feel squeamish about flesh itself and about sharing it with plants and animals. To be lost in flesh as a sin-sick soul is the opposite of being keenly aware of one's creaturely connection to other creatures. And alternately, in "Vanie (I)", the scientist or "subtle Chymick" "de-vest[s] and strip[s] the creature naked" finding "callow principles" and imparting "his minde" (15-18). As described by Herbert, this way of knowing, based on a human-creature binary, involves not fellow-feeling but violation and imposition.

Again, Strier is right that the creation itself does not console Herbert. On the one hand, he often feels displaced from it, as in "Employment" (1):

I am no link of thy great chain,  
But all my companie is a weed.  
Lord place me in thy consort; give one strain  
To my poore reed. (21-24)

And, on the other hand, while he takes pleasure in the created world, he is keenly aware of its creaturely mortal limits, as in "Vertue":

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridall of the earth and skie:  
The dew shall weep thy fall to night;  
For thou must die. (1-4)

Even more importantly, he understands that to look for consolation primarily in the created world is idolatrous. As he puts it in "The Pulley," there is no rest, no ultimate consolation, in creation itself. If there were, then humanity "would adore my gifts in stead of me, / And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature" (13-14).<sup>12</sup>

What, then, is the purpose of "Providence," if not consolation? The poem does not long for consolation but rather takes up the human

priestly vocation of offering praise, a priestly action that paradoxically requires humble attention to the smallest of creatures as well as the large. The poem is a hymn of praise, one that simultaneously recognizes that the hymn will happen whether or not humanity sings and sharply prods humanity to take up its particular vocation.

The prod to sing comes by way of a sharp distinction between humanity and the other creatures, a distinction framed as capacity and lack:

Beasts fain would sing; birds dittie to their notes;  
Trees would be tuning on their native lute  
To thy renown: but all their hands and throats  
Are brought to Man, while they are lame and mute.

Man is the worlds high Priest: he doth present  
The sacrifice for all; while they below  
Unto the service mutter an assent,  
Such as springs use that fall, and windes that blow. (9-16)

The claim that “Man is the worlds high Priest,” voicing praise on behalf of a mute world must strike environmentally-conscious readers as inappropriate and even arrogant. And, as Debra Rienstra observes in her article on “George Herbert and the Metamorphoses of Devotion,” what begins as an apparently arrogant declaration of human superiority is gradually revealed in the poem as a call to receive the guidance of all creatures.<sup>13</sup> So, given that the sense of non-human creaturely lack diminishes and even disappears in the poem, we might ask why Herbert introduces it. The distinction itself is substantial: Herbert is talking about the uniquely human gift of speech and its right end. And the sharpness of the distinction works here as a prod, not to encourage human arrogance but to puncture it. This is no celebration of Man but a call to action: it is important that we not separate speaking on behalf of the creatures on the one hand and receiving guidance from those creatures on the other. The boldness of Herbert’s declaration of human priesthood is necessary because that role constitutes the imperative to listen and receive. While listening requires utmost humility and quiet,



it must not be mistaken for a state admitting complacency or one of lordly prerogative.<sup>14</sup> As Herbert insists from the beginning of the poem, the demand of the position is urgent, and as he draws to a conclusion, the demand exceeds the capacity of fallen humanity.

Further, Herbert's naming of Man as world's high priest invokes the Adamic priesthood and thus involves all people in the vocation of the gardener priest, a vocation that calls all into active attention outward. If we are ashamed of how we have collectively behaved in relation to other creatures and the creation, then notably Herbert gives no room to indulge this shame—no more room than he does in "Love (III)."<sup>15</sup> Though he surely did not have this possibility in mind, he has left no room for a denial of human capacity and particularity; rather, he insists that humanity do well that which only humanity can do.

But what is more crucial than the declaration of humanity as the world's high priest is the way that the poem characterizes Providence itself. The character of Providence deeply defines what it means to be figured as priest. Providence, again, is not the far-off view of a disembodied eye; it is a movement to be felt and a song to be heard. And with this sense the Chain of Being gives way to something more organic and intimate. Notably, Herbert describes both the reading of Scripture and the reading of nature as a responsiveness to the Holy Spirit, and Herbert's language for both is strikingly parallel. In "Providence" he addresses the "most sacred Spirit" who "sweetly temper'st all. *If we could heare / Thy skill and art, what musick would it be!*" (25, 39-40; italics mine). For Calvin sin blinds humanity, but here sin has deafened us.<sup>16</sup> Herbert uses the same conditional mode in "The Flower" for biblical reading: "Thy word is all, *if we could spell*" (21; italics mine).

Herbert's priest figure here is not a worldly master but the gardener-parson-poet who attends to the wisdom of each creature in a world in which use and wonder accompany each other. That any creature is useful to human life becomes a matter of praise. For example, the coconut becomes a divine marvel: "The Indian nut alone / Is clothing, meat and trencher, drink and kan, / Boat, cable, sail and needle, all in one" (126-28). The more ordinary things are, the more one is inclined to take them

as a matter of natural course, the more Herbert riddles us into the sense that they are everyday graces:

Light without winde is glasse: warm without weight  
Is wooll and furre: cool without closenesse, shade:  
Speed without pains, a horse: tall without height,  
A servile hawk: low without losse, a spade. (101-04)

Far from celebrating the dominion of humanity, the poem enacts human life as participation in a world of relationships in which meanings are not fixed but discovered in awe and gratitude.<sup>17</sup>

While “Providence” begins with the characteristic Herbertian problem—the problem of directing poetry to its true beloved—poetry itself can only ever accomplish this within the paradox of its own lack, its own superfluity (see Todd 109). The Gospel axiom that God’s strength is made perfect in human weakness comes home here in a particular way: that humans as “secretar[ies] of praise” can only faithfully inscribe what they hear by way of submission, attending to the infinity of God in the herb.<sup>18</sup> Human humility is paradoxically central to the action of praise:

But who hath praise enough? nay, who hath any?  
None can expresse thy works, but he that knows them:  
And none can know thy works, which are so many,  
And so complete, but onely he that owes them.

All things that are, though they have sev’rall wayes,  
Yet in their being joyn with one advise  
To honour thee: and so I give thee praise  
In all my other hymnes, but in this twice. (141-48)

This poem praises God twice, as an offering of praise (as in “all my other hymns”) and in the very creaturely being of the writer, whose fingers bend to hold his quill.<sup>19</sup> The double praise of “Providence” is in the *agape* realization that the Creator has made the singer.

As the human creature takes up the role of priest in “Providence,” poetry becomes kind, following the kindness of the herb. The herb in kindness heals the body as the poem in kindness both praises God and

tunes poet and reader to praise. And here I will pick up the terms I introduced earlier. The poem both thinks with and about creatures, paradoxically taking up its hierarchical role by being schooled.

### The Providential Rose

So how does “The Rose” move providentially? The poem does not sing praise but rather offers a reparative rebuke. It demands that we not take the rose for less than it is but gestures toward a fullness, a creaturely wisdom that exceeds itself. To tease this out, I will follow Vendler’s lead and picture the scene, imagining what has been offered, to which the rose acts as return. Instead of imagining the original offer of a rose, let us think about how and how much roses were used. As in the Middle East today, in Early Modern England roses were not only viewed and smelled but were also consumed. Given the ubiquity of rose water and even rose petals in sweets let us imagine not a rose being offered but instead some delicacy made of a rose. Let us imagine that the poem offers back a whole rose for roses broken down for artificial pleasure.

Returning to Gerard, one learns that one of the most common uses of the rose was in confections: “pretty things made of roses and sugar” (1265).<sup>20</sup> Rose petals were also “stamped” in order to produce “the most fine and pleasant yellow colour that may be devised, not only to limne or wash pictures and Imagerie in books, but also to colour meates and sauces” (1268). What if our speaker is not simply trading on a bit of spoiler knowledge to deflate a festive atmosphere but instead speaks out of a daily knowledge of plants? The first stanza of the poem, with its “press me not” rejection of “sugred lies” (1-2) in favour of a “strict” (4) diet, fits as a response to an invitation to eat a (one more?) “pretty thing” (Gerard 1265). The “[c]olour’d griefs” and “[b]lushing woes” of the second stanza respond to the decorative colours produced with roses. The speaker does not introduce the rose as an object lesson; he is offered pleasures and instead sees roses, the roses constituting the de-ceits/delights before him. He declines artifice made of roses and instead offers a real one, a whole rose.

What is this artificial rose our speaker has been offered? Hannah Wooley, in *The Ladies Directory*, gives some idea of the possibilities. Wooley, who as the title page proclaims, "hath had the honour to perform such things for the entertainment of his late majesty, as well as for the nobility," presents "choice Experiments and Curiosities," recipes that could be made by people with the resources, usually sugar, flour, and rose water, which is almost ubiquitous in the book. The products of these recipes range from preserved fruits and candied flowers to cakes and "rich court perfumes," to medicinal waters. (The inclusion of the latter suggests that Herbert's poem operates not within a sharp cultural binary but rather within a common concern to mix pleasure and health.) Most cake recipes in the book include rose water (usually mixed with large quantities of sugar), and so our speaker could be responding in "The Rose" to many things. Yet some recipes stand out, in light of the poem, for their use of roses for both flavour and colour. For instance, "sugar plate" uses rose water and flower petals (of burrage, roses, or marigolds) for colour (7). And sugar plate itself is used to make lozenges, which can be used to "perfume wine" (16). Alternately, "A pretty sweet-meat taught me by a Jew" also uses the standard rose water boiled with sugar, as well as almonds, and also "two ounces of the leaves of Damask roses, beaten fine" (55). The rose here accounts for both the "sweet" and the "pretty" of the treat. The flower becomes reconstituted most artfully, though, in Candied Flowers, whole petals (minus their white, bitter tips) saturated in hot liquid sugar, and dried on a clean cloth: little sweet roses.

Besides presenting a real rose as the source of ingredients, there is a humoral sense in which Herbert presents the whole body of the flower, a body akin to the bodies of the speaker and auditor. In other words, in presenting the source, even the laxative (that source's effect), the speaker presents a body that affects bodies. Even as he plays on the laxative effect, Herbert presents a thing that cannot be reduced to either that effect or to the effect of beauty and taste achieved in the confection. "My answer is a rose" (32) should be taken seriously, as it finally appeals not to a disembodied symbolic meaning but to an irreducible

body, with its own nature and effects on other bodies, with which it shares humoral parts. This is ultimately a play on the flesh, on the flesh's claims on the soul, as it were. The wholeness of the rose unites beauty and truth, both delighting and judging the beholder.

Nature's grace becomes evident as we attend to the flower, and in this sense the poem's opening words might take us back to the talking rose of "The Quip." For a fleeting moment, as we move from the title "The Rose" to the poem's first words, "press me not," we might just think that the rose itself is speaking.<sup>21</sup> And even though remedies as well as confections come through the pressing of the rose, this hint of the rose's own voice returns to the sense in "Providence" that, as "Trees would be tuning," roses also might have something to say, given that "each creature hath a wisdom for his good" (61). It is the wisdom of the rose that this poem articulates. To return to the Herbertian lines quoted by Berry, "thou art in small things great, not small in any" ("Providence" 41).

"The Rose" invites its audience to look again, to know and to learn from the rose itself as a fellow creature. It presents the rose as a body to be read, like the poem itself, which does not so much, as Vendler says, accompany the rose as evoke it. And the poem itself presses as the life of the flower of "Repentance" (2-6): its trochaic rhythm and catalectic endings produce an energetic and clipped effect. The flower is not pressed, but it presses. The deictic "*this* flower" (25; italics mine) has a particularity to it that signals both an actual flower and suggests the poem itself as a rose, a song of the rose that is both a recognition and an uttering of the unvoiced.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, Herbert gives us a way between a cosmos-emptying interiority and a romanticizing of nature: a creaturely seriousness toward God and neighbour, in which the latter names all kinds of kinship. This seriousness takes the form of Herbert's "strict, yet welcome size" ("The

Rose" 4). Zane Calhoun Johnson argues that for Herbert humanity communes with the other creatures "primarily though the act of ingestion" (142), and that the belly is the primary location of inter-creaturely connection. Herbert does attend and celebrate the close interweaving of the creation in what we call the food chain. But notably "The Rose" pivots on the speaker's resolve not to consume the flower, either as "sugred" "pleasure" (1-2) *or* as "physick" (29), and rather to choose health, a health observable in the unconsumed rose. Is this a rejection of the creaturely communion that Johnson sees? Herbert's strictness of diet, his renunciation of appetite, has a "double aime": "either of Abstinence a morall vertue, or Mortification a divine" (*Works* 267). Ingestion is certainly part of Herbert's picture, but there is a creaturely fellow feeling that precedes it, a corporally-grounded relationship that abides whether Herbert is eating or not.

If not eating is the ground of creaturely communion for Herbert, then what? Herbert takes flowers as parallel lives; his presentation of the rose in its wholeness as a sign of the healthy person in this poem should be understood in connection to "The Flower's" more fully developed sense of creaturely fellow feeling, especially as the poem imagines the hidden life of flowers in winter:

Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart  
 Could have recover'd greennesse? It was gone  
 Quite under ground; as flowers depart  
 To see their mother-root, when they have blown;  
                   Where they together  
                   All the hard weather,  
 Dead to the world, keep house unknown. (8-14)

Herbert's plain and striking "who would have thought?" moves to a "shrivel'd heart" and then, through an enjambment, into "greennesse": Herbert has figured himself as plant life so naturally that we barely register the figuration, before taking us to a place we can never visit, where the mother-root keeps house.<sup>22</sup>

We see this fellowship also in “Life” where Herbert bids “deare flowers” farewell, observing that when alive they are fit “for smell or ornament / And after death for cures” (14-15). He continues: “I follow straight without complaints or grief, / Since if my sent [scent] be good, I care not, if / It be as short as yours” (16-18). In the matter of the greatest importance for creaturely bodies, Herbert takes a lesson in faithfulness from below.<sup>23</sup>

Canadian Mennonite University  
Winnipeg, CA

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All Herbert references are to Hutchinson. Poems are cited by line number, prose by page number.

<sup>2</sup>On the general persistence of the doctrine in Christian history, see Bynum 1-17; and for its seventeenth century life, see Gil 1-28.

<sup>3</sup>I use “humanity” for Herbert’s “man” in accordance with current use, but the term problematically suggests a human/animal binary that, as Laurie Shannon argues and as this essay bears out, was foreign to early seventeenth century England and to Herbert; see Shannon 1-28.

<sup>4</sup>Jack Goody explains the complex history of Christianity and flowers, especially roses, which from the beginning of the faith were rejected as signs of luxury but which came to be spiritual signs (see 120). Important here is the reconciling of theology and botany in the thirteenth century (see 150).

<sup>5</sup>Shannon (5) raises Levi-Strauss’s question of thinking *with* and offers in response thinking *about*.

<sup>6</sup>As Russell M. Hillier puts it, “All creatures in Herbert’s providential account of Creation are thrilling with mystery” (639).

<sup>7</sup>Unlike in Hollywood depictions, quill-making includes cutting off all the feather’s barbs. What Herbert observes looks more like a pen than a feather.

<sup>8</sup>Vaughan’s “The Book” develops this sense more fully.

<sup>9</sup>Herbert’s naming of other creatures as “fellows” was not unique—Montaigne had called animals “fellow-brethren” while John Rowland would later refer to other creatures as “fellow-commoners”; see Shannon 4.

<sup>10</sup>Julia Reinhard Lupton in the opening of “Creaturely Caliban” points out that the word “creature” derives from the future-active participle *creatura*, indicating an ongoing action: “the *creatura* is a thing always in the process of undergoing creation” (1). She further observes that “*creature* marks the radical separation of creation and creator” (1). For Herbert, and for the very idea of providence, there is a radical *distinction* rather than *separation*. Perhaps the dilemma represented by Caliban arises as humans assume mastery over other humans, an assumption that presumes separation from the Creator.

<sup>11</sup>Joel Swann, “Herbert’s Herbs,” as presented at the Paris George Herbert Conference, May 20, 2017.

<sup>12</sup>The devotional and ethical end of the contemplation of Providence is to counter human pride. As the introduction to the 1602 English translation of Theodoret’s *Mirror of Divine Providence* puts it, “at this time, wherein Atheisme like an ill weed, is growne to such height, as it seemeth to ouersadow the plants of true Religiō, while men attributing to Nature, what belongs properly to the Creator of Nature, do both depriue God of his glory, and also discover their impiety, to the danger of their owne soules, and the hurt of others” [A2r].

<sup>13</sup>Angela Balla goes further, describing the speaker’s “fallen anthropocentrism that corrupts the speaker’s joy with smugness” (297). I especially appreciate Balla’s critical sharpness in her conference paper, as it motivated me to respond. My sense of both Balla and Rienstra’s arguments is that they see in the poem an initial position and then a turn from that position, a turning characteristic of Herbert’s verse. I recognize the turn in tone but also see the constellation—another of Herbert’s methods—in which priesthood is a crucial term, with meanings discovered as the poem proceeds so that we end with a complex sense. The possibilities of pride and distortion are certainly there, but the actual vocation of world’s priest is functionally cleared of them by the serious and humbling work of ministry.

<sup>14</sup>Michael McCanles gives a brilliant account of the poem’s form and action. What gives me pause, though, is his picture of the poem as showing “God and self serenely at one in a total vision reflecting the interpenetration of God’s will and man’s” (93). There is an urgency to this serenity, perhaps best expressed in Herbert’s instructions to pray “with a grave liveliness [...] pausing yet pressing” (*Country Parson* 231).

<sup>15</sup>Again, Strier’s reading of the poem is essential on this point.

<sup>16</sup>Notably, for Calvin human blindness is not a mechanical problem but resides in the nexus between eye and mind; it is an ignorance constituted by presumption; see Lee Palmer Wandel on Calvin and Montaigne and the eye, 149-50.

<sup>17</sup>And, as Richard Todd observes, the poem goes beyond its Psalm 104 source in its stress on “the interaction of the creatures with each other and on man’s interaction with them” (103).

<sup>18</sup>In this context it is striking that Herbert uses “infinite” only twice in *The Temple*, once to describe the “infinite sweetness” of Scripture (“H.Scriptures I” 1) and a second time in “Providence,” describing all things great and small (41-44).



<sup>19</sup>I read the poem as Wilcox does in her edition of Herbert's English poems, and in distinction to Glimp, who sees Herbert using praise of all the other creatures to make up for his own lack. Glimp's reading is in many ways crucial, but his emphasis on Herbert's "sense of devotional insecurity" (n36) misses the way in which, following Psalm 104, the speaker of "Providence" receives himself as Divine gift, a reception that precedes praise. As the BCP Morning Prayer service says: "O Lord, open thou our lips. And our mouth shall show forth thy praise" (Cummings 241).

<sup>20</sup>See Jack Goody on flowers as a common source of sweetness and scent, particularly in a time when sugar was a luxury (see 181).

<sup>21</sup>The opening words, "press me not," which though they do not carry what is to us the most obvious floral meaning—the flower pressed in a book, a practice that came to England in the nineteenth century —applies to other treatments of flowers, as well as to the pressing of the rain (see "Providence" 117-20).

<sup>22</sup>Herbert reserves the word "mother" almost exclusively for the church and does not describe the earth as mother. The word here though fits Herbert's larger sense of creation as household and Christ as householder.

<sup>23</sup>My thanks to Glenn Clark, Judith Owens, Katie Calloway, Debra Rienstra, and the *Connotations* readers and editors for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay. Thanks also to the Canadian Society of Renaissance Studies, at which I presented an early version of this essay, especially to Ken Graham and Gary Kuchar. Thanks also to Seika Dyck, Chris Huebner, Jason Peters, and Greg Wiebe for conversations that helped me clarify my argument. And thanks to Warren Cariou for sharing his roses with me, to try in recipes.

## WORKS CITED

- Balla, Angela. "Herbert and Gerson Reconsidered: Mystical Music and the Conciliarist Strain of Natural Law in 'Providence.'" *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 33 (2024): 285-327. <https://www.connotations.de/article/herbert-and-gerson-reconsidered/>.
- Berry, Wendell. "Christianity and the Survival of Creation." *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*. New York: Pantheon, 1992. 93-116.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336*. New York: Columbia UP, 1995.
- Cummings, Brian, ed. *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*. Oxford: OUP, 2011.
- Freer, Coburn. *Music for a King: George Herbert's Style and the Metrical Psalms*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1972.
- Gerard, John, and Thomas Johnson. *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes. Gathered by Iohn Gerarde of London Master in Chirurgie Very Much Enlarged and Amended by Thomas Iohnson Citizen and Apothecarye of London*. London, 1633. <https://www.proquest.com/eebo/docview/2240902621/99857317/802B46CEB80540BAPQ/1?accountid=163371>.

- Gil, Daniel Juan. *The Fate of the Flesh: Secularization and Resurrection in the Seventeenth Century*. New York: Fordham UP, 2021.
- Glimp, David. "Figuring Belief: George Herbert's Devotional Creatures." *Go Figure: Energies, Forms, and Institutions in the Early Modern World*. Ed. Judith H. Anderson and Joan Pong Linton. New York: Fordham UP, 2011. 112-31.
- Goody, Jack. *The Culture of Flowers*. Cambridge: CUP, 1993.
- Herbert, George. Ed. Helen Wilcox. *The English Poems of George Herbert*. Cambridge: CUP, 2007.
- Herbert, George. *The Works of George Herbert*. Ed. F. E. Hutchinson. Oxford: Clarendon, 1945.
- Hillier, Russell M. "'Send Back Thy Fire Again': Praise, Music, and Poetry in the Lyrics of George Herbert." *The Modern Language Review* 111.3 (July 2016): 633-64.
- Johnson, Zane Calhoun. "'All Things unto Our Flesh Are Kind': Corporality and Ecology in *The Temple*." *George Herbert Journal* 42.1-2 (2018-2019): 128-45.
- Lovejoy, Arthur O. *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. New York: Harper and Row, 1960.
- Lupton, Julia Reinhard. "Creature Caliban." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.1 (Spring 2000): 1-23.
- McCanles, Michael. *Dialectical Criticism and Renaissance Literature*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1975.
- Raleigh, Walter. *The History of the World*. London, 1614. <https://www.proquest.com/books/history-world/docview/2248541513/se-2>.
- Rienstra, Debra. "'I Wish I Were a Tree': George Herbert and the Metamorphoses of Devotion." *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 32 (2023): 145-64. <https://www.connotations.de/article/debra-k-rienstra-i-wish-i-were-a-tree-george-herbert-and-the-metamorphoses-of-devotion/>.
- Rosenberg, Jessica. *Botanical Poetics: Early Modern Plant Books and the Husbandry of Print*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2022.
- Shannon, Laurie. *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013.
- Strier, Richard. *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983.
- Swann, Joel. "Herbert's Herbs." Herbert in Paris Conference, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle—Paris 3. 20 May 2017.
- Theodoret, Bishop. *The Mirror of Diuine Prouidence Containing a Collection of Theodoret His Arguments: Declaring the Prouidence of God to Appeare Notably Both in the Heauens and in the Earth, and in All Things Therein Contained: Taken out of His Workes De Prouidentia*. London, 1602. <https://www.proquest.com/books/mirror-diuine-prouidence-containing-collection/docview/2240866306/se-2>.
- Todd, Richard. *The Opacity of Signs*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1986.
- Vendler, Helen. *The Poetry of George Herbert*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975.
- Wandel, Lee Palmer. "John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne on the Eye." *Early Modern Eyes*. Ed. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel. Leiden: Brill, 2010. 135-55.

Wolley, Hannah. *The Ladies Directory in Choice Experiments & Curiosities of Preserving in Jellies, and Candying Both Fruits & Flowers. Also, an Excellent Way of Making Cakes, Comfits, and Rich Court-Perfumes. With Rarities of Many Precious Waters; among Which, Are Doctor Stephens's Water, Dr. Matthias's Palsie-Water; and an Excellent Water against the Plague: With Severall Consumption Drinks, Approved by the Ablest Physicians.* London, 1662.

<https://www.proquest.com/eebo/docview/2240895875/27B29073F0894BC3PQ/1?accountid=163371&imgSeq=1>.

# Herbert and Gerson Reconsidered: Mystical Music and the Conciliarist Strain of Natural Law in “Providence”

ANGELA BALLA

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 285-327.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-balla-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-balla-1)

---

This article is the fifth entry in a debate on “George Herbert and Nature” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/george-herbert-and-nature>). Further contributions to this debate are welcome, please contact [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

---

## Abstract

Recent scholarship has linked George Herbert to medieval French theologian Jean Gerson, an early theorist of individual natural rights and conciliarism. This essay proposes that Herbert knew Gerson’s ideas on divine and natural law in *De Vita Spiritualis Animae* (1402) well enough to employ them in “Providence.” In this didactic poem, Herbert explains (through his sole use of italics) how divine and natural law work providentially. Pivotal for Herbert is Gerson’s redefinition of the concept of subjective right as a power or faculty intrinsic to an individual, whether human or non-human, since that redefinition underpins Gerson’s conciliarism. Herbert not only uses Gerson’s concept of subjective right at the outset of “Providence,” where the speaker relishes the “right” (4) to “write” (2) as God’s “Secretarie” (8), but Herbert also relies on Gerson’s notion of subjective right throughout the poem. Because Herbert thinks that non-humans have Gersonian subjective rights, he places these creatures within the scope of God’s “permission” (33), a jurisdiction traditionally reserved for rational beings free to act morally (or immorally). Herbert’s choice has immense philosophical and theological consequences, for, according to his Gersonian logic, non-humans serve God, humanity, and each other when they use their powers and faculties to obey God’s objective right, His “command” (33). Their behavior allows them to offer what amounts to moral witness indirectly. Significantly for Herbert, Gerson suggests that when creation exercises their subjective rights in obedience to God’s objective right, their obedience creates a cosmic concord, a mystical music. That concord bolsters Gerson’s conviction that a council of priests may hold a pope accountable. Herbert provocatively metaphorizes Gerson’s logic in “Providence” by depicting a council

of creatures headed by "Man" (6) as the "worlds high Priest" (13), who learns to attune himself to the universal harmony in loving obedience to a self-sacrificing God.

More than any other seventeenth-century poet, Herbert wears his learning lightly, in service of a spiritual humility conducive to true devotion. As the speaker of "The Pearl. *Matth. 13*" declares, "I know the wayes of learning; both the head / And pipes that feed the presse, and make it runne; / [...] / Yet I love thee" (ll. 1-2, 10).<sup>1</sup> The contrast between the mind and the heart seems stark, for the speaker announces his preference for loving God over seeking scholarly renown.<sup>2</sup> But sometimes in Herbert's writing what appears to be a firm rejection of academic controversies is actually a deft rejoinder to them, such that there is less professional distance between Bemerton and Cambridge than sometimes supposed.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the task of discerning Herbert's intellectual debts in his poetry and prose—as well as the ways he makes good on those debts—continues to challenge and to surprise readers. Recently, Christopher Hodgkins has illumined a new context for thinking about Herbert's "lovers' quarrel" ("Yet I love thee" 23) with learning by attending to Herbert's "fleeting mention" of medieval French theologian Jean Gerson (1363-1429) in *The Countrey Parson*, where Herbert briefly refers to Gerson as "a spirituall man" whose charitably moderate approach to dietary ethics deserves praise ("Gerson, a Spirituall Man" 119). According to Hodgkins, Herbert's reference to Gerson "suggests Herbert's greater debts to this man who once led the University of Paris" ("Gerson, a Spirituall Man" 119), debts that Hodgkins does not identify due to his focus on providing a "brief comparative glimpse" ("Gerson, a Spirituall Man" 135) of the two men in order to facilitate a study of their interest in "diet and [...] devotion" ("Gerson, a Spirituall Man" 131). I agree with Hodgkins that Herbert's favorable characterization of Gerson suggests that he may have exerted a "greater" influence on Herbert, especially since Yelena Mazour-Matusevich has recently shown how extensive was Gerson's reception in the early modern period, in England as well as in Europe.<sup>4</sup> I propose that one place worth investigating as a site of that greater influence is Herbert's didactic poem "Providence," for that poem's wordplay, logic,

and imagery suggests Herbert's awareness of Gerson's work on natural law and mystical theology.<sup>5</sup>

As I argue in this essay, Herbert's lyric meditation on God's immediate and mediate guidance in His creatures' lives as they obey natural law hints at Herbert's familiarity with Gerson's ideas, particularly those in *De Vita Spirituali Animae* (1402). First, Herbert appears conversant with Gerson's notion of a created order based on *caritas* and buttressed by the concord between divine and natural laws, a concord that produces a mystical music within the cosmos, that awesome temple. For those who question Gerson's influence on this matter since earlier philosophers, notably Boethius, also believed in a musical cosmos, Boethius' mechanical notion of *musica mundana* differs from Gerson's allegorical understanding of the *canticum divinale*. Whereas Boethius thought that the *musica mundana* literally activates the *musica spiritualis*, Gerson imagined that divine music figuratively results from God's creatures knowing and loving Him.<sup>6</sup> Gerson's mystical sense better suits Herbert's depiction of God as a loving Composer desiring His creatures to accord with Him in love. Second, Herbert appears to share Gerson's Thomist view that human nature excels non-human nature given humanity's access to right reason, a divine faculty that for Gerson obligates a church council to hold papal authority in check. Herbert plausibly draws on these Gersonian ideas—a mystical music perceptible by the soul and a conciliarism based on right reason—throughout "Providence," poetically shifting theological and philosophical hands. Over the course of the poem, one of the longest in *The Temple*, Herbert shows how the sweet concord of non-human nature following divine law rebukes humanity's pride. By figuring non-human nature as a harmonious proto-church council that reminds "Man" (6) of his duty as "the worlds high Priest" (13) and alerts him to gross abuses of office, Herbert may even nod to Gerson in a witty conciliarist move.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, as Herbert shows how the providentially beautiful harmony of non-human nature reveals the often-hubristic division between humans and non-humans created by Man's fallen reason, he appears to

agree with Gerson that such harmony stirs a longing for a mystical connection with all creatures that poetry may foster.<sup>8</sup> Investigating the possibility that Herbert reworked some of Gerson's ideas in "Providence" allows readers to see that Herbert remained engaged with academic debates while at Bemerton. If Herbert did borrow from Gerson, as I contend is likely, his light touch in bringing scholarly concerns to bear on pastoral care testifies to his humble refusal to lord his learning over his flock, and the surprising reach of medieval disputes.<sup>9</sup>

### 1. Providence and the Right to Write: Herbert's Gersonian Approach to Natural Law

One of the most striking aspects of the opening stanza of Herbert's lyric "Providence" is its buoyant joy, especially since early modern accounts of providence regularly concentrated on shocking events and sobering signs, each with eternal portent. Herbert's marked departure from his contemporaries in depicting Providence likely owes something to Gerson, but to see how and why, it is necessary briefly to survey those contemporaries' work. According to Alexandra Walsham, "'Strange and wonderful newes' of terrible disasters, sudden accidents, and bizarre prodigies was a major theme of the blackletter broadside ballads and catchpenny quarto and octavo pamphlets which flowed from city publishers in growing profusion between 1560 and 1640," an output that "penetrated the provinces and countryside" (33). While popular sources offered a shocking providentialism, ecclesiastical texts gave a sobering one, urging the laity to discern God's hand in quotidian events. Walsham records that "English Protestant divines discussed the doctrine [of providence] in exhaustive detail and with wearisome frequency; it was a prominent theme of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century academic theology and practical divinity" (9) as well as sermons. Whereas some clergy urged their parishioners to view "[e]very happening, catastrophic or trivial," as "a signpost concerning the Lord's soteriological intentions" (15), other writers viewed events through the lens of vestigial paganism, as when they assigned responsibility to fate,

chance, the deities Fortuna or Nature, elves, hobgoblins, or witches (Walsham 20-31).<sup>10</sup> Absent from Walsham's description of these texts is a sense of joyful freedom in them, whether of God in His sustenance of Creation or of humanity in their response to God's activity. Yet that joyful freedom bursts from the speaker of "Providence" as he contemplates God's creation:

O sacred Providence, who from end to end  
Strongly and sweetly movest! shall I write,  
And not of thee, through whom my fingers bend  
To hold my quill? shall they not do thee right? (1-4)

What prompts the speaker's joy is not simply that Providence "strongly" moves; it is also that He moves "sweetly." Helen Wilcox notes that "sweet" (in any of its variants) is "One of H.'s favourite words," for it signals "his intense experience of God," which ranges from "sensual pleasure and artistic beauty to moral virtuousness and redemptive love" (xliv). Pivotal to Herbert's intense experience of God is the freedom to respond to Him, and Herbert alerts readers to that freedom when his speaker asks two questions: shall he write of God? And if he does, shall his fingers write rightly? The rapturous awe of the speaker's opening exclamation suggests ideal answers to these questions, but the fact that they go unanswered signals the importance of his choices. In just several lines, Herbert's emphasis on joyful freedom as the start of a proper response to "sacred Providence" makes a significant contribution to early modern providentialist discourse.<sup>11</sup>

Herbert's recalibration of the emotional and spiritual tenor of this discourse owes much to scripture and the liturgical tradition, but these sources do not clearly explain the hopeful eagerness surrounding the speaker's writing ability, while Gerson's theological and philosophical work may. Herbert's primary debt in this stanza is to the apocryphal Book of Wisdom: "Wisdom reacheth from one end to another mightily: and sweetly doth she order all things" (8:1).<sup>12</sup> Close behind scripture in terms of influence is the ancient O Antiphon addressed to Sapientia: "O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High, / reaching



from one end to the other mightily, / and sweetly ordering all things" (1-3).<sup>13</sup> Both sources exhibit some of the buoyant joy that animates Herbert's opening stanza in marked contrast to other providentialist writings. A third source, Jean Gerson's *De Vita Spirituali Animae*, while less recognizable to many readers, appears to undergird the logic of the speaker's questions, helping to bolster their enthusiasm. Gerson's treatise, a collection of six lectures on natural law and mystical theology, offers an influential understanding of the distinction between objective and subjective right, two components of the mystical music that Gerson believes resonates throughout the universe given the concord between divine and natural laws. His distinction between objective and subjective right plausibly informs Herbert's rhyme of "write" with "right." The sense of the rhyme is that the speaker ought to feel an imperative to write fairly of God, to inscribe just and beautiful claims about Him. Still, the only way that imperative works is if he has the ability to write. Herbert's play on the objective obligation to act morally and the subjective capacity to do so recalls Gerson's definitions of objective and subjective right. In his second *Lectio*, Gerson denotes objective right as God's law (*lex*), "a true sign revealed to a rational creature" via "divine right reason willing that creature to be obliged either to do or not to do something conducive to his sanctification so that he may attain eternal life and avoid damnation."<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Gerson denotes subjective right (*ius*) as "an immediate faculty or power belonging to someone according to the dictate of right reason."<sup>15</sup> Whereas objective right concerns rational creatures' duty to obey God's moral commands as revealed in divine and natural law, subjective right involves creatures' innate capacity to do what God decrees.<sup>16</sup> These definitions clarify Herbert's "write" / "right" rhyme. Marveling at how God's divine and natural laws "Strongly and sweetly movest [...]" the universe "from end to end," the speaker feels a moral need to respond in kind to God as Legislator, and so asks, "shall I write"? Then he wonders whether his writing will suffice, asking whether his fingers will "do thee right," thereby indicating the possibility that he has the mental, physical, and

spiritual abilities to write well of God. That he prefaces these questions with “not” signals his trust in the implied positive answers.

Gerson’s distinction between objective and subjective right may inform Herbert’s rhyme further if one consults the Latin text. To the extent that Gerson’s notion of objective right imbues Herbert’s word “write,” there is connotative play between God’s *lex* and Herbert’s *lexicon*. And to the extent that Gerson’s notion of subjective right inhabits Herbert’s word “right,” there is connotative play between *ius* as a power or faculty and *iustum* as the right or just end. If Herbert had in mind such Latin wordplay, the fact that it registers at one remove, only through a mental pun, suggests his decorous restraint, but that fact may also suggest his hope in a providential order to language.<sup>17</sup> At a minimum, the exuberant tone of his ancient sources, combined with the liberating logic of *De Vita Spiritualis Animae*, help to explain the joyful freedom of Herbert’s opening stanza.<sup>18</sup> Even so, for readers skeptical about even a denotative connection between Herbert’s rhyme and Gerson’s definitions of objective and subjective right, perhaps because those definitions seem commonplace and thus unattributable to Gerson alone, it is important to remember that they were innovative in Gerson’s day and influential in Herbert’s as Gerson’s legacy grew.<sup>19</sup> For readers inclined to doubt that Gerson’s influence extends past Herbert’s first stanza, it is worth asking what Herbert read that so engaged him with medieval natural law theory that he explicates some of that theory part-way through “Providence” in his only use of italics in the poem. Perhaps mindful of how Donne often borrows from medieval philosophical and theological debates in his profane and sacred verse, Herbert delves into established categories of divine and natural law, keen to illuminate how these categories work together to demonstrate the wisdom of Providence.<sup>20</sup> As he does so, he deftly changes hands, moving from theology in the first stanza to philosophy in the second stanza:

We all acknowledge both thy power and love  
 To be exact; transcendent, and divine;  
 Who dost so strongly and so sweetly move,  
 While all things have their will, yet none but thine.  
 For either thy *command*, or thy *permission*

Lay hands on all: they are thy *right* and *left*.  
 The first puts on with speed and expedition;  
 The other curbs sinnes stealing pace and theft. (29-36)

In the first of these stanzas, the speaker intriguingly recognizes God's "power and love" as the cosmos' driving forces. But this unusual pairing gets dwarfed by more surprising details, like the speaker's pronoun shift from the first-person singular to the first-person plural (a point to which I will return), and the way he underscores the poem's initial claim that Providence "strongly and sweetly" moves. Then, an even more surprising detail arrives: when, in the second of these stanzas, the speaker explains his thinking in the first, he not only uses terms familiar from medieval natural law theory, but also he italicizes these terms, making them impossible to ignore. Within that theory, God's "*command*" refers to His preceptive will, what God orders His creatures to do (or not to do), while God's "*permission*" refers to his permissive will, what He allows His creatures to do (or not to do). While it is possible to distinguish between three types of natural law—the preceptive, the prohibitive, and the permissive—Herbert clearly groups the first two types within God's commands, leaving the last type to fall within God's permissions. In doing so, he may be following Gerson's example, for Gerson also includes prohibitive divine law within preceptive divine law when he declares, "The divine preceptive law is a true sign revealed to a rational creature that is a notice of divine right reason aiming to hold or bind that creature to act or not to act so as to sanctify it, that it may achieve eternal life and avoid damnation."<sup>21</sup> Whether Herbert is following Gerson or agreeing with him unawares becomes easier to see if readers situate Herbert's two stanzas in the context of the medieval debates on divine and natural law that Herbert signals his knowledge of through his arresting use of italics.

Within this context, the speaker's earlier, easily overlooked assertion that God's "power and love" move the cosmos appears increasingly strange. To those working under the influence of Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologiae* systematized pagan and Christian ideas about divine and natural law, what drives the cosmos are God's right reason and will.<sup>22</sup> Whereas Thomists prioritized God's right reason above His

will in their efforts to grasp His moral power, voluntarists like William of Ockham prioritized God's will above His right reason.<sup>23</sup> The first person to balance God's will and right reason in order to comprehend His moral power better was Pierre d'Ailly, but neither he nor his predecessors paired God's power with His love, as Herbert does.<sup>24</sup> Herbert's scholarly and clerical training equipped him to think independently on the subject of divine and natural law, but it still makes sense to ask what he could have read that helped to inspire the theological and philosophical initiative he shows in stressing God's love alongside His power.

Given my attempts thus far to prove the probability that Gerson's thinking shaped Herbert's in "Providence," it should come as no surprise that I posit *De Vita Spirituali Animae* as a likely source for Herbert's daring in averring that God's "power and love" motivate the universe as it operates providentially according to His preceptive and permissive laws. In Gerson's treatise, God's love grounds the universe, and His power, expressed as His will and right reason, work equally out of that love. Because Gerson aims at pastoral care rather than natural philosophy, Gerson spends more time discussing rational being than non-rational being, which makes sense in light of his title, *On the Spiritual Life of the Soul*. Still, his scholastic exploration of human nature, coupled with his periodic mentions of non-human nature, allow readers to see how Herbert may have relied on some of Gerson's thought in "Providence." In his fifth *Lectio*, Gerson refers to the "harmony of the spiritual life which is charity."<sup>25</sup> He then clarifies that the "principle harmony of the soul, in which consists the soul's true life [...] is God."<sup>26</sup> To Gerson, the fact that God's love is the ground of the soul's being implies that God's love is the source of all being, which in turn suggests that God's Being *is* love, a logic that has scriptural support since John of Patmos twice avers, "God is loue" (*Holy Bible: 1611 Edition*, 1 John 4:8, 1 John 4:16). Regarding God's power, Gerson states that "nothing happens without God causing it, and nothing is true without the first truth, for all wisdom is from the Lord God."<sup>27</sup> Although here Gerson does not refer directly to God's will and right reason, he seems to do so indirectly in his references to "first cause" and "first truth." Later, he not only

refers to God's will and right reason directly, but also he claims that they are equally balanced: "in moral practices, right reason is not prior to the will" because "neither is prior to the other in God."<sup>28</sup> Gerson's conviction that God's love founds a cosmos within which His power works equally through His will and right reason so as to make his His laws known resembles Herbert's thinking about Providence in the two stanzas above. Both men agree on the loving basis of the universe, and they agree that God expresses His power through an equal balance between His will and right reason. Moreover, both men agree that humans may perceive God's loving power through a rational grasp of the objective right of preceptive law and the subjective right of permissive law.

Yet Herbert's readers may well wonder about what non-humans perceive of God's loving power, especially if those readers look closely at the speaker's explication of divine and natural law in the two stanzas quoted above. Since the niceties of natural law theory may not appeal to all readers, it may be tempting to breeze through these stanzas, assuming that God's command and permission applies to humans, while God's command only applies to non-humans. On this view, only humans have fully free will, so only they need permissive natural law, and non-humans do not sin, so they do not need permissive law to curb sin. But the speaker proclaims that "either" God's command "or" His permission "lays hands *on all*," implying that humans *and* non-humans fall under the scope of God's command *and* permission. Provocatively, Herbert suggests that non-humans, in addition to obeying God's command, enjoy something like a liberty covered by God's permission.<sup>29</sup> The only way that this shocking suggestion makes sense in the context of divine and natural law, a context that Herbert begs his readers to notice through his use of italics, is if Herbert relies on Gerson's famous definition of subjective right cited above, wherein that right (*ius*) is "an immediate faculty or power belonging to someone according to the dictate of right reason." This definition alone allows non-humans to come within the jurisdiction of God's permissive law.

For those who still doubt the applicability to Herbert of Gerson's thinking on this point because they assume that Herbert's poem does not suggest that non-humans share in right reason, it is important to point out that because Gerson believes that "right reason and its dictates are firstly, originally, and essentially in God," he views right reason as a participative faculty that humans access through their connection to God.<sup>30</sup> To use an anachronistic but helpful analogy, right reason resides in God somewhat like a software program stored in the cloud runs only on devices with authorized access. Thus, to Gerson, non-humans have subjective rights according to right reason located not in themselves but in God. So, while non-humans do not participate or share in God's right reason as humans do, non-humans still function according to God's right reason. As they exercise their abilities according to His wisdom, they experience His permission to be themselves, to do whatever is theirs to do within the scope of His will. That Gersonian understanding appears in "Providence." As Diana Benet sums up the speaker's logic in stanza eight, "God's will is that all things should have their will," but she does not identify the root of the speaker's claim that "all things have their will, yet none but thine" (161). That root plausibly is Gerson, who declares in a memorable passage, "every positive being has as much of its existence and the consequence of its goodness as it has of [subjective] right [...]. In this way the sky has a right to rain, the sun to shine, the fire to heat, yes, and every creature in all that it is able to do well by its natural ability."<sup>31</sup> This idea, which lays the foundation for a modern notion of subjective rights, surely informs Herbert's choice to include non-humans within the scope of God's permissive will.

Because Herbert appears indebted to Gerson in these two stanzas, whose natural law theory informs the entire poem, it is crucial to mention one more consequence of their logic. Herbert suggests that, as non-humans exercise their subjective right to do whatever they have the power or faculty to do in a situation, they offer—with some degree of freedom, some measure of God's permission—what amounts to moral witness indirectly, thereby helping humans to curb sin. Although he

surely agrees with Gerson that non-humans are not free in the way that humans are since non-humans lack the divine faculty of right reason, Herbert nevertheless goes beyond Gerson in clearly recognizing non-humans' ability to obey God's permissive law. Irwin observes that, in various writings, Gerson hesitates to declare definitively that the actions of non-humans exhibit a kind of liberty, even as he ascribes to their actions a moral value worthy of praise.<sup>32</sup> For him, the laudable aspects of non-human behavior appear as these creatures conform to natural law, and through it divine law, since "all the principles of natural law are properly said to be of divine law, though in a different manner."<sup>33</sup> Herbert undoubtedly would concur that natural law falls within the purview of divine law, such that as non-humans follow natural law, they necessarily obey some divine law. His poem accordingly suggests that even as all power is God's power, God is just in His use of that power: He directs it in and through concordant laws.<sup>34</sup> In the parts of "Providence" that surrounds these two stanzas, Herbert plausibly uses Gerson's natural law thinking at least as a partial basis for his own, showing how non-human nature accords with God's decrees in ways that inspire and correct human nature. The creatures thus offer something like a moral testimony, even a mystically musical one. As Herbert's speaker finds his ordained part in the harmony produced by Creation and joins in the "musick" (40) that God orchestrates, he models an ethic of engagement with the natural world, both human and non-human. Writing well, virtuously and beautifully, facilitates his moral and spiritual participation in the world around him, and demonstrates that truly good poetry exhibits the strength and sweetness of Providence. Herbert thus reveals how poetry and its writers may reflect the wonderfully lyrical nature of God.

## 2. "What musick...!": Poetic Praise as Providential Accord

Near the outset of "Providence," however, the speaker appears further from this last goal than the opening stanza suggests he hopes, and some readers realize.<sup>35</sup> In just the second stanza, the speaker revels so much in his subjective right to write that he mixes fitting pride with blind

hubris, displaying a fallen anthropocentrism that corrupts the speaker's joy with smugness, subtly at first, and then not so subtly. But as he considers his place in the natural order, and specifically as he meditates on non-human creatures in relation to himself, he gradually becomes more right-sized, less grandiose, more capable of genuine service to God and other creatures. Although the speaker initially sees his service more literally, according to the letter of the natural law, once he performs that service, he understands it more metaphorically, according to the spirit of that law. As I contend in this section, Herbert's poetic dramatization of his speaker's humbling—a process that recurs throughout the poem—appears indebted not only to Gerson's notions of objective and subjective right, but also and especially to Gerson's sense that creatures' conformities to natural law, and thus their obedience to divine law, creates a cosmic harmony. That harmony is no Boethian mechanical marvel, but a mystical music based on God's self-sacrificing love. Furthermore, to keep his speaker humble, Herbert creatively applies Gerson's ideas about mystical theology so as to depict a speaker using Gerson's affective meditational tools to develop his devotion. Ultimately, in both the part of the poem that precedes the two stanzas quoted above and the part of the poem that follows them, Herbert shows his speaker learning to use his intellectual and emotional faculties with a glorious humility proper to them. But for the speaker to praise God rightly, using words that only he has, he must first learn how other creatures praise God, and become attuned to Providence working in and through them.

The most significant lesson in the speaker's need for humility starts early in "Providence." In the poem's second stanza, the speaker highlights humanity's rational capacity (their subjective right) to know God's law (the objective right), proclaiming, "Of all the creatures both in sea and land / Onely to Man thou has made known thy wayes" (5-6). Wondering at Man's greatness in a way that recalls Psalm 8:4, "What *is* man, that thou art mindfull of him?" the speaker effectively answers the psalmist's question, but with a note of presumption absent from the psalmist's answer.<sup>36</sup> To be fair, "Onely" humanity participates in divine



right reason, which is why their obedience to God's will through their use of His right reason enables them to worship God through language, and written language at that. Mindful of these matters, the speaker stresses Man's vocation to write, for God "put the penne alone into his [Man's] hand, / And made him Secretarie of thy praise" (7-8). Because Man's signature talent is his linguistic ability, "versing" (39) is one of his crowning achievements, a feat exclusive to him.<sup>37</sup> But those who do not write poetry in praise of God are still equipped to be His secret-keeper, clerk, correspondent, and minister.<sup>38</sup> These human capabilities are all worth celebrating, and the speaker does so rightly. Indeed, the length and complexity of "Providence" shows Herbert relishing his own ability to write poetry. The problem with the speaker's exultation is that his use of the word "Onely" is dangerous: he allows the truth he knows to become tainted by "proud exclusivity" (Guibbory 81).<sup>39</sup>

While the speaker's claim that Man alone may compose God's praise is, of course, literally true, his claim is spiritually false, as scripture that Herbert knew well evinces. Take Job, for example, who averred: "But aske now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the foules of the aire, and they shall tell thee. Or speake to the earth, and it shall teach thee; and the fishes of the sea shall declare vnto thee. Who knoweth not in all these, that the hand of the LORD hath wrought this?" (Job 12:7-9). Beyond Job, there is Jesus, who replied to the Pharisees, "I tell you, that if these [disciples] should holde their peace, the stones would immediatly cry out" (Luke 19:40). Then there is John of Patmos, who recorded in his prophetic vision, "euery creature which is in heauen, and on the earth, and vnder the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I, saying, Blessing, honour, glory, and power bee vnto him that sitteth vpon the Throne, and vnto the Lambe for euer and euer" (Rev. 5:13). These instances of non-human creatures testifying to spiritual truths are hardly exhaustive.<sup>40</sup> Both in number and fame, they suggest that Herbert disagrees with the discordant note of unhealthy pride heard in the speaker's assertion that "Onely" Man worshipfully records God's secrets. In stanzas three through five, Herbert increases the volume of that off-key note until it is hard for the speaker to miss.

By the third stanza, the speaker's tone has veered noticeably from the buoyant joy of the first stanza and the proud confidence of the second stanza; now, the speaker sounds sharply condescending. "Beasts fain would sing; birds dittie to their notes; / Trees would be tuning on their native lute / To thy renown" (9-11), the speaker fantasizes, recreating other creatures in Man's image, as if somehow God failed to make non-human creatures sufficient in themselves for the purposes He set for them. Yet because non-human creatures cannot fulfill human standards, he ends his fantasy by pitying their pathetic state: "but all their hands and throats / Are brought to Man, while they are lame and mute" (11-12). Part of what interferes with the speaker's right understanding and feeling about human and non-human creatures is his literalism, his hyperfocus on what is materially evident, whether about the animal, vegetable, and mineral bodies that he perceives through his senses, or about his own body, with its various powers and faculties. Earlier in the poem, precisely these abilities were the source of his justified rejoicing, but now, his limited perspective yields a distorted image.

Still, Herbert paints a more complicated picture of the speaker's human nature than just intellectual and emotional corruption, which is why the speaker's anthropocentrism registers in a more nuanced way in stanza four. The speaker valorizes humanity in a way that seems to have biblical support when he declares arrestingly that "Man is the worlds high Priest" (13). Placing Man in a vocation with Jewish, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant expressions, the speaker strikingly includes non-human nature as part of the fold. He correctly calls Man a priest insofar as scripture describes Peter telling Christ's followers, "But yee are a chosen generation, a royall Priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, that yee should shewe forth the praises of him, who hath called you out of darkness into his marueillous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). Still, being a member of a royal priesthood is not the same as being the high priest himself. It is thus tempting to wonder whether the speaker has transgressed natural and divine law by forgetting the verse, "wee [Christians] haue a great high Priest, that is passed into the

heavens, Iesus the Sonne of God" (Heb. 4:14).<sup>41</sup> Skeptical readers may counter that the speaker justly distinguishes Man from Christ by announcing that Man is the *world's* high priest, whereas Christ is the world's *and* heaven's high priest. Readers may further contend that it is possible for Man to be a high priest since the Bible makes clear that "euery high Priest taken from among men, is ordeined for men in things *pertaining* to God" (Heb. 5:1.). The problem with these objections is that for them to work logically, Man, as "the worlds high Priest," would have to accept that non-humans, at least some of them, qualify to be priests, just not high priests. Yet nothing in Herbert's poem so far gives any indication that the speaker, the self-appointed spokesperson for Man (as distinct from Herbert), is willing to view non-human creatures, or even some of them, as the world's priests under Man as their high priest. In fact, in the lines immediately following the speaker's assertion that Man is "the worlds high Priest" who "doth present / The sacrifice for all" (13-14), the speaker states that "they [non-human creatures] below / Unto the service mutter an assent" (14-15). But, as Herbert knew, there is no muttering in scriptural accounts of non-human creatures proclaiming God's glory. These creatures confidently proclaim what they know, in whatever sense they know it. Since Christianity underscores the need to satisfy the spirit of the law over its letter, it is a mistake to assume the speaker is always spiritually right when he stresses part of the literal truth. My point is that the speaker's proud anthropocentrism prevents him from perceiving how non-human creatures testify harmoniously to the wonders of Providence. That limitation is tragic insofar as the logic of his metaphor of Man as "the worlds high Priest" requires that at least some non-humans take on something of a priestly role.

Having elevated Man to such a global height in the fourth stanza, the speaker in stanza five feels an overdeveloped sense of responsibility for offering God's praise poetically. The speaker's anthropocentrism burdens him so much that he assumes that Man must supply the verbal worship that non-humans cannot, or else these creatures languish spiritually. According to the speaker, the person who does not worship

God linguistically "Doth not refrain unto himself alone, / But robs a thousand who would praise thee fain, / And doth commit a world of sinne in one" (18-20). From one perspective, the speaker's hubris leads him to imagine that a single refusal to worship God via the spoken or written word is a microcosm of rebellion that commits a macrocosm of sin. His ignorance of scriptural assurance cited above that non-human nature has praised God in the past, is doing so in the present, and will do so in the future means that he misses how non-human nature serves God as differently abled secretaries, even as teachers for those who heed their witness. From another perspective, however, the speaker intimates that in some mystical way, non-human creatures do have a legitimate claim to humanity's words. If their claim is not exactly a right to human worship, it may at least be a stake in it. On this last view, non-human nature has a measure of spiritual authority and maybe even the means to hold Man accountable for ignoring it. Within the speaker's complex, conflicted logic, at once problematic and profound, runs a subtle strain of conciliarist thinking that may well owe something to Gerson given his status as a leading conciliarist in his period and afterward.<sup>42</sup> Yet to perceive how Herbert develops that strain in later stanzas while recalling other aspects of Gerson's work, one must first observe how Herbert brings the speaker into providential accord with non-human nature via a concerted lesson in humility.

That humbling process operates quietly while the speaker's pride persists, as stanzas six and seven show. His arrogant anthropocentrism reaches a high point in stanza six when he imagines that "The beasts say, Eat me" (21), and "The trees say, Pull me" (23). This arresting moment recalls Ben Jonson's ode to Robert Sidney's country house, "To Penshurst," wherein a variety of creatures vie to sacrifice themselves for their lord's sake. On land, they passively serve their master, for "The painted partridge lies in every field / And for thy mess is willing to be killed" (29-30). In water, by contrast, they serve actively, as when "Fat, agèd carps [...] run into thy net" (33). Not to be outdone, amphibians offer themselves up with flattering athleticism: "Bright eels [...] emulate them, and leap on land, / Before the fisher, or into his hand" (37-

38). While Jonson depicts non-humans as if they exist largely to please humanity, Herbert exaggerates that attitude by having his speaker smugly put non-humans in their place. For example, the speaker reminds the “beasts” that “The tongue is yours to eat, but mine to praise” (22), and he tells the “trees” that “the hand you stretch, / Is mine to write, as it is yours to raise” (23-24). He thus harps on his earlier point that non-human creatures lack Man’s signature faculty, that Gersonian right to write justly.<sup>43</sup> Still, for all the proud anthropocentrism evident in the speaker’s belief about what the beasts and trees “say” to Man, the fact that they speak to him at all is a surprise since only three stanzas earlier, he thought them “lame and mute.” Apparently, his contemplation of non-human creatures, though undertaken with a superior attitude, has humbled him enough to realize that Providence has given non-humans more faculties than he thought.

At this point in stanza six, it is barely possible for the speaker to perceive that non-humans have voices, however figuratively understood, and that non-humans providentially instruct Man, a possibility that he admits when he considers whether “beasts must teach” (21). The speaker’s shift to the second person via the possessive “yours” (22, 24) and “you” (23) so as to address non-human creatures directly further indicates his recognition that he is not as superior as he once thought. Even as he stridently asserts Man’s privileged place in the created order, he starts to temper his assertions, as if the visceral connection he shares with the material world reins in some of his excesses. Consequently, in stanza seven, when he turns again to Providence, he praises that “most sacred Spirit” (25) on behalf of himself and “all my fellows” (26). Contemplating nature enables him to see fellowship where once there was only lordship.<sup>44</sup> Admittedly, some vestiges of pride appear in his depiction of Man as a feudal lord paying “rent” (27) to God as Dominus out of the “benefit accrue[d]” (28) from other creatures. While it is true that Man enjoys *dominium* over these creatures according to scripture, since God told Adam and Eve, “haue dominion ouer the fish of the sea, and ouer the foule of the aire, and ouer euery liuing thing that mooueth vpon the earth” (Gen. 1:28) it nevertheless sounds like

Herbert's speaker lords his privileged place above the creatures he has yet to listen to fully. Still, the pride in his anthropocentrism is tempered by a newfound sense of fellowship with non-human nature because all serve the ultimate King.

With a new, humbled spirit in stanza eight, the speaker shifts pronouns yet again, adopting the first-person plural "We" (29) for the first time as he and his "fellows" confess how Providence works through both "power and love," moving "strongly and sweetly." Intriguingly enough, at the moment when the speaker finds fellowship, perhaps even kinship, with non-human creatures simply because he chooses to humble himself, he becomes able to use his subjective right to write rightly, to the point of using italics in stanza nine. Part of what enables him again to write justly, after a lapse of six stanzas, is that he accesses the faculty of right reason, which Man alone of God's creatures may, to discuss of the most thorny and difficult subjects he can, medieval natural law theory. The fact that he does so in poetry is remarkable. Since I have already discussed stanzas eight and nine in the previous section, there is no need to regurgitate my findings here. But it is worth stating that by reflecting on and writing about the relation between God's "*command*" and "*permission*," the speaker is paradoxically reduced and enlarged, simultaneously humbled and exalted, all while appearing closer to his rightful spiritual size. Gone (for the moment) are his distorted observations and extreme moods. Instead, he serves his human audience by instructing them in unfamiliar concepts using balanced rhetoric and a calm tone. He also serves his non-human audience by finally having a spirit of respectful temperance toward them. Though there is no creature on earth other than Man who could possibly parse the subtleties of natural law, the speaker does so beautifully, simply, smartly, all without lording it over others. The fact that no commentator that I know of has explored the significance of the speaker's natural law thinking demonstrates how suavely Herbert utilizes his ample learning here.

Fascinatingly, not only does the speaker find his rightful place amongst all creatures by using his signature human talents in companionate ways, but also he rediscovers the joy he had when the poem opened. The speaker's realization that "Nothing escapes" (37) God's preceptive and permissive wills because all are caught up in the legal trajectories of God's eternal justice leads him to affirm what Man knows only through divine revelation: "all must appeare; / And be dispos'd, and dress'd, and tun'd by thee, / Who sweetly temper'st all" (37-39). The speaker's vision of Providence as the cosmic Composer is fascinating, particularly given his exuberance in marveling, "If we could heare / Thy skill and art, what musick it would be! (39-40) This music is no conventional music of the spheres, no Boethian cosmic harmony, since the music to which the speaker refers is in some mysterious way moral, and in every way legally just. That is because metaphoric, even allegorical, tuning and tempering are required, which means both that earlier music went awry, and some music at least is now proceeding beautifully.

These ideas, combined with the fact that Herbert has deliberately invited readers to think about natural law in the preceding stanzas, make it hard not to think of *De Vita Spirituali Animae*, particularly Gerson's vision of how creaturely being depends on God's Being in a brilliantly complicated yet ordered way. As mentioned earlier, since Gerson's treatise aims at pastoral care rather than natural philosophy, his most developed commentary concerns humans instead of non-humans. Nevertheless, his description of how rightly ordered human behavior conforms variously to divine and natural law sheds light on how non-human behavior similarly conforms to that law, though within the ordained limits of the creature. In an admittedly difficult passage, Gerson works hard to articulate all the ways that a human may obey God's law on just one occasion:

In the same act, multiple rectitudes and goodnesses may coincide: one of nature, another of manners, another of grace, another of glory; and this [coincidence] occurs according to the diverse ways of considering that act to be conformed variously to the divine law or goodness, not that in God there is

any diversity in his laws which may be called real or formal, but that we conceive the same divine law in diverse ways and consider it according to really distinct attitudes toward creatures; these attitudes do not exist in God by Himself, but in Himself and the creatures thus related and considered, from which [consideration] distinct concepts are formed by the intellect and abstracted by a power far stronger than [animal instinct].<sup>45</sup>

According to Gerson, when a rational creature performs a single act, that act conforms to divine law in one or more ways, whether because it heeds the laws of nature, the demands of good custom, the gifts of grace, and/or the rewards of glory. These different kinds of conformity to divine law do not exist in God Himself alone, like right reason does. Instead, differences in conformity to divine law occur in the individual relations between God and His creatures. Gerson hence quite fittingly suggests that the differences in how creatures conform to divine law appear best to rational creatures who contemplate others, human or non-human, since rational creatures are capable of observing such differences. Additionally, he suggests that when rational creatures contemplate others, their contemplative behavior itself conforms to divine law. He thus implies that there is a hierarchy to creatures' conformity to divine law, one which adds to the spectacular moral dynamism of God's creation. Admittedly, it is hard to picture that dynamism. One may think, for example, of God's will for each creature emanating outward toward that creature like a ray of light, which the creature's own will returns to God in and through its obedience to divine law.<sup>46</sup> But it is not hard to imagine that dynamism as a symphony of concordant notes and rhythms. That kind of moral music, whereby all creatures play their instruments—their powers and faculties—according to God's objective will with a creative liberty allowed by God's permissive will, fits well with Herbert's speaker's exclamation, "If we could heare / Thy skill and art, what musick it would be!"

The humbling process brought about by the speaker's summation of divine and natural law in the two stanzas cited above prompts him to deepen his understanding of non-human creatures as his "fellows" in the remainder of the poem. His striking label suggests that non-humans



are not just instruments of the divine; they are fellow beings, descendants of the One whose Being animates the universe. Because of this spiritually expansive, emotionally generous, and intellectually open view of Creation, the speaker refers to non-humans in human terms, subtly at first and then not so subtly. "Tempests are calm to thee; they know thy hand, / And hold it fast, as children do their fathers, / Which crie and follow" (45-47), the speaker tells God. The speaker uses a simile to elaborate on the earlier "fellows" reference, which distances humans from non-humans on the Great Chain of Being. As the poem continues, however, the speaker opts for metaphor through the use of gendered pronouns for animals, vegetables, and even minerals. For example, he states, "no beast but knows his feed" (50). His imaginative leap is not huge since beasts are generally male or female. But he then avers, "Each creature hath a wisdom for his good" (61), implying that all creatures, whatever their nature, exhibit something recognizably human in their being. Thus he refers to a rose as masculine, for its "cure" (78) signals that the rose is a veritable vegetal doctor. A few lines later, the speaker marvels at how minerals sometimes warn Man, thereby aiming at his good: "when he digs the place, / He makes a grave," the speaker relates, "as if the thing had sense, / And threatened man, that he should fill the space" (82-84). The key phrase is "as if"; by likening dirt to a human (an unusual move until one remembers the Hebrew word for dirt, "*adamah*," which Herbert likely knew), the speaker imagines what that dirt would say to a clueless human, and then the speaker articulates that warning on the dirt's behalf. Amazingly, the speaker serves as a secretary for gravel.

Indeed, so powerful is his impulse to communicate with a non-human that he turns away from Providence, the primary audience of his prayer, and speaks directly to a mineral. Meditating on the weather, he rehearses what he knows of climate history: "When yet some places could no moisture get, / The windes grew gard'ners, and the clouds good fountains" (115-16). Because of his figuration of wind as a gardener, a counterpart of sorts to humanity, he becomes distressed at the prospect of future storms, and so apostrophizes the "good fountains":

Rain, do not hurt my flowers; but gently spend  
 Your hony drops: presse not to smell them here:  
 When they are ripe, their odour will ascend,  
 And at your lodging with their thanks appeare. (117-20)

The childlike faith that the rain has sense enough to hear his petition and fellowship enough to heed it is both strong and sweet. For though that faith-filled speaker stands on the border between Christian kinship with Creation and pagan animism, the speaker leans toward Christian kinship. Indeed, he may aim to follow Jesus' teaching: "verily I say unto you, If yee haue faith as a graine of mustard seed, yee shall say vnto this mountaine; Remove hence to yonder place: and it shall remoue, and nothing shall be vnpossible vnto you" (Matt. 17:20). In any event, the speaker's momentary indulgence in the childlike imagination that Rain is eager to leave his sky-home in order to smell the flowers does not indicate idolatry; rather, the speaker's humble recognition that the rain does what it wills within the scope of God's permission recalls Gerson's memorable illustration of subjective right: "the sky has a right to rain." While it is impossible to know for certain whether Herbert's use of the pathetic fallacy relies definitively on Gerson's famed attribution of subjective right to a non-human creature, the constellation of Gersonian ideas and logic appearing in places throughout the poem suggest Herbert was not ignorant of the philosophical significance of his depiction of Rain.

More connections to Gerson's thinking on natural law and its spiritual implications appear shortly after the speaker apostrophizes Rain. The speaker, having resumed his prayer to Providence, marvels at God's abundance, recognizing that "Sometimes thou dost divide thy gifts to man, / Sometimes unite" (125-26). To illustrate the latter phenomenon, Herbert employs a classic example of divine bounty, the nut, though he innovates poetically by using a surprising type of nut.<sup>47</sup> With the zeal of a New World explorer, the speaker enthuses, "The Indian nut alone / Is clothing, meat and trencher, drink and kan, / Boat, cable, sail and needle, all in one" (126-28). The cascade of examples conduces

to awe, as well as lingering reflection. Despite the rush of detail, or perhaps because of it, readers may slow down long enough to ask, how *does* the coconut yield all these things? In supplying this example, Herbert could have borrowed from ancient sources, but he also could have borrowed from Gerson. In another of the latter's works, *De Theologia Mystica Practica* (1407), Gerson encourages his audience to cultivate a reverential imagination, not an idly curious one, such that even a creature as small as a nut may prompt a mystical experience:

You, similarly, in that which you read, hear, see, speak, or think, convert it immediately into affectivity, as if you breathed it from within, smelled, or tasted it [...] let your mind rise up immediately and simultaneously to reverence and love, to a trusting request for your needs and those of your brothers, with whom the Father is shared [...] We can find such forms of affection without number or end. From one day to the next they will be sweet and new, as if hidden in a honeycomb (Sg. 5:1), in manna, or in a nut. (Gerson, *On Mystical Theology* 301)

Gerson's emphasis on the "sweet" discovery of God's Creation, coupled with his last reference to the nut, may have been memorable enough to inspire Herbert in "Providence." But even if Herbert did not read *De Theologia Mystica Practica*, Gerson's *De Vita Spirituali Animae* still helps to illumine the spiritual significance of Herbert's poetic revel in the abundance of the "Indian nut."

In that latter work, as shown above, Gerson suggests that each creature, rational or non-rational, conforms to divine law via natural law in a multitude of ways, each way appropriate to that creature's being. The creature's powers and faculties, that is, the creature's subjective right, allows that creature to conform to divine law in ways that may or do differ, partly or entirely, from the ways of another creature, such that each creature retains a place in the Great Chain of Being. Although Gerson focuses on rational creatures' conformities to divine law given his concerns with pastoral care, his logic implies that non-rational creatures also conform variously to divine law. Thus for non-rational creatures as well as rational ones, "multiple rectitudes and goodnesses may

coincide" as these creatures obey divine law. Gerson's provocative understanding of conformity to divine law agrees with Herbert's brief meditation on the Indian nut. Surely aware that in the Creation account as recorded in Genesis, "God saw every thing that hee had made: and behold, *it was* very good," Herbert portrays his speaker noticing the intrinsic goodness of a humble and yet awesome object (Gen. 1:31). The fact that the coconut has so many uses—bodily covering, physical sustenance, plate, transport, tool—shows Providence at work. Precisely because Providence works in and through the nut's conformities to divine law, the nut offers what amounts to moral witness indirectly to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. But for those who struggle to perceive that witness, Herbert concisely articulates how the nut's abundance signals God's wise generosity: he declares that the Indian nut "alone" (126) combines "all in one" (128). In a poem full of examples of non-human creatures like the coconut, each conforming to divine law grounded in God's love, Herbert repeatedly teaches the same Gersonian lesson: the affective contemplation of God's creatures great and small within and beyond poetry helps to nurture the life of the soul. If readers experience the harmonious magnificence of Creation in reading Herbert's poem, and especially if that experience humbles and encourages them, then poetry providentially helps readers grow into a truly abundant life.<sup>48</sup>

To make that goal clear to readers, Herbert dramatizes the speaker's spiritual transformation as a result of his meditations on Providence. As evidenced above, the speaker's attitude develops some humility early on in the lyric, when he switches from first-person singular to first-person plural, thereby recognizing himself as a member of a musical chorus of creatures, human and non-human. Yet Herbert does not halt the speaker's spiritual progress there. Though the speaker celebrates humanity's ability to labor as God's "Secretarie" at the beginning of the poem (8), the difficulty of that labor ends the celebration exactly halfway through the poem. At this point, he feels inadequate and longs for help with his writing. The speaker's earnest questions spotlight his

poignant predicament and his willingness to receive whatever help anyone—anyone at all, human or non-human—may offer:

Who hath the virtue to expresse the rare  
And curious vertues both of herbs and stones?  
Is there an herb for that? O that thy care  
Would show a root, that gives expressions! (73-76)

At first, the speaker appears to look for a fellow human to help him write ("Who"). But then, he searches for a fellow non-human to assist him ("an herb"). Providentially, right in the act of wondering what creature (perhaps literally beneath him) he may ask for help to write well, he shows himself writing beautifully, and in some way adding to the Book of Nature.<sup>49</sup> Yet because the speaker senses that he is still spiritually out of tune with the ultimate Lyricist, he nevertheless persists in his contemplation of God's creatures. And what he receives from them is not a confirmation of his superiority or even an assurance of his equality, but a limited awareness of his inferiority. That awareness arrives three stanzas from the poem's end, when the speaker again feels insecure about his ability to serve as God's "Secretarie," and so asks: "But who hath praise enough? nay who hath any?" (141). His second question is particularly powerful since it suggests that his meditation on God's ways and means has given him an experience of the divine that transcends words, no matter how artful. Consequently, his insecurity about being a good servant is quickly replaced by a stabilizing certainty: "None can expresse thy works, but he that knows them; / And none can know thy works, which are so many, / And so complete, but onely he that owes them" (142-44). The crucial word here in these lines is "owes." Given what the speaker has shared about God's Creation and his changing responses to it, Herbert surely intends an aural pun, such that one "owes" Providence when one 'oh-s' Providence.<sup>50</sup> If so, then it appears that, as in "Sion," so too here: the best praise of God may be "one good grone" (18). When the speaker lets himself be tempered and tuned, when he conforms himself to God's law in awe, humility, repentance, gratitude, joy, and especially love, then he is ready

to join other creatures—who have perhaps been waiting for him—in the mystical music of the cosmos, that spiritual harmony in and of God.

### 3. The Council of All Creatures: A Glance at Herbert's Protestant Conciliarism

So far, I have drawn attention to Herbert's conviction that humans and non-humans offer providential guidance to those with ears to hear and eyes to see it. Herbert's belief appears indebted to Gerson's understanding of divine and natural law, particularly as they shape the cosmos's mystical music. That music provides the basis for Gerson's conciliarism. As I have explained above, Gerson thinks that the mystical music of the universe arises from each creature's multiple conformities to divine law via natural law. Thus, for him, all creatures have intrinsic spiritual significance, even though their actions (or inactions) may not be moral or immoral *per se*. While humans may offer moral witness to one another directly or indirectly, given their share in divine right reason, non-humans, given their lack of right reason, must provide what amounts to moral witness to humans indirectly. As a result, humans must use their rational faculty especially sensitively to perceive non-humans' witness. Herbert appears to find aspects of Gerson's thinking amenable, for in "Providence," he consistently shows how non-humans, despite lacking fully free will and right reason, provide the speaker the near-moral guidance he needs to humble himself before God and his "fellows." As the speaker follows this guidance, he allows Providence to tune him spiritually so that he will contribute fairly, that is, justly and beautifully, to the cosmos' mystical music. Since this concord originates in God, whenever any creature accords with divine law, that creature positions himself to serve "Man" effectively as a member of a proto-Church council working in the temple of the cosmos. In this section, then, I briefly consider Herbert's Protestant conciliarism, which he likely learned from Gerson, one of conciliarism's chief champions.<sup>51</sup>

Herbert's subtly provocative adaptation of Gerson's conciliarism appears throughout "Providence," but especially in its closing stanzas. There, Herbert reaffirms Gerson's conviction that non-humans have enough innate goodness to give their human counterparts what amounts to moral witness. This witness, together with Herbert's decision to anthropomorphize non-humans by assigning them masculine pronouns, means that non-humans function as a proto-church council obliged by God's laws to help guide "Man" in the use of his priestly authority, especially if he is willing to serve as the "worlds high Priest," a role that logically necessitates at least some other creatures' service as lower priests.<sup>52</sup> In the poem's final stanzas, this council appears in lyrical dialogue with the speaker:

All things that are, though they have sev'rall wayes,  
Yet in their being joyn with one advise  
To honour thee: and so I give thee praise  
In all my other hymnes, but in this twice.

Each thing that is, although in use and name  
It go for one, hath many wayes in store  
To honour thee: and so each hymne thy fame  
Extolleth many wayes, yet this one more. (145-52)

Both stanzas show Herbert's reliance on Gerson's notion of species-specific conformity to divine law via natural law. In the first stanza, the speaker's use of the word "things" levels all creatures, humbling Man by placing him in the same category as a thing. Even so, the speaker reasserts Man's superiority, for though "All things" follow "one advise" of objective right (divine law), all things "have sev'rall wayes" of doing so as determined by subjective right (a creature's power or faculty). Since Man's faculty includes versification, the speaker mentions how his past lyrics laud God once, but this lyric does so "twice." Wilcox parses the speaker's usage of the word "twice" by observing that one form of praise occurs in "Providence" itself, while another transpires in Herbert's being as he writes that poem (427n147-8). What scholars miss is that something similar happens to non-humans in the poem's last

stanza. Whereas the penultimate stanza zooms in on the speaker, reestablishing him above other creatures as God's poet, the ultimate stanza zooms out on all creatures as God's poems, even His proto-poets. While "Man" is God's "Secretarie" directly, non-humans are God's secretaries indirectly. As each creature lives his life in accordance with divine law via the laws of nature inscribed within his body, that body serves God as an instrument of His harmony. From Herbert's Gersonian perspective, "each" creature is a "him" who is God's "hymne," that is, an individual being with spiritual import, one who has personality or something akin to it.

The fact that Herbert dignifies non-human creatures by suggesting that they have something in them that resembles Man, something that evokes human free will and right reason without being either of those things, allows non-human creatures to carry a near-moral message with spiritual significance.<sup>53</sup> Although they may carry this message individually, they have great power when they carry it collectively. For when they do the latter, they exert something like conciliar authority to affirm, to tolerate, or to protest the behavior of Man, "the worlds high Priest." Read this way, "Providence" suggests that *De Vita Spiritualis Animae* influenced Herbert not only through Gerson's discussion of natural law, but also through the nascent conciliarism that arises within that discussion. Admittedly, the boldness and vehemence of Gerson's opposition to unjust popes may seem out of line with the subtlety of Herbert's metaphor of Man as "the worlds high Priest," especially since Herbert gently distances himself from his speaker when the speaker fails to follow the biblical logic surrounding this role through to its ministerial consequences of shared governance of the Church.<sup>54</sup> But Herbert is more than capable of extracting the grains of truth from a text and leaving the rest.<sup>55</sup> So in my brief collection of the grains of Gerson's conciliarism in *De Vita Spiritualis Animae*, I identify those that have the greatest relevance for understanding what Herbert suggests may be the proper balance between human and non-human authority when it comes to living together in God's world.



In his treatise, Gerson spends much time delineating the differences between divine law, natural law, civil law, as well as mortal and venial sin in hopes of helping readers to know whether they are in danger of losing their salvation during a time when two popes claimed to be legitimate. Because he believes that humans share in God's right reason, they have the authority and the obligation to challenge unjust rulers, even illegitimate or evil popes. Thus he claims, "if superiors for their own lust are able to throw down, to trample on, to afflict and to destroy their inferiors because it is not permitted to oppose their violence either in word or in deed, then the commonwealth, for whose benefit all power is established, would go badly."<sup>56</sup> Consequently, he contends that it is morally and spiritually acceptable according to divine and natural law to oppose corrupt rulers and popes if there is "an urgent and manifest necessity," even in cases that affect only "individual persons."<sup>57</sup> Gerson makes it clear that the natural right to oppose and even to kill an unjust Pope applies only to rational creatures:

[T]here are many possible cases in which someone pretending to be the Pope, and having such an attitude from the Church, may be lawfully killed or imprisoned by a subject, or [experience] a withdrawal from the power of his obedience once rejected, unless perhaps someone could show that some revealed constitution stands in the way, because some human constitution is not able to abolish this natural right; for it is founded on the title of natural existence communicated by God to the rational creature.<sup>58</sup>

Gerson's stipulation that the right to protest bad papal conduct stems from the right to self-preservation allows him to address the pastoral care crisis brought about by the Western Schism.<sup>59</sup> But because of his focus on caring for souls, he does not state what he and others know: the God-given right of self-preservation applies to non-rational creatures, too.

Given Gerson's assumption that only humans have the need and the natural right to resist or to remove a grossly abusive Pope, he could not have imagined that anyone would apply his words to non-humans, however figuratively and wittily. Yet "Providence" shows Herbert doing just that. Throughout the poem, as I have shown, one or more non-

humans indirectly indicate that "Man" ought to realign himself with divine law via natural law, and thereby experience the sweet power of being in harmony with God and the rest of Creation. Because Herbert portrays Man as "the worlds high Priest," it is unclear whether he agrees with Gerson's adage, "as the Pope is the superior of all, so he is the servant of all."<sup>60</sup> The closest Herbert comes to stating that Man is the servant of all occurs when the speaker avers that Man "doth present / The sacrifice for all," a proud claim that is technically true, but spiritually false, as the rest of the poem proves. Still, Herbert brings his speaker to that point when he realizes that he "owes" the rest of Creation, and that sense of indebtedness to non-humans implies that the speaker must work to repay them in a way that goes beyond writing. Insofar as Herbert turned to Gerson for ideas on this point, it is worth noting that Gerson specifies that a good Pope will work for the Church "as their superior and guardian and preserver."<sup>61</sup> Should he fail in one or all of these areas, members of the Church may try to correct him fraternally using these laws.<sup>62</sup> If he refuses to be corrected, then members may report him to the Church council, which has the power and authority to denounce him if he ignores their rebuke.<sup>63</sup> Gerson contends, "But if he does not convene the council as lawfully required, and nevertheless persists in his offenses, he may himself be regarded as truly obstinate, not ready to listen to the Church."<sup>64</sup> In such a defiantly transgressive state, the Pope is vulnerable to a just and potentially fatal overthrow. Gerson's idea that a Church council is greater than a Pope has implications that he does not parse in the *De Vita Spirituali Animae*. But in "Providence," Herbert investigates poetically some of the metaphoric consequences of Gerson's bold logic, depicting the ways in which Man, the cosmos' worship leader, may realign himself with God and neighbor, human and non-human, thereby deepening the life of his soul and providentially helping to preserve the lives of his fellow creatures.

To the extent that "Providence" articulates humanity's need to humble itself relative to other creatures in order to live better with them in

acts of loving stewardship, the poem offers multiple ways for its audiences to reconsider humanity's place in the cosmos and especially on Earth. For twenty-first-century readers dealing with the effects of global climate change, "Providence" makes what now may seem like either a tired or refreshing argument: hubristic humanism needs urgent treatment using philosophical and theological tools. The fact that "Herbert the eco-warrior," in Russell M. Hillier's incisively witty locution, apparently borrowed some of these tools from Gerson and poetically repurposed them invites further examination (641).<sup>65</sup> For example, does Gerson's understanding of natural law and mystical theology in the *De Vita Spiritualis Animae* and/or the twin treatises, *De Mystica Theologia Speculativa* and *De Mystica Theologia Practica*, influence other poems in *The Temple*? What may Gerson's three treatises on mystical music say about Herbert's own approach to God's "musick," whether in "Providence" or in other lyrics such as "Church-musick," "Antiphon [I]," "Antiphon [II]," or "Heaven"? After all, "Man," a companion poem of sorts to "Providence," suggests that "Musick and light attend our head" (33), and so may well owe something to Gerson's spiritually resonant cosmos.<sup>66</sup> Surely a fuller understanding of how Herbert creatively adapts Gerson's belief in the legal basis for mystical music would complement readers' knowledge of how *The Temple* "attempts visually (and descriptively) to evoke the harmonic structures of liturgical music" (Prakas 85). As technological innovation renders more of the universe audible, thereby recalling medieval and early modern notions of a cosmic harmony, Herbert's Gersonian perspective in "Providence" will invite hopefully readers to imagine other ways that *The Temple* draws on medieval and early modern scholarship in a concerted effort to improve readers' spiritual sight and hearing.<sup>67</sup>

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

## NOTES

I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Connotations* for their helpful feedback, as well as Christopher Hodgkins for his insightful commentary on an earlier version of this essay.

<sup>1</sup>All citations of Herbert's poems are to Wilcox's edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup>For a reading of "The Pearl. *Matth. 13*" that highlights Herbert's "lovers' quarrel with learning," see Hodgkins, "'Yet I love thee'" 23.

<sup>3</sup>I have made a similar argument in relation to Herbert's use of Sir Francis Bacon's scientific method in "Baconian Investigation and Spiritual Standing."

<sup>4</sup>See Mazour-Matusevich, *Le père du siècle*, especially her account of Gerson's reach in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England 347-59. The fact that Bishop Joseph Hall "possessed a thorough and vast knowledge" (355) of *De Vita Spirituali Animae*, among Gerson's other works, and that Herbert's close friend Nicholas Ferrar imitated one of Gerson's treatises for the spiritual benefit of the community at Little Gidding, Cambridgeshire (359), suggests that Gerson's growing influence in England extended to Herbert in ways not previously recognized. Additionally, the fact that Gerson's conciliarism appealed to John Foxe in his widely published *Acts and Monuments* (see 349) implies that Herbert likely knew of Gerson's work. The likelihood increases given Hodgkins's observation that "Gerson's complete works were published in Latin six times before 1502," meaning for Hodgkins that "it is likely that Herbert would have had access to them during his years as both student and fellow at Cambridge" ("Gerson, a Spirituall Man" 137n21). Although Hodgkins attributes this information to a page from Brian Patrick McGuire's *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation*, the information does not appear on that page, but McGuire does record on a different page from that book that Gerson's "collected works" were "printed and reprinted in Cologne, Strasbourg, Nuremberg, Basel, and Paris" between 1483 and 1521, and published again "in Paris" in 1606, making Gerson's collected works (presumably in Latin) published five times by 1521, and six times by 1606 (McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation* 364). Notably, Mazour-Matusevich claims (on the same page number cited by Hodgkins) that Gerson's "complete works were published six times before 1502," which indicates both that Hodgkins confused Mazour-Matusevich's essay in McGuire's edited collection with McGuire's monograph, and that McGuire and Mazour-Matusevich disagree about how to chart the proliferation of Gerson's work; see Mazour-Matusevich, "Gerson's Legacy" 358. Despite these discrepancies, what is not in doubt is that Gerson's influence extended to members of Herbert's professional and personal circles, and thus likely reached him.

<sup>5</sup>In doing so, I hope to develop Virginia R. Mollenkott's description of "Providence" as "Herbert's most profound philosophic poem." Though she cites G. H. Palmer as the source of this assertion, the phrasing is her own; see Mollenkott 34. See also G. H. Palmer's edition, *The English Poems of George Herbert* 247-49.

<sup>6</sup>Gerson's conception of mystical music as metaphorically registering divine order thus departs from Boethius's material understanding of cosmic harmony ex-

pressed in *De institutione musica* (first printed in 1491-92). For a discussion of Gerson's ideas about mystical music in relation to Boethius', see Irwin. I am grateful to Clarissa Chenovick for alerting me to the scholarly interest in Gerson's mystical music. For a characterization of Boethius' *musica mundana* in mathematical terms, see Ilnitchi 37.

<sup>7</sup>My argument that Herbert's ambivalent portrayal of "Man" as "the worlds high Priest" recalls Gerson's reformist attitude toward misguided, erring, and even abusive Popes articulates the dangers of priestly pride more starkly than Paul Dyck does when he states that the role of the "gardener priest" (274) ought not devolve into "a state admitting complacency or [...] lordly prerogative" (274). Despite the different emphases we each place on the problem of pride in "Providence," we agree on the importance for Herbert of humility in the exercise of a priestly vocation. So while Dyck stresses that "Providence" teaches the speaker (and Herbert's readers) that Man ought "not separate speaking on behalf of the creatures on the one hand and receiving guidance from those creatures on the other" (15), I highlight the ways in which Herbert—whom I see as separate from but in some ways sympathetic to his speaker—illustrates the spiritual tempering of the sometimes wayward speaker, who is one expression of "the worlds high Priest."

<sup>8</sup>My argument thus supports Debra Rienstra's illuminating exploration of a related issue, namely, Herbert's view that poetry may foster therapeutic connections with non-human creatures. In tracing the pressures exerted by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on *The Temple*, Rienstra finds in "Easter Wings," for example, "a kind of Ovidian resolution" (159) whereby readers witness "the speaker turning into a bird in its very form" (159), and "the poem itself turn[ing] into a bird" (159). While Rienstra inspects the transformation of Herbert's speakers into birds (or other non-human creatures) in a number of poems within "The Church," I examine the ways that Herbert keeps the distinctions between humans and non-humans mostly clear in "Providence" so as to facilitate a Gersonian mystical harmony in each creature's conformity to God's will.

<sup>9</sup>In considering the influence of older, more philosophical and theological works on Herbert's verse, my argument complements that of Katherine Calloway, who assesses how Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) shapes Herbert's poetic volume *The Temple*. Calloway's trenchant reading of how Herbert takes Lucretian and Epicurean atomism and makes even the finest dust particle the post-mortem vehicle of faith is exquisite. Still, when she asserts that "the speaker [of "Providence"] considers the potential Bacon noticed for the divine Marshal and his creatures to be at cross-purposes" (137), she goes further than I think Herbert does in that poem. To explain her position, she avers, "Herbert makes clear that he does not include just the unruly human will in sin's orbit; all of creation can misbehave" (137). Yet my sense of Herbert's Gersonian-inflected perspective is that non-human creatures do not "misbehave" *per se* since they cannot go against God's will. Moreover, as Herbert knew, the Apostle Paul states that God subjected non-human creation to "vanitie" (i.e. futility) after humankind's Fall (Rom. 8:20). Non-human mis-

behavior implies a moral fault (even one on the part of Providence), while subjection to “vanitie” (understood as futility) does not imply moral fault, only the mysterious will and wisdom of God, which I think Herbert celebrates in the poem.

<sup>10</sup>Intriguingly, Walsham cites Herbert’s *The Countrey Parson* as evidence of the “clerical hostility” (22) toward the lay tendency to place a “materialistic, almost animistic trust in a self-evolving universe” (23). According to her, Herbert combats this tendency with vivid “‘stories and sayings’” about “the judgements of God” (Walsham 105; quoting Herbert’s *Countrey Parson* in *Works* 233). But her exclusive focus on Herbert’s prose means that she misses how his poem “Providence” offers a memorable story of one person’s response to providence both general and special.

<sup>11</sup>In using a historiographical account about early modern providentialism as a starting point for my argument about “Providence,” I primarily aim to show how much Herbert’s poem differs from the work of his contemporaries and to offer some Gersonian reasons for that difference. But I also want to illustrate the need for more historians to attend to literary texts when constructing their narratives.

<sup>12</sup>See Wilcox’s note in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, 110n1-2.

<sup>13</sup>The original Latin reads, “O Sapientia, quae ex ore Altissimi prodiisti, / attingens a fine usque ad finem, / fortiter suaviterque disponens omnia.” I am grateful to Malcolm Guite for drawing my attention to the O Antiphons. See Guite; see also Church of England.

<sup>14</sup>Gerson’s Latin reads: “Lex divina praeceptorum est signum verum revelatum creaturae rationali quod est notificativum rectae rationis divinae volentis teneri illam creaturam seu ligari ad aliquid agendum vel non agendum pro dignificatione ejus ad aeternam vitam consequendam et damnationem evitandam” (*Œuvres complètes* 130). I was assisted in preparing an initial translation of Gerson’s treatise by <https://www.onlinetranslationpro.com/latin-to-english-translation>. Nevertheless, all English translations from Gerson’s treatise are my own unless otherwise specified. I would like to thank my colleague Andrei Gandila for his general counsel regarding Latin translation, and linguist Heidi Scott for sharing her experiences as a translator.

<sup>15</sup>Gerson writes, “jus est facultas seu potestas propinqua conveniens alicui secundum dictamen rectae rationis” (*Œuvres complètes* 141).

<sup>16</sup>To put these two senses of right another way, Annabel S. Brett states that objective right is “the just portion which is due between persons,” whereas subjective right “is something belonging to the person herself” (3). For an account of the challenges in translating the Latin words “ius” and “lex” as “right” or “law,” given that “ius” and “lex” were sometimes used interchangeably, see Brett xi.

<sup>17</sup>This claim does not appear farfetched since another of Herbert’s poems, “Coloss. 3.3. *Our life is hid with Christ in God*,” diagonally demonstrates a belief in or at least a hope for a providential order to poetic language, which the poet displays through “a double motion” (2) of signification, both straightforward and diagonal. Notably, the poem that follows “Providence” is “Hope.”

<sup>18</sup>Gerson himself is indebted to one or both of these ancient sources because he alludes to it or them when he writes about God’s permissive will, declaring that

God sometimes allows bad things to happen “most justly, bringing good from these evils according to His most powerful wisdom reaching strongly from end to end with and through the inscrutable abyss of His judgments.” He writes, “hoc justissime faciat, eliciendo ex his malis bona secundum potentissimam sapientiam suam attingentem a fine usque ad finem fortiter et per inscrutabilem abyssum judiciorum suorum” (Gerson, *Œuvres complètes* 181).

<sup>19</sup>Against scholarly consensus, Brian Tierney asserts that “Gerson’s language [concerning subjective right] is not new in itself” because it stems from “twelfth-century canonistic writings” (*The Idea of Natural Rights* 210). However, Tierney argues that Gerson’s “originality consists in his ways of handling the earlier traditions of thought and applying them to the new problems of his own day,” especially the crisis in pastoral care provoked by the Western Schism (1378-417) (*The Idea of Natural Rights* 211). Furthermore, Tierney recognizes that “a convincing case can also be made for Gerson as an early proponent of a doctrine of individual rights” because of Gerson’s redefinition of *ius* as a faculty or power (*The Idea of Natural Rights* 210). For a discussion of scholarship making this case, as well as his rejoinder to it, see Tierney 210-11.

<sup>20</sup>Multiple examples exist of Donne’s witty efforts to integrate medieval natural law theory into his erotic and devotional poetry. Two of the most important are Elegy 6, “Natures lay Ideott,” given its exploration of *dominium* through the figuration of the beloved as formerly virgin territory “severd” from “the Worlds common” (21), and Holy Sonnet 14 in the Westmoreland Sequence, “Why ame I by all Creatures wayted on?” (17) given its meditation on the rationale for the puzzling difference between human and non-human nature. Fascinatingly, in the Revised Sequence, this sonnet notably appears eighth, with another title, “Why are wee by all Creatures waited on?” (24) If Herbert had one of Donne’s natural-law oriented poems in mind when he wrote “Providence,” Holy Sonnet 14 seems the most probable candidate since in that poem, as in Herbert’s, non-human nature initially gets contrasted with the speaker as the stand-in for Man.

<sup>21</sup>Gerson writes, “Lex divina praeceptorum est signum verum revelatum creaturae rationali quod est notificativum rectae rationis divinae volentis teneri illam creaturam seu ligari ad aliquid agendum vel non agendum pro dignificatione ejus ad aeternam vitam consequendam et damnationem evitandam” (*Œuvres complètes* 130). The fact that Gerson focuses on preceptive divine law, thereby spending less time on permissive divine law, is not surprising since his priority is to help readers identify mortal sins so as not to lose their salvation during a time of conflicting pastoral care, when two popes vied for dominance. Not surprisingly, the tendency of natural law theorists to focus on preceptive (and prohibitive) divine law to the detriment of permissive divine law gets replicated in modern scholarship, with the notable exception of the work of Tierney in *Liberty & Law*.

<sup>22</sup>For a brief survey of the medieval debate on the relation between God’s will and right reason, though one with some questionable development, see Idziak. For an investigation of how the medieval scholarly interest in the relation between God’s will and reason influenced discussions of human ethics, see Williams; see also Hoffman.

<sup>23</sup>For a brief summary of this intellectual history, see Idziak.

<sup>24</sup>See Idziak's section on d'Ailly.

<sup>25</sup>Gerson writes, "harmonia vitae spiritualis quae est charitas" (*Œuvres complètes* 184).

<sup>26</sup>Gerson writes, "principalem harmoniam in qua consistit vera animae vita quae Deus est" (*Œuvres complètes* 185).

<sup>27</sup>Gerson writes, "nihil fit absque Deo causante et nihil est verum absque prima veritate, nam omnis sapientia a Domino Deo est" (*Œuvres complètes* 133).

<sup>28</sup>Gerson writes, "in praxibus moralibus recta ratio non est prior voluntate," because "neutrum esse prius altero in Deo" (*Œuvres complètes* 141). This moment, perhaps more than any other, makes it clear that Gerson agrees with d'Ailly, his teacher and mentor, and the dedicatee to *De Vita Spiritualis Animae*, in equalizing the divine will and right reason, a position to which Herbert's poem shows him amenable, for that balance supports another between God's power and love.

<sup>29</sup>For Herbert to suggest that non-humans operate within the sphere of God's permission is highly innovative. Tierney explains why: "From the beginning [of the Christian Church] the idea of divine permission was associated with the idea of human free choice" (*Liberty & Law* 8).

<sup>30</sup>Gerson writes, "Recta ratio et dictamen suum est primo originaliter et essentialiter in Deo" (*Œuvres complètes* 141). Brett helpfully observes that when Gerson argues that "'right reason and its dictate is firstly originally and essentially in God', but 'participatively' in rational creatures alone" [*Œuvres complètes* 141], his "language is very close to that of Thomas Aquinas in his treatise on the laws, where the participation of rational creatures in the eternal law is the natural law" (Brett 82-83).

<sup>31</sup>Gerson writes, "omne ens positivum quantum habet de entitate et ex consequenti de bonitate, tantumdem habet de jure [...] In hunc modum coelum jus habet ad influendum, sol ad illuminandum, ignis ad calefaciendum, hirundo ad nidificandum, immo et quaelibet creatura in omni eo quod bene agere naturali potest facultate" (*Œuvres complètes* 142).

<sup>32</sup>Irwin notices how Gerson equivocates on whether non-rational creatures have liberty—the freedom that falls under permissive natural law—when she examines his work on the mystical music of the cosmos: "Gerson's medieval mind made use of scholastic subtleties concerning mediated grace to discover freedom and understanding where they seemed not to exist. Although in his previous distinctions [in *De Canticordo*, part of *Tractatus de Canticis*, 1423-1426] he labelled the song of animals as unfree, he now finds it possible to say that animals participate in the freedom of the first principle: 'We shall see that there is scarcely any operation in the universe, however natural it is held to be, which is not related to the first principle and is free inasmuch as it is freely produced by it. And thus any operation is praiseworthy and to be highly praised'" (Irwin 197); see also Gerson, *De Canticordo*, col. 649.



<sup>33</sup>Gerson writes, “omnia principia juris naturalis esse de lege divina proprie dicta, licet diversa ratione” (*Œuvres complètes* 136).

<sup>34</sup>Gerson puts the matter in scriptural terms certainly acceptable to Herbert: “there is no power except from God, says the Apostle [Paul],” and God is the “Legislator.” Gerson writes, “non est potestas nisi a Deo, dicente Apostolo”; Gerson refers to “legislator Deus” and “legislator noster Christus” (*Œuvres complètes* 145, 193, 170).

<sup>35</sup>For example, Benet finds “the Christian’s generalization in the second stanza [...] surprising,” but not a sign of moral decay (159). Benet speculates that the speaker is perhaps guilty of “[p]rojection” when he “assum[es] that nonrational creatures are frustrated singers and musicians” (160), but she rejects this speculation, declaring “From the beginning [...] he has seen the citizens of the natural world as willing praisers through service” (160). I cannot agree with this reading since I see Herbert humbling his speaker.

<sup>36</sup>The passage is worth considering in context because of how the psalmist David spotlights man’s magnificence: “When I consider thy heauens, the worke of thy fingers, the moone and the starres which thou hast ordained; What *is* man, that thou art mindfull of him? and the sonne of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower then the Angels; and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to haue dominion ouer the works of thy hands; though hast put all things vnder his feete. All sheepe and oxen, yea and the beasts of the field. The foule of the aire, and the fish of the sea, *and whatsoeuer* passeth through the paths of the seas” (Ps. 8:3-8). Herbert’s poem shares this anthropocentrism while destabilizing it with the imaginative use of Gersonian ideas.

<sup>37</sup>See Herbert, “The Flower” 567-69.

<sup>38</sup>See the *OED* “secretary” *n.* 1.-3.; see also Wilcox’s note 421n8.

<sup>39</sup>Achsah Guibbory deploys this memorable locution to characterize the speaker of “The British Church,” but her phrase applies at this early moment of “Providence.”

<sup>40</sup>One other scriptural example worth identifying is Ps. 19, since King David, the psalmist, illustrates non-humans’ abilities to serve God as eloquent secretaries: “The heauens declare the glory of God: and the firmament sheweth his handy worke. Day vnto day vttereth speach, and night vnto night sheweth knowledge. *There is* no speach nor language, *where* their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (Ps. 19:1-4).

<sup>41</sup>The complete verse reads, “Seeing then that wee haue a great high Priest, that is passed into the heauens, Iesus the Sonne of God, let vs hold fast *our* profession” (Heb. 4:14).

<sup>42</sup>See Mazour-Matusevich, *Le père du siècle* 348-49; see also Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights* 207.

<sup>43</sup>Notably, the first recorded instance of the pejorative use of the figurative verb “harp” occurred in the early sixteenth century, so Herbert could have had this sense in mind when composing “Providence.” See the *OED* “harp” *v.*

<sup>44</sup>I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the word “fellows.” According to the *OED*, “fellow” *n.* most often refers to one seen as a “partner, colleague, collaborator,” even an “ally” (I.1.a); the word “fellow” may also refer to “a companion, an associate, a comrade” (I.2.a), or even a “counterpart” (I.5). Additionally, the word “fellow” was “Used as a friendly or polite form of address to a person of lower social status, esp. a servant” (I.6.a). Although in the fourteenth century this latter usage “impl[ied] polite condescension, as if to a companion, friend, or equal,” the word gradually lost that “implied haughtiness or contempt,” and eventually became obsolete shortly after Shakespeare’s lifetime (the last sample quotation under this sense, from Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, is dated to 1616). My point here is that the speaker’s usage of “fellows” shows some humility, enough to allow him to build on the subtle personification embedded in that word in the remainder of the poem.

<sup>45</sup>Gerson writes: “In eodem actu concurrere possunt multiplices rectitudines atque bonitates: una naturae, alia moris de genere, altera gratiae, altera gloriae; et hoc est secundum diversas habitudines considerandi eundem actum conformari multipliciter divinae legi seu bonitati; non quod in Deo sit aliqua diversitas in suis legibus quae dicatur realis vel formalis, sed quod ipsam eandem legem divinam concipimus diversimode et consideramus secundum habitudines distinctas realiter ad creaturas; quae habitudines non sunt ipse Deus solus sed ipse et creaturae sic relatae et consideratae, a quibus distincti conceptus ab intellectu formantur et abstrahuntur per potentiam longe fortiolem quam sit aestimativa ovis quae ex speciebus lupi sensatis elicit inimicitiam non sensatam” (*Œuvres complètes* 125).

<sup>46</sup>Gerson periodically employs the metaphor of light when discussing God’s law; for instance, he refers to “the notification of the rational creature through the immediate irradiation of its divine light” when explaining how humans gain knowledge of divine and natural law via right reason. Gerson’s Latin reads, “notificatio creaturae rationali per immediatam divinae lucis suae irradiationem” (*Œuvres complètes* 136).

<sup>47</sup>Citing A. S. Pease, Wilcox notes that “the praise of the nut was an ancient (Sophist) paradoxical trope” (426n126).

<sup>48</sup>Puzzingly, Mollenkott does not cite Herbert’s description of the Indian nut as an example of the theme of “the One in the Many and the Many in the One,” but it strikes me that his lines on the coconut beautifully exemplify this theme.

<sup>49</sup>I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of the importance of the Book of Nature for Herbert. For a fuller consideration of this widespread early modern *topos*, see Todd.

<sup>50</sup>Because I hear an aural pun on “owes,” I cannot agree with Wilcox, who glosses that word’s meaning as “Owns” (427n144). There is a great spiritual difference between asserting *dominium*—masterful ownership—over non-human nature and realizing humanity’s indebtedness to non-human nature.

<sup>51</sup>For a survey of Gerson’s conciliarist legacy in the decades after Gerson died, see Mazour-Matusevich, *Le père du siècle* 348-49; see also McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation* 329-33.

<sup>52</sup>Such a poetic move is not so far-fetched given Herbert's use of the beast fable in "Humilitie" to accomplish a similar moral end, though with radically different results.

<sup>53</sup>For this reason, I cannot agree with Todd's assertion that "Herbert's attitude toward the doctrine of divine Providence [...] is entirely conventional" (84). Similarly, I must disagree with Rienstra, who shares Todd's view when she claims that, in "Providence," Herbert "echoes Psalm 104's catalog of creation, praising at length and in conventional terms the diversity, purposefulness, and orderliness of a world in which even poisons and thorns have their place. Also conventional is the sense of human exceptionalism, specifically because of the human capacity for language" (148). As I have shown, Herbert's signature attitude of buoyant joy toward Providence depends on Gerson's expansive redefinition of subjective right in relation to objective right (giving Herbert's speaker the right to write well of Providence both general and special). That buoyantly joyous attitude gets a further lift from Herbert's surprising declaration that natural law is founded on God's love as well as His power, a marked change from the expected medieval terms of God's right reason and will. As a result of these philosophical and theological innovations, Herbert's bold personification of non-human creatures so as to give them near moral import deserves credit as unconventional, even innovative.

<sup>54</sup>As I have argued above, in the moment when Herbert's speaker avers that "Man is the worlds high Priest," he is not prepared to accept that he must make room for other creatures, however few, to join him in his priestly role. Attending to the adjective "high" and yet not considering the implied comparative adjective "low" (or its rough equivalent) does not make sense to me.

<sup>55</sup>In light of Hodgkins' connection between Herbert and Gerson when it comes to their dietary ethics, I cannot help but recall Herbert's famous phrase in "The Church-porch," "a good digestion turns all to health" (358). My point is that Herbert surely digested Gerson's conciliarism when apparently drawing on it metaphorically in "Providence."

<sup>56</sup>Gerson writes, "si superiores pro sua libidine possent inferiores dejicere, conculcare, affligere et perdere et quod eorum violentiae se opponere neque facto neque verbo liceret, male irent respublicae pro quarum utilitate potestas omnis statuta est" (*Œuvres complètes* 151-52).

<sup>57</sup>Gerson observes that it would go bad even for "personis singularibus" (*Œuvres complètes* 152) if their superiors were to inflict violence on them which they could not repel. Still, in an effort to preserve order, he advocates forceful resistance only when "urgente manifesta necessitate" (*Œuvres complètes* 153).

<sup>58</sup>The full passage reads, "Qua in re statim apparet multos casus esse posibles in quibus aliquis gerens se pro papa et pro tali habitus ab Ecclesia, poterit a subdito licite vel occidi vel incarcerari, vel per modum quemdam appellationis ab eo vel subtractionis a potestate suae obedientiae declinari, nisi forte quis ostenderet constitutionem aliquam revelatam obstare, quia humana constitutio jus hoc naturale tollere non potuit; fundatur enim in titulo naturalis existentiae communicatae a Deo

ipsi creaturae rationali, ad quem titulum consequitur jus defendendi se e noxia repellendi, hoc est vim vi repellendi modo prius exposito" (*Œuvres complètes* 152).

<sup>59</sup>For an account of Gerson's conciliarist thinking in his later works, see Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights*, 207-35; see also Oakley.

<sup>60</sup>Gerson writes, "sicut papa superior est omnium, ita omnium est servus" (*Œuvres complètes* 153).

<sup>61</sup>Gerson states that the natural right of the Pope requires that the Church honor and help him as their "superior et tutor atque conservator" (*Œuvres complètes* 154).

<sup>62</sup>Gerson writes, "Propterea si peccet, corripitur jure divino et naturali frater-naliter" (*Œuvres complètes* 155).

<sup>63</sup>Gerson writes, "si nolit corrigi, potest tandem denuntiari Ecclesiae" (*Œuvres complètes* 155).

<sup>64</sup>Gerson writes, "Quod si requisitus legitime nolit concilium celebrare et nihilo-minus perseveret in delictis, potest ipse haberi tamquam vere pertinax, non paratus audire Ecclesiam" (*Œuvres complètes* 155).

<sup>65</sup>Hillier insightfully ties "Providence" to "[Richard] Hooker's understanding of the law of nature within Creation and his stated principle that 'obedience of crea-tures unto the law of nature is the stay of the whole world (I.3.2)'" (640), a helpful argument with which I agree. My contribution to historicizing Herbert's natural law thinking is to show how Gerson's arguments about the relation between objec-tive and subjective right, as well as mystical music and conciliarism, surely exert a powerful influence on Herbert, one perhaps as strong as that of Hooker.

<sup>66</sup>Gerson's declaration in *De Canticorum Originali Ratione* (part of *Tractatus de Can-ticis*) that "metaphysical reason concludes that this whole universe is properly spo-ken of as a monochord of divine wisdom" (Irwin 190, citing *De Canticorum Originali Ratione*, col. 631) would likely have appealed to Herbert.

<sup>67</sup>For two memorable examples of recent efforts to hear the universe's music, see "Black Hole at the Center of Galaxy M87" and "Galactic Center Sonification."

## WORKS CITED

- Balla, Angela. "Baconian Investigation and Spiritual Standing in Herbert's *The Tem-ple*." *George Herbert Journal* 34.1-2 (Fall 2010-Spring 2011): 55-77.
- "Black Hole at the Center of Galaxy M87." New NASA Black Hole Sonifications with a Remix, Chandra X-Ray Observatory, [https://chan-dra.si.edu/photo/2022/sonify5/](https://chandra.si.edu/photo/2022/sonify5/). 23 June 2024.
- Benet, Diana. *Secretary of Praise: The Poetic Vocation of George Herbert*. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1984.
- Brett, Annabel S. *Liberty, Right, and Nature: Individual Rights in Later Scholastic Thought*. Cambridge: CUP, 1997.

- Calloway, Katherine. "A Particular Trust: George Herbert and Epicureanism." *Connotations* 32 (2023): 114-44. <https://www.connotations.de/article/a-particular-trust-george-herbert-and-epicureanism/>.
- Church of England. "The Advent Antiphons." *Advent*. <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/churchs-year/times-and-seasons/advent#mmm20>. 28 May 2024.
- Donne, John. *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*. Vol. 2. Gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000.
- Donne, John. *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*. Vol. 7, part 1. Gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005.
- Dyck, Paul. "The Providential Rose: Herbert's Full Cosmos and Fellowship of Creatures." *Connotations* 33 (2024): 259-84. <https://www.connotations.de/article/the-providential-rose-herberts-full-cosmos-and-fellowship-of-creatures/>.
- "Galactic Center Sonification." *A Universe of Sound*, Chandra X-Ray Observatory, <https://chandra.si.edu/sound/#gcenter>. 23 June 2024.
- Gerson, Jean. "De Vita Spiritualis Animae." *Jean Gerson: Œuvres complètes*. 10 vols. Ed. Palemon Glorieux. Paris: Desclée & Cie, 1962. 3: 113-202.
- Gerson, Jean. *Plures tractatus de canticis, Joannis Gerson opera omnia*. Vol. 3. Ed. Ellies du Pin. Antwerp, 1706.
- Gerson, Jean. *On Mystical Theology: Second Treatise*. *Jean Gerson: Early Works*. Trans. Brian Patrick McGuire. New York: Paulist P, 1998.
- Guibbory, Achsah. *Christian Identity: Jews and Israel in Seventeenth-Century England*. Oxford: OUP, 2010.
- Guite, Malcolm. "O Sapientia an Advent Antiphon." *Malcolm Guite*, 17 Dec. 2020, 9:01 a.m., <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2020/12/17/o-sapientia-an-advent-antiphon-6/>. 28 May 2024.
- Herbert, George. *The English Poems of George Herbert*. Ed. Helen Wilcox. Cambridge: CUP, 2007.
- Herbert, George. *The English Poems of George Herbert*. Ed. G. H. Palmer. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916.
- Herbert, George. *The Works of George Herbert*. Ed. F. E. Hutchinson. Oxford: OUP, 1941.
- Hillier, Russell M. "'Send back thy fire again': Praise, Music, and Poetry in the Lyrics of George Herbert," *The Modern Language Review* 111.3 (July 2016): 633-64.
- Hodgkins, Christopher. "'Gerson, a Spirituall Man': Herbert and the University of Paris's Reformist Chancellor." *Edward and George Herbert in the European Republic of Letters*. Ed. Greg Miller and Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2022. 119-39.
- Hodgkins, Christopher. "'Yet I love thee': The 'Wayes of Learning' and 'Groveling Wit' in Herbert's 'The Pearl.'" *George Herbert Journal* 27.1-2 (Fall 2003-Spring 2004): 22-31.
- Hoffman, Tobias. "Intellectualism and Voluntarism." *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*. Ed. Robert Pasnau. Cambridge: CUP, 2009. 414-27.
- Holy Bible: 1611 Edition*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982.

- Ilntichi, Gabriela. "Musica Mundana, Aristotelian Natural Philosophy and Ptolemaic Astronomy." *Early Music History* 41 (2002): 37-74.
- Idziak, Janine. "God's Will as the Foundation of Morality: A Medieval Historical Perspective." *Religions* 12 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050362>. 30 May 2024.
- Irwin, Joyce L. "The Mystical Music of Jean Gerson." *Early Music History* 1 (1981): 187-90.
- Jonson, Ben. "To Penshurst." *The Cambridge Edition of Ben Jonson's Works Online*. Ed. by Colin Burrow. <https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/k/works/forest/facing/#>. 27 March 2024.
- Mazour-Matusevich, Yelena. "Gerson's Legacy." *A Companion to Jean Gerson*. Ed. Brian Patrick McGuire. Leiden: Brill, 2006. 357-99.
- Mazour-Matusevich, Yelena. *Le père du siècle: The Early Modern Reception of Jean Gerson (1363-1429) Theological Authority between Middle Ages and Early Modern Era*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2023.
- McGuire, Brian Patrick. *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2005.
- Mollenkott, Virginia R. "The Many and the One in George Herbert's 'Providence.'" *CLA Journal* 10.1 (September 1966): 34-41.
- Oakley, Francis. "Gerson as Conciliarist." *A Companion to Jean Gerson*. Ed. Brian Patrick McGuire. Leiden: Brill, 2006. 179-204.
- Pease, A. S. "Things Without Honour." *Concerning Poetry* 21 (1926): 27-42.
- Prakas, Tessie. *Poetic Priesthood in the Seventeenth Century: Reformed Ministry and Radical Verse*. Oxford: OUP, 2022.
- Rienstra, Debra K. "'I Wish I Were a Tree': George Herbert and the Metamorphoses of Devotion." *Connotations* 32 (2023): 145-64. <https://www.connotations.de/article/debra-k-rienstra-i-wish-i-were-a-tree-george-herbert-and-the-metamorphoses-of-devotion/>.
- "Secretary, N. (1-3)." *Oxford English Dictionary*, OUP, 2024, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/secretary\\_n1?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use&tl=true#23666113](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/secretary_n1?tab=meaning_and_use&tl=true#23666113). 23 June 2024.
- Tierney, Brian. *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, Church Law, 1150-1625*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Tierney, Brian. *Liberty & Law: The Idea of Permissive Natural Law, 1100-1800*. Washington, D. C.: The Catholic U of America P, 2014.
- Todd, Richard. "'Providence': Reading the Book of Nature." *The Opacity of Signs: Acts of Interpretation in George Herbert's The Temple*. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1986. 83-112.
- Walsham, Alexandra. *Providence in Early Modern England*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999.
- Williams, Thomas. "Intellect and Will." *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Ethics*. Ed. Thomas Williams. Cambridge: CUP, 2018. 238-56.

# A Response to Franziska Quabeck: “The Yellow Leaf: Age and the Gothic in Dickens”

ROBERT L. PATTEN

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 328-332.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-patten-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-patten-1)

---

This response is a contribution to the debate on “Dickens and Colour” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/dickens-and-colour>). Further contributions to this debate are welcome; contact [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

---

## Abstract

The response to Franziska Quabeck’s contribution to the debate on “Dickens and Colour” takes up a few points for further discussion and suggests that “yellow” does not always signify imprisonment in and of old age.

The email invitation from Burkhard Niederhoff read: Since you are an authority on Dickens, I thought you might be interested in it and consider writing a response. Well, I have been thinking about Dickens for sixty-five years, but I have not been acquainted with the debate on “Dickens and Colour” that has been running in *Connotations: A Journal for Debate*. Curious, I accessed the abstract, and it prompted me to promise a response.

I learned a lot from this article. It seems to be informed by conversations about color, from the abstractions of Goethe two centuries ago to current inquiries about the Gothic, authorial uses of images of color, the uncanny, and representations of Victorian England’s culture.

I take it that the essay has a primary thesis: "Dickens creates his own logic of colours, in which he uses yellow predominantly not as a primary colour, but as a tinge, a *discolouring* of that which was formerly white, or conceived of as white" (3). This is then refined to define Victorian connotations of "yellow" as light, air, and freedom, a kind of beneficent white illumination, whereas Dickens uses "yellow" to signify "both the literal and metaphorical imprisonment in and of old age" (4). Imprisonment becomes both actual prisons and enforcement in home or elsewhere. And metaphorical enforcement is elaborated into "oppressive conditions that imprison the mind" (5) "and human spirit" (6). The latter half of the discussion centers on the genre and psychologies of the Gothic, bringing in Dickens, said by Robert Mighall to be a major contributor of Gothic scenes in Victorian literature.<sup>1</sup>

That is a lot to posit. Quabeck situates her postulations within current discourse, and applies its propositions to a number of instances in Dickens's writing where the fit seems appropriate for containing all these elements: the color, its standing as discoloration, and its opposition to light, air, and freedom physically, mentally, and spiritually: "By describing Miss Havisham as having no brightness left, Dickens could not make it any clearer that his use of yellow differs significantly from all the associations and uses the Victorians had of this particular primary colour" (14). She also hits home by associating yellow with aging. She is particularly adept at nuancing Annette Federico's "Dickens and Disgust" to distinguish those who are becoming decrepit from those who are, or seem to be, unaging. The comparison of Mrs. Skewton dressed and undressed to "Good" Mrs. Brown is telling.

Her generalizations range across, and encompass, nearly the entire oeuvre, from *Pickwick* to *Great Expectations*. And that is where I would demur, on several grounds, from such sweeping assertions as "from all the associations and uses of the Victorians." The paper is convincing about "yellow" being used in the ways she analyzes, in these passages. But stretching across the whole corpus of Dickens's writing, and a very large portion of the literature—or at least the fiction—of Victorian England, seems an unearned inference. From the start, I wanted to know



“more”—that obnoxious Oliver word—about every category of user. All novelists, all poets,<sup>2</sup> all Dickens, all Victorian architects and decorators and landscape designers, used “yellow” in this other way? Even Dickens—the only one I briefly tested—used “yellow” as an element in a lady’s dressing table, and perhaps thereby as an enhancement of her beauty; *Pickwick Papers*, ch. 22, serial edition: “Mr. Pickwick journeys to Ipswich, and meets with a romantic adventure with a middle-aged lady in yellow curl papers.” What about the fruiterers “radiant in their glory [...] pears and apples clustered high in blooming pyramids, [...] Norfolk Biffins, squab and swarthy, setting off the yellow of oranges and lemons [...] The very gold and silver fish [...] went gasping round and round their little world in slow and passionless excitement” (*A Christmas Carol*, Third Stave, Morgan Library transcription of MSS). Just two examples, but they serve to illustrate Dickens’s use of color to raise a variety of feelings and associations. It would be possible, using the Gutenberg electronic editions, to word search “yellow” across the Dickens corpus, to see how it is used. And the editors of *Connotations* tell me that the best way to discover “yellow” in all of Dickens’s novels is to use the CLiC concordance at <https://click.bham.ac.uk>.<sup>3</sup>

What this essay does is make one [me, at least] want to do that. It is clear that Quabeck has identified a significant way Dickens used “yellow.” But does it always signify “both the literal and metaphorical imprisonment in and of old age”?

Three other issues floated across my scattered mind. In the era of using natural dyes, up to the mid-nineteenth-century, yellow was derivable from many plants—Queen Anne’s lace, onion skins, turmeric, and marigold, for instance—and used in a lot in fabrics. When the coal-tar aniline dyes proliferated, and chemists found other means of enhancing color (e.g., arsenic for green) some authorities hated the vulgar brightness that resulted: Turner relished chrome yellow, but M. Paul in *Villette*, William Morris, Whistler, and William Holman Hunt thought the new hues vulgar. So perhaps “yellow” because too luminous?

Secondly, one needs to credit Dickens with being observant. His descriptions of prisoners did, if anything, moderate the awful smells and

filth of their bodies and environments. Contact with sweat and coal tar dust and other pollutants yellowed white shirt collars—still does. And when blood-vessels break apart in jaundice, bilirubin turns cheeks yellow. This happens sometimes in infants at birth as well as in persons with high blood pressure at any stage of life. And, as this essay mentions, jaundice appeared frequently on faces in city streets. So some of the yellow of incarceration is the hue of jaundice and bilirubin, and is probably so recorded by many describing unhealthy conditions, in and outside prisons. I do not know Monika Fludernik's book. I should. I have been reading a history of early nineteenth century London jails and prisons, and they were fetid in the extreme.

Finally—and Quabeck's note (see 15n1) brings this up—yellow takes up other associations later in the Victorian period: as a racial mark for Asians; also as a publisher's mark for a certain kind of publication—French erotic paperbacks dressed in yellow wrappers, so adopted for *The Yellow Book*; and painters showed loose women in green rather than yellow environments, associated with illicit and toxic practices.

None of these “sidebars” directly apply to the analyses of Dickens's uses of yellow in the particular examples analyzed here. But they do raise the question of whether Dickens has a color “logic” or simply uses “yellow” where it would be found in decaying houses and bodies, as a potent element in his Gothic depictions of wasting lives. For noting that usage, whether or not it is a “logic” or a pervasive practice, this article is well worth reading. I thank Franziska Quabeck and the staff of *Connotations* for bringing it to my attention.

Rice University  
Houston, TX

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See e.g. Mighall 39-45 (on *Oliver Twist*), 69-77 (on *Bleak House*), and 103-14. I just ran across Mahawatte who claims that “Gothic writing functions as a crucial binding force within Eliot's novels, contributing to the ethical framework of the writing” (4).

<sup>2</sup>The play of white against yellows and gold in Tennyson's "The Last Tournament" might be of interest to color scholars.

<sup>3</sup>When using the concordance, one will find 166 hits for "yellow" in Dickens's novels; see <https://cllc.bham.ac.uk/concordance?conc-q=yellow&conc-subset=all&conc-type=whole&corpora=corpus%3ADNov&kwic-span=-5%3A5&table-filter=&table-type=basic>.

## WORKS CITED

- Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol: The Original Manuscript Edition*. New York: Norton, 2016.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*. 20 numbers in 19 parts. London: Chapman and Hall, 1836-37.
- Federico, Annette. "Dickens and Disgust." *Dickens Studies Annual* 29 (2000): 145-61.
- Mahawatte, Royce. *George Eliot and the Gothic Novel: Genres, Gender, Feeling*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013.
- Mighall, Robert. *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares*. Oxford: OUP, 1999.

# Kinship and the River Cam: George Herbert's Anthropocentrism Reconsidered

SARAH CROVER

*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 33 (2024): 159-180.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-crover-2](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-crover-2)

---

This article is the third entry in a debate on "George Herbert and Nature" (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/george-herbert-and-nature>). Further contributions to this debate are welcome, please contact [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

*Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate* (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

---

## Abstract

George Herbert's devotional poetry, with its minute attention to the natural world, ought to be well suited to early modern scholars with an ecocritical bent. However, his work is frequently dismissed as disappointingly anthropocentric or simply as a poor fit for ecological readings of the early modern literary canon. With a few exceptions, a more egalitarian reading of Herbert's engagement with nature has been largely resisted. This article aims to address this lack and reexamine Herbert's relationship with nature. I read Herbert's writing as revealing an investment in a flatter ontological hierarchy than he is usually given credit for. While the debate about how much agency Herbert is willing to ascribe to the nonhuman in his poetry continues, little time has been spent comparing this work with his engagement with the natural world in his prose letters. Specifically, four Latin letters protesting the proposed drainage of the River Cam in 1620 merit more attention than they have received in this debate and may help, I suggest, clarify his position since they provide insight into how he applied his thinking in practice, not just in theory. Ultimately, Herbert's anthropocentric engagement with the natural world is nuanced by his figuring of the relationship between humans and nature as one of familial kinship.

George Herbert's devotional poetry, with its minute attention to the natural world, ought to be well suited to early modern scholars with an

ecocritical bent. However, his work is frequently dismissed as disappointingly anthropocentric (see, for example, Borlik; Fudge; and Ralph) or simply as a poor fit for ecological readings of the early modern literary canon and passed over with only a glancing reference in discussions of nature writers of the period. Even those who are willing to give Herbert the benefit of the doubt tend to assume his engagement with nonhuman nature is limited by a classically influenced Christian worldview that significantly subordinates nature to humans on the *scala naturae* (see Bushnell). With a few exceptions (see, for instance, Glimp; Zane Calhoun Johnson; and Remien), a more egalitarian reading of Herbert's engagement with nature has been largely resisted. This article aims to address this lack and reexamine Herbert's relationship with nature. Without intending to wholly discount ecocritical critiques, I read Herbert's work as revealing an investment in a flatter ontological hierarchy than he is usually given credit for. While the debate about just what degree of agency Herbert is willing to ascribe to the nonhuman in his poetry continues, little time has been spent comparing this work with his engagement with the natural world in his prose letters. Specifically, four Latin letters protesting the proposed drainage of the River Cam (hereafter "Cam") in 1620, written during his time as Cambridge's Public Orator, merit more attention than they have received in this debate and may help, I suggest, clarify his position since they provide insight into how he applied his thinking in practice, not just in theory.<sup>1</sup>

This article is a companion piece to the four other essays (by Angela Balla, Katie Calloway, Paul Dyck, and Debra Rienstra) in this debate on "George Herbert and Nature" in *Connotations*: we come to different conclusions, but each of us reexamines Herbertian conceptions of nature.<sup>2</sup> While not primarily ecological in focus, these other essays support, as mine does, a more nuanced vision of Herbert's supposed anthropocentrism. My primary focus is on Herbert's Latin letters and the insight they give into his practical application of his beliefs; however, I join the others in drawing upon samples of his devotional poetry, "Providence" and "Man," to make my case.

Although the relationship between humans and God remains firmly at the centre of Herbert's universe, I contend that his anthropocentric engagement with the natural world is nuanced by his figuring of the relationship between humans and nature as one of familial kinship—a hierarchical family, true, but still a family where every member owes a necessary duty of care to the other. In both his devotional poetry and his letters as Public Orator, Herbert's language conveys a vision of shared responsibility for correct preservation of nature. This kind of biblically motivated "good steward" model is not unique, but it does complicate received wisdom about Herbert as a nature writer. No matter how paternal in structure, a kin relationship necessitates a view that the natural world is owed something in return for its service. Moreover, such a framing of reciprocal duty shared among humans and nature as coparticipants in a family is unusual (though not unheard of) among the early modern intelligentsia.<sup>3</sup> When viewed side by side, Herbert's poems "Providence" and "Man" articulate more clearly what is only touched upon in his letters regarding the Cam: that God's created world is owed good stewardship and pastoral care by its human "high Priests" ("Providence" l. 13) in recognition of its shared kinship with humanity.

### The Clergyman and the Critics

The question of where Herbert stands on the position of humanity in the natural world is a vexed one. Scholars often struggle to reconcile his apparent anthropocentrism with his keen attention to and obvious respect for the minutiae of nonhuman creation. Perhaps for this reason, Herbert is not a favourite choice when it comes to ecocritical studies of early modern nature writing.<sup>4</sup> As Peter Remien notes, "Herbert has not been the subject of much ecocritical inquiry, [though] scholars have long noted the 'ecological' dynamics of 'Providence'" (116).<sup>5</sup> Those who do directly engage with his work can be quite dismissive. Laura Ralph notes that Herbert's nature poetry "reasserts the prevailing framework [of anthropocentrism] without question" (23), while Todd Borlik, in

his ecocritical anthology *Literature and Nature in the English Renaissance*, introduces the Herbert entry by calling him “outrageously anthropocentric,” referring to his devotional poetry as “radiat[ing] a sense of being miraculously at home in a bespoke world where everything has been designed for human comfort and delight” (“George Herbert” 70).<sup>6</sup> Borlik does modulate this position elsewhere in the same text, acknowledging that works like Herbert’s “Providence” which “envision nature as a holy temple seem to articulate—albeit with a theological rather than an ecological vocabulary—a commandment to see and treat the environment more holistically” (15), but the disappointment in the aside—“theological rather than ecological vocabulary”—is unmistakable.

Even when they are not dismissing Herbert, ecocritically minded scholars frequently are tepid in their acknowledgements. In “Renaissance Literature and the Environment,” Borlik allows that “[d]evotional poets such as George Herbert might regard other creatures as humanity’s servants, yet the belief that Providence operated within the environment could foster an intimation of ecological principles” (n.p.). This provisional endorsement gives the overall sense that any Herbertian gestures towards a more inclusive engagement with nature are more accidental than intentional. Similarly, Rebecca Bushnell, in speaking of the Western tradition generally, notes that, while belief in “human exceptionalism and supremacy over all other living things” was commonplace, the deep entanglement of humans in the natural world always undermined that sense of privilege” (3).<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is material reality that forces these thinkers to question their anthropocentrism, not their own ideological inclinations. While Bushnell does not mention Herbert directly in this quotation, she may well have him in mind as one of these thinkers. In her anthology section titled “Plants” (where she includes Herbert’s poem “Rose”), Bushnell observes,

premodern cultures attributed to plants astonishing powers, expressed in the notion of a plant’s “virtues,” omnipresent in early natural history, herbal medicine, and magic [...]. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “virtue” may denote “the power inherent in a thing; [...] for plants, a virtue is then “power to affect the body in a beneficial manner; strengthening, sustaining,

or healing power." The key word here is power, granting plants a form of agency expressed through action in animal bodies. (73-74)

Again, Bushnell suggests that, despite being preconditioned towards anthropocentrism, early modern writers like Herbert did have the capacity to assign a kind of agency to nonhuman creatures that would seem to challenge that human exceptionalism, but they rarely did so.

There are some notable exceptions to this reading of Herbert's engagement with nonhuman creation. David Glimp points out that Herbert's creatures in "Providence" are more than mere obedient servants to man and ultimately "take on a conciliar function, and guide the poet's own writing. Devotion originates not with mankind, but with the advice of the created world" (126). Peter Remien, building upon Glimp's version of a more egalitarian Herbert, notes that his "attentiveness to the creature leads to a quasi-sublime rapture before the creature" (114) and suggests "the collective oeconomy established by the nonhuman creation supplies Herbert with a model of divine government superior to human life" (115).<sup>8</sup> Glimp and Remien thus allow for a Herbert who is enraptured by and seeks lessons from the natural world, rather than simply relegating it to the status of obedient human tool. Similarly, Zane Calhoun Johnson suggests that in "Man" Herbert envisions a kind of benevolent entanglement "between the human body and its environment" (128). Challenging accusations of Herbert's supposed extreme anthropocentrism, Johnson argues that his positive version of human and environmental enmeshment at least makes space for a beneficial, shared ecological relationship (129-30). On this subject, Ken Hiltner observes,

George Herbert considers the far-reaching implications of losing indigenous species: "More servants wait on man / Than he'll take notice of; in ev'ry path / He treads down that which doth befriend him, / When sickness makes him pale and wan." Herbert's point is that even the seemingly insignificant plants we marginalize might well be the "herbs [that] gladly cure our flesh" in time of sickness. (144)



Hiltner notes a deep concern for the natural world in “Man,” above and beyond its usefulness to us, as peopled with friends who are overlooked and “tread[] down” by “man.” However, he stops short of acknowledging an impulse in Herbert to push back against anthropocentric cosmologies.

Curiously, for a text on environmental protest literature in the period, Hiltner does not discuss Herbert’s own protest letters about the proposed alterations to the Cam: he is either unaware of or uninterested in this application of theory to practice, and, indeed, none of the previously discussed authors make reference to these letters either. For the most part, these authors merely focus on a smattering of Herbert’s most obviously nature-oriented poems (such as “Providence” and “Man”) and overlook his prose writing. The impression forms that he is “outrageously anthropocentric” with occasional glimmers of broad-mindedness, which, I argue, falls far short of a balanced understanding of Herbert’s ecological engagement.

### Defending the Cam

George Herbert’s opposition to the draining of the River Cam was practical and economical, as we will see, but a second look reveals less mercenary concerns as well. In the early seventeenth century, the Crown was considering a project to drain the fens feeding the Cam and Ouse. As Catherine Freis and Greg Miller note, “King James hoped to decrease the flooding common to the low-lying area and increase its agricultural productivity and had appointed two agents to oversee the project, which did not move forward until after his reign” (Introduction vi). George Herbert, and other Cambridge loyalists, vehemently opposed the project’s potential impact on the Cam, which flows through the city and the university. Herbert was Cambridge’s Public Orator during this period,<sup>9</sup> so he was well-placed to protest this plan, and several of his letters regarding this matter survive. In his capacity as Public Orator, “Herbert solicit[ed] the aid of the powerful on behalf of Cambridge University against those [who supported the project.] Herbert

and his colleagues feared the result would be to lower the water level of the river, making transportation of goods and people far more difficult, or impossible" (vi).<sup>10</sup> A meeting of the Privy Council was held on the proposed draining, "led by the King, on April 11, 1620, attended by Greville, Naunton, and representatives of Cambridge University and the town" (Freis and Miller, "Notes" 126). Ultimately the project collapsed because an agreement could not be reached between the Commissioners and the undertakers (see Hutchinson 605, qtd. in Freis and Miller, "Notes" 126), and those against the draining celebrated a temporary victory (the project was carried out in fits and starts from 1625 onward, although it was not completed until the 1650s; see Ash 14).<sup>11</sup> It is during this period, after April 1620, that four Latin letters were written by Herbert, all titled *gratiae de fluevio*, i.e. thanks concerning the river. Recorded in *The Orator's Book* (see Freis and Miller, "Notes" 127), Herbert thanks various powerful figures, including the meeting attendees, for the preservation of the river.<sup>12</sup>

Herbert's letter to James I is the most circumspect, but still gives a clear sense of his/Cambridge's opposition. Since the King himself originally supported the project, Herbert's expressions of relief at the project's failure necessitated careful phrasing. His letter to James already emphasizes in its heading that his thanks is regarding the river and "against the contractors" (*gratiae de fluuio contra Redemptores*, Herbert "[To King James]" 44), suggesting he is taking pains to avoid any implication that he is criticizing the king.<sup>13</sup> This specification of subject matter is absent in the titles of his other three letters. After the salutation and appropriate opening flattery and obeisance, Herbert thanks the King for gifting Cambridge the Cam, implying that rather than the project collapsing, James offered those opposed to the project a clear "triumph" by acknowledging the rightness of their position: "your most humble subjects [...] celebrate a triumph when we are given a whole River by our King" (44).<sup>14</sup>

Herbert is more direct in his letters to friends and colleagues Francis Bacon, Fulke Greville,<sup>15</sup> and Robert Naunton.<sup>16</sup> While not implicating

James, his descriptions of the other proponents of the project are scathing. In Letter Six, to Robert Naunton, Secretary of State, Herbert thanks him for preserving the Cam from would-be fen drainers, calling them "Xerxes" and "Scourgers of the seas" (51).<sup>17</sup> He is alluding here to Xerxes' retaliation against waters of the Hellespont, for drowning his bridge, by ordering them to be scourged with 300 lashes.<sup>18</sup> Herbert then deliberately conflates the drying out of the land and potential lowering of river levels (which would affect the Cam's navigability and the university's status as a cultural and trade hub) with the drying up of the knowledge the Cambridge "muses" thirst for.<sup>19</sup> He makes a similar case to Francis Bacon in Letter Five,<sup>20</sup> congratulating him on his success in defending the navigability of the river by "grind[in]g into powder" their enemies (49).<sup>21</sup> Playing on the adage that "a dry soul is wisest," he notes that without Bacon's assistance Cambridge was in danger of becoming so dry that its scholars would "not [be] so much wise as out-of-the-way philosophers" (47).<sup>22</sup> In his flamboyant praise of Bacon, Naunton, and Greville, for having scotched the project, he makes their support a question of loyalty to the Alma Mater, congratulating them on considering Cambridge as a mother and they her sons who cannot tolerate the drying up of the riverine breasts from which they have formerly drunk, and saying they have done well to pay their debt. It should be noted that, while these men were instrumental in scuttling the plan, there can be no certainty that they were wholly opposed to the draining of the fens in general or altering the Cam in particular. As Freis and Miller note (see "Notes" 126), the letter to James appears to be more of an exercise in attempting to stave off future draining projects than acknowledging strong support in blocking the project. Even his framing of the project's failure to launch as a kingly gift of the river to Cambridge implies an intentional transaction, which, while a very optimistic interpretation of events, is also a clear-eyed massaging of facts that wrongfoots the king should he attempt to withdraw his supposed gift. Herbert's words to his peers similarly read like an exhortation to remember their duty to their Alma Mater rather than an acknowledgment of a shared goal. Repeatedly he thanks them for their support of

their "Nurturing Mother" (Herbert, "Ad R. Naunton" 51). He places no period on this support: he asks Greville to "keep up the good work" of defending the river (53).<sup>23</sup> The kinship ties he establishes between alumni and the university are as enduring, he seems to suggest, as the kinship ties of flesh and blood. In Herbert's representation of the matter, a failure to prevent the project would amount to a familial betrayal of both the river and university. These letters present a masterful guilt trip that aims to forestall any backsliding; for who, as Herbert says, "would be able to tolerate the dry nipples and parched breasts of such a noble parent without a sense of distress?" ("Ad R. Naunton" 51).<sup>24</sup>

While Herbert's elegant political maneuvering reveals considerable artistry, especially a talent for painting a verbal picture, it is his treatment of the Cam as kin that is most revealing for the purposes of this paper. His rhetorical treatment of the parties involved in this dispute as tyrants or heroes may seem to pursue a reductive line of reasoning, but when he moves to discussing the debts owed to the interested non-human parties—the university and the river—he displays a surprisingly nuanced vision, particularly for a thinker who has been accused of displaying a "rigidly hierarchical anthropocentrism" in his poetry (Fudge 3-4, qtd. in Glimp 195). Herbert refers to Cambridge university using the conventional term for one's home university, the *Alma Mater* or "Nourishing Mother," but then intensifies the kinship association by extending the metaphor to the graduates and beneficiaries of the university by calling them her "sons" in his letter to Naunton (51). Cambridge becomes their "noble parent" and nurse from whose breasts they "drank" (51).<sup>25</sup> In elaborating on the conceit, Herbert subordinates the humans to the human-created and human-serving institution in the familial hierarchy. Then he further extends the metaphor, and the network of kinship, to the Cam. By praising Cambridge's "sons" for keeping "Those Springs, from which they themselves once drank, intact for her" ("Ad R. Naunton" 51), he makes the metonymic link between river Cam and Cambridge, and metaphorically links them both to knowledge, depicting the river as the inextricable and critical milk or

life blood of the larger institutional body, which is elevated in importance above those “sons” by “for her.” Thus, the Cam is as much kin, as a part of the whole, as Cambridge is. This envisioned kinship, while anthropomorphic, disrupts the traditional hierarchal structure of the chain of being, since it arguably places the needs of two nonhuman entities on equal footing with those of the humans they serve. Herbert’s framing of the relationship calls to mind the fifth commandment, which requires children to honour their parents (see Exod. 20:12). In all but his letter to James, Herbert emphasizes duty and service of sons to their mother university, and he takes care each time to make the river an inseparable part of that mother. The river may figure as an instrumental good in his letter, but by strategically framing it as part of Alma Mater, he is able to argue that it holds a place of critical intrinsic worth amongst its “sons,” and is therefore owed the respect and obedience usually reserved for human kin. This was not the only rhetorical move available to Herbert.<sup>26</sup> He could just as easily have chosen to emphasize how the God-given river was meant to serve humans, and that this project represented a misguided stewardship of an important resource, or that its careful taming to the hand of man would be squandered—these kinds of metaphors are readily available and frequently employed in the same period in discussions of other rivers, such as the Thames. For instance, Edmund Spenser describes the London Thames in Book Three of the *Faerie Queene* (1590) as a wild horse that only the English can master. The Thames is controlled by Troynovant (proto-London), who has subdued him: “Vpon [Thames’] stubborne neck whereat he raues / With roring rage, and sore him selfe does throng, / That all men feare to tempt his billowes strong, / She fastned hath her foot” (3.11.45.3-6).<sup>27</sup> This brutal depiction of breaking the river into service, by placing its neck under the English capital’s heel, precludes mutual love and service, much less kinship. William Camden, in his chorographic poem *De Connubio Tamae et Isis*, is less violent in his figurations, but his description of the river leaves no room for misunderstanding the natural world’s subordination to humanity. Interleaved through his prose

work *Britannia* (1610), *De Connubio* has the personified river offer homage to Elizabeth I. While describing the geographic location of the royal castle of Windsor on the banks of the river, Thames pauses: "therewith Tamis seeming to bow his knee, / And gently crouch, obeisance made, and then he thus went on," continuing his praise of the queen (Camden 289-90).<sup>28</sup> Camden thus makes a topographical fact (that the castle is situated on a river bend) serve as evidence of the river's willing subordination to and service of the crown, and, by extension, the English people. Herbert would certainly be aware of these and other characterizations of English rivers, but they do not appear to influence his own rhetorical approach. Instead, he refuses these options and insists upon a model where a familial relationship and reciprocal duty between human and nonhuman parties is envisioned.

Besides emphasizing our kinship with the Cam by prescribing filial duties to her, Herbert also argues that contractors aiming to drain the fens and alter the Cam embody a kind of overstepping or theft of the duties of other natural bodies and weather systems, such as the sun and droughts. His letter to Greville claims that the contractors are "stealing the sun's job" (53),<sup>29</sup> and his letter to Bacon likewise suggests that the contractors seek to "illegally" (47) drain the waters.<sup>30</sup> In Herbert's world view, human interventions that alter the rivers and fens from their appointed state are an unsanctioned and even criminal enterprise. He describes recent droughts as having "scoffed" at the plan and done "more than a thousand contractors could" (47).<sup>31</sup> The sun and the drought are allowable intervenors, carrying out a "job"; humans are stepping outside the hierarchal chain of service and throwing things out of balance.<sup>32</sup> This figuration of human and non-human actors as squabbling over their duties is reminiscent of a large unruly family; it also deliberately blurs boundaries between human and nonhuman creatures, yet again challenging the popular notion of a Herbertian cosmology where humans stand firmly separate from and above the rest of creation.

Leaning into his watery conceit, Herbert dissolves boundaries in another way. In each of his letters, Herbert moves seamlessly between the

literal river and the metaphorical one. As his words make clear, he means both that they have literally drunk the river waters, and that they have drunk the knowledge supplied from Mother Cambridge, and that neither one can survive with the proposed changes to the river. He laments, "No reasonable person doubts that without water and short on provisions, the colleges would be abandoned, and the Muses' marvelous abodes like forgotten widows, or sapless and withered trees, would be stripped of her foster sons" ("Ad R. Naunton" 51).<sup>33</sup> At once pragmatic and hyperbolic, Herbert blends mundane concerns of bodily nourishment and commerce (the river would still be the most reliable thoroughfare for trade and transportation in this era), with the more ethereal concerns of knowledge acquisition and spiritual nourishment. A true university man, he is acutely aware that the two go hand in hand: one kind of drinking is impossible without the other. Each time, he deftly reminds the reader of familial ties: the loss of the river, he argues, would be equivalent to destruction of the college, and the college/river would become like "forgotten widows" (51). That he is thinking of both the university and the Cam when he describes these widowed, "marvelous abodes" of muses is clear because he uses this metaphor again in his letter to James, where he reminds him that rivers in general, and a university river in particular, are places they delight in and inhabit. While thanking his king for the gift of the river, in his perhaps most pointed statement to James, he observes, "since [the muses] once delighted in Rivers, you now bestow upon us the waters they inhabit!" (45).<sup>34</sup> Muse, river, university, and man are all kin and should be treated accordingly. Even a king should not break up a family.

As Freis and Miller point out, "we find in [Herbert's letters] many tropes and habits of mind that are also evident in his English and Latin poems" (Introduction vi). This echoing of habits and tropes suggests we can draw from them a sense of how he was thinking about the natural world in general, and the River Cam more specifically. These letters reveal two key insights about Herbert's habit of mind. The first is the choice of metaphor: as I have already discussed above, Herbert

chooses to figure the Cam and Cambridge as parts of the same, critically important nourishing motherly body, even though he had other, well-recognized, figurative options available to him. The second is the way this argument, making humankind owe loyalty and service to the University/river (rather than the other way around), might be seen by those who style Herbert as entirely anthropocentric as an odd subversion of his usual stance. However, upon closer inspection, that sense of loyalty and care is also present in "Man" and "Providence," and it is to this point I turn now, by way of conclusion.

### Herbert's Creaturely Kin in His Devotional Poetry

"Providence" and "Man" are two poems that are frequently used to indict Herbert for subordinating creation, but they merit a second look. It cannot be said that he avoids entirely the trap of paternalism or anthropocentrism, but it is only fair, in light of his letters, to reexamine what we believe we know about Herbert as a thinker and poet. An in-depth exploration of his devotional poems is outside the scope of this paper, but I will touch upon them here briefly to illustrate how well their preoccupations dovetail with the ideas expressed in his letters.

At first glance, his poem "Providence" presents a straightforward styling of the natural world as subordinate to humans. For example, the speaker asserts that

Man is the worlds high Priest: he doth present  
The sacrifice for all; while they below  
Unto the service mutter an assent,  
Such as springs use that fall, and windes that blow.  
(l.13-16)

This figuration could suggest that, while not without some agency, the rest of nature are the obedient congregants who are left to "mutter assent" to the higher prayers and wisdom of the priestly Man. However, these lines can be interpreted another way. Rienstra, on the one hand,



notes that, while "Providence" makes clear distinctions between human and animal identity, it "subtly question[s] a simple view of human superiority" (148), and "Man" moves from a comfortable sense of "human superiority" to the "last two stanzas [...] [which] hint[] that human superiority is not automatic" and can be "squandered" (149). Dyck, on the other hand, comments, "[t]he boldness of Herbert's declaration of human priesthood is necessary because that rule constitutes the imperative to listen and receive" (273). Calloway traces the influence of Lucretius and particularly Epicurean atomism in Herbert's development of a theology of nature more inclusive than that proposed by Aristotle (see 115). Finally, Balla, in exploring Herbert's great intellectual debt to Gerson, highlights Gerson's ascription of "intrinsic spiritual significance" to all creatures that is mirrored at least in the conclusion of "Providence" (311). She notes that the speaker ultimately "leans toward Christian kinship" (307) with the rest of creation.

Like my co-contributors, I see more space for fellowship among creatures than strict hierarchy in this poem. While Man may be the high priest and favourite beneficiary of nature's wealth, Herbert makes clear that this bounty should not be abused, nor the care unreciprocated. In "Providence," he pointedly notes,

Bees work for man; and yet they never bruise  
 Their masters flower, but leave it, having done,  
 As fair as ever, and as fit to use;  
 So both the flower doth stay, and hony run.

Sheep eat the grasse, and dung the ground for more:  
 Trees after bearing drop their leaves for soil:  
 (l.65-70)

The consistent theme is one of reciprocity and balance: never take too much, do not befoul your resources, use nature's gifts with due care. This position chimes nicely with his styling of the Cam as part of a motherly body that deserves respect and protection. While this approach is not unproblematic, Herbert seems to take quite seriously both the powers and duties of humanity.<sup>35</sup> In a time where hierarchy was

usually viewed as a positive and natural structure, a benevolent patriarch who takes seriously his responsibility to look after his human and environmental kin is at least several steps away from the "outrageous" anthropocentrism of which he is accused. Moreover, his styling of Man as "high Priest" bears careful consideration. From a modern and secular perspective this term can take on a more negative valence than it would for Herbert and his contemporaries. As a clergyman himself, he would be intimately associated with the ideals of pastoral care expected of a priest for his flock. While "high Priest" might suggest to us heavy-handed power, as well as obscure, overwrought religious practices, in practical terms the priest, Rabbi, or minister of a congregation was always ultimately held responsible for the spiritual and often physical well-being of his congregants.<sup>36</sup> As Dyck highlights, "Herbert's priest figure here is not a worldly master but the gardener-parson-poet who attends to the wisdom of each creature in a world in which use and wonder accompany each other" (274). Herbert, we know from poems such as "The Windows" as well as the whole of *The Country Parson*, took the responsibilities of priesthood very seriously. While he held the position of leader and elucidator of holy mysteries, the priest must answer to God for any "sheep" he lost along the way. The head of a congregation was expected to prioritize the needs of his parishioners. Herbert would know that no aspect of the life of his parish would be too trivial to merit the attention of a truly dedicated minister. The Anglican minister feeds (the Eucharist), educates, and advises his flock. Reading Herbert's words through the lens of practical pastoral care, rather than as a simple metaphor, changes the way we read "high Priest." It is a subtle but significant difference: rather than some distant hierophant, we have instead someone who takes on an intimate, parental relationship with his flock. Even the terms "pastoral" and "flock" remind us of the non-human imagery associated with Christian fellowship in a community in which Christ is the Lamb of God. Thus, I argue, the meaning of the words in these lines is considerably blurred. The animals may only mutter assent to the high Priest Man, and he may be the holder of

power and wisdom, but it is done on their behalf, with very real and accountable (to God) consequences if he should fail in his priestly care.

A similar nuancing of this hierarchy can be traced in Herbert's "Man."<sup>37</sup> Herbert states,

For us the windes do blow,  
The earth doth rest, heav'n move, and fountains flow.  
Nothing we see, but means our good, (l.25-27)

In these lines the natural world seems reduced to a storehouse of food and tools for human easement. However, Herbert's stanza describing the world as arranged entirely for us, is more complex than it might at first appear:

Nothing we see, but means our good,  
As our *delight*, or as our *treasure*:  
The whole is, either our cupboard of *food*,  
Or cabinet of *pleasure*. (ll. 27-30)

The lines in the second part of the stanza clearly suggest a commodification of the world.<sup>38</sup> However, I argue, they also suggest the preciousness of that world. The words "delight," "treasure," and "cabinet of pleasure" generally suggest something beyond utilitarian servants and tools. They gesture toward cherished possessions that are a source of joy and wonder, a series of beautiful *objets d'art* that are good in and of themselves. This styling of the world suggests that our modern suspicion of hierarchy may perhaps lead us to miss that Herbert is quite genuine in his wonder and concern for nature, even if he does see humans as rulers over it.

Herbert is understudied as an early modern nature writer by modern scholars. Few attempt to trace how his thinking about the natural world influenced his engagement with nature in daily life, yet, as I have argued, to consider the relationship between theory and practice in Herbert's life is critical to our understanding of his attitude to the nonhuman world. His writings as Public Orator provide us with a unique window into how this deeply spiritual intellect applied his thinking in the public sphere, in an arena that he knew would have very concrete,

material consequences. The lines from Matthew were never more relevant here: "by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt. 7:20). Herbert's fruits, in his letters in defense of the Cam and the university, illustrate a habit of thought that resists easy categorizations of him as unapologetically anthropocentric. His characterization of the Cam as honoured kin, rather than obedient serf, challenges past readings of Herbert as a man who is comfortable with a recklessly commodified and subordinate nature. His insistence, in his letters, of the human duty to the non-human Alma Mater, adds further weight to readings of his devotional poetry that find evidence of a more nuanced, inclusive vision of the relationship between humanity and nature in Herbert's cosmology. Ultimately, as his letters suggest, Herbert's vision of our place in the world can be most accurately described as one of complex kinship networks, with hierarchal but deeply compassionate and symbiotic relationships.

Vancouver Island University  
Nanaimo, BC

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Herbert wrote many letters, in addition to those on the draining of the Cam, during his time as Cambridge's Public Orator. Thus, while a compilation of his university letters in Cambridge's *Orator's Book* records that he wrote four letters on the subject, they are interspersed with unrelated letters. To maintain consistency with my source (Greg Miller and Catherine Freis's *George Herbert's Latin Prose: Orationes et Epistolae* (2017-18)), his four Cam letters are numbered four, five, six, and seven in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>I am grateful to all my co-contributors for giving me access to earlier drafts of their papers, and to Katie Calloway and Angela Balla, in particular, for their feedback.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Marvell, for instance, is a notable exception.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Marvell is a much more popular choice from the era.

<sup>5</sup>Zane Calhoun Johnson similarly notes this oversight, when it comes to Herbert in particular, and "the Metaphysical poets more generally" (129).

<sup>6</sup>See also Erica Fudge's *Perceiving Animals*. David Glimp observes that she "specifically addresses "Providence" as offering among the most transparent statements of the rigidly hierarchical anthropomorphism she locates in early modern England" (195n30).

<sup>7</sup>Bushnell directs readers to the work of Bach; Raber; Feerick and Nardizzi; and Yamamoto for corroboration (3).

<sup>8</sup>Remien also points to McColley; Schoenfeldt; and Nicholas Johnson for literary criticism that at least note the positive ecological bent of Herbert's works.

<sup>9</sup>According to Jacqueline Cox, "the office required the writing of eloquent addresses and official letters in Latin to the sovereign and other important individuals and institutions [...]. The University continues to employ an Orator" even today (n.p.).

<sup>10</sup>Given that Herbert is speaking as the mouthpiece of the university in these letters, it would be naïve to assume the words on the page are his unfiltered personal beliefs. Miller and Freis succinctly summarize his role thus: "As Cambridge University Orator, Herbert wrote or spoke formally on behalf of the University [...] Herbert was to speak for an institution, and he was unflaggingly attentive to his audience and context" (Miller and Freis, Introduction viii). Herbert himself makes explicit this positioning when he is coaching Creighton, his replacement at Cambridge, "emphasiz[ing] the rhetorical nature of his Correspondence: 'Carefully consider less what it may be fitting for you to write and more what it is fitting for your pen to write for the University' (Letter 18)" (vi). Herbert is highly aware of his different audiences and the different voices necessary to his various roles, and modulates his writing accordingly. However, it does not therefore follow that his comments about the preservation of the Cam were not somewhat reflective of his beliefs. Indeed, the passion with which he expresses himself (in his letter to Bacon), when denouncing the contractors as "dolt[s] in silks" (49), has a ring of ardent sincerity.

<sup>11</sup>For a detailed discussion of this complex project, see Ash's *The Draining of the Fens*.

<sup>12</sup>See Miller and Freis, "Notes" 126-27, for a discussion of the dating and numbering of these letters.

<sup>13</sup>All Latin quotations, and their translations, are taken from Greg Miller and Catherine Freis' edition of Herbert's extant Latin prose.

<sup>14</sup>*nos humillimos subiectos, integro Fluuio a Rege nostro do[na]tos, triumphare?* (Herbert, "[To King James]")

<sup>15</sup>Sir Fulke Greville (1554-1628), eventually titled Baron Brooke, was Commissioner of the Treasury for James I at the time Herbert was writing to him and had previously held several important court positions including chancellor and under-treasurer of the exchequer (see Freis and Miller, "Notes" 128). Like Naunton and Bacon, he was a graduate of Cambridge. He also mingled with the great intellects of his day, maintaining friendships with Bacon and Sir Philip Sidney, in addition to being a poet of note himself (128).

<sup>16</sup>Robert Naunton (1553-1635) held the position of Secretary of State from 1617-23 and eventually Burgess Elect. He was also a former Public Orator for Cambridge, and "was elected to Parliament to represent Cambridge University in January of 1620, and then again in 1624 and 1625. *Burgensis* (burgess) refers to a member of

Parliament representing a borough, corporate town, or university" (Freis and Miller, "Notes" 130).

<sup>17</sup>*Quarè plurimum debemus constantiae fauoris tui, qui restinxisti sitim exarescentium Musarum, et Xerxes istos, alterosque maris quasi Flagellatores expugnatos fusosque nobis dedisti* (Herbert, "Ad R. Naunton" 50).

<sup>18</sup>In his *Histories*, Herodotus wrote that Xerxes built a pontoon bridge across the Hellespont. When the bridge was destroyed by storms, enraged Xerxes ordered the waters of the Hellespont to be scourged with 300 lashes, commanding a pair of fetters to be lowered into its waters. Those who had designed the bridge or overseen its construction were ordered to be beheaded (7.35)" (Freis and Miller, "Notes" 128n1).

<sup>19</sup>For a discussion of the legal importance of maintaining the navigability of rivers in England, see the first chapter in Sarah Crover, *Stage and Street: The Cultural History of the Early Modern Thames*.

<sup>20</sup>While Herbert's friendship with Bacon (see Freis and Miller, Introduction vi) would be one reason for him to seek his support, in this letter he is writing to him in his official capacity as Orator, and treating Bacon in his official capacity, as Chancellor, as the wording makes plain: he addresses him as "Illustrissime Domine," gives him his formal title, "Cancellarius" (Herbert, "Ad F. Bacon" 46), and employs the "we" voice of the university rather than the personal "I" to speak about the Cam (48).

<sup>21</sup>*Tu verò Patrone noster, qui elegantias doctrinae nitoremque spirans purpuram et eruditionem miscuisti, dilue, fuga hos omnes, praesertim sericatam hanc stultitiam contere* (Herbert, "Ad F. Bacon" 46-48).

<sup>22</sup>*Siccam animam sapientissimam esse dixit obscurus ille philosophus; sane exorti sunt nuperi quidam homines, qui libenter sapientiores nos redderent: sed si ablatus fuisset Fluuius noster, per quem vicini agri opulentiâ fruimur, veremur, ne non tam sapientes nos, quam obscuros philosophos reddidissent* (Herbert, "Ad F. Bacon" 46).

<sup>23</sup>*Tantum rogamus, ut pergas, & inter novos honorum cumulos, quod expectamus indies futurum, Almae Matris amorem tecum simul evehas* (Herbert, "Ad. Ful. Grevil" 52).

<sup>24</sup>*Quis enim sicca vbera et mammas arentes tam nobilis parentis, aequo animo ferre posset?* (Herbert, "Ad R. Naunton" 50).

<sup>25</sup>*Quanta Hilaritate aspicit Alma Mater filios suos iam emancipatos, conservantes sibi Illos Fontes a quibus ipsi olim hauserunt?* (Herbert, "Ad R. Naunton" 50).

<sup>26</sup>See Calloway and Balla for an exploration of the influence Francis Bacon (a personal friend) and his oeuvre, had on Herbert's writing. With Calloway, I agree that, while Bacon's work shaped Herbert's, he diverges from him considerably in places, particularly in rejecting human mastery of nature (see 140n15).

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, the second chapter of Crover, *Stage and Street*, for a discussion of Spenser and Camden's treatment of the Thames.

<sup>28</sup>This is Philemon Holland's translation. The Latin original, from Camden's 1610 edition of the *Britannia*, reads: "(simulq[ue] suo quasi poplite flexo / Tamisis en placide subsidet, & inde profatur)" (Camden 289-90).

<sup>29</sup>*solem officio suo privantes* (Herbert, "Ad Ful. Grevil." 52).

<sup>30</sup>*Neque enim passus es illum Fluuium, qui tantae poeticae, t[an]tae eruditionis nobis conscius est, palustri opera & vliginosa intercipi* (Herbert, "Ad F. Bacon" 46).

<sup>31</sup>*Sed siccitas anni huius derisit incoeptum et plus effecit quam mille Redemptores exequi possent* (Herbert, "Ad F. Bacon" 46).

<sup>32</sup>Similarly, Dyck notes that Herbert elevates "natural" simples of herbs over human-made compound drugs in *The Country Parson* as both better for the body and innately the proper providers of physick (262-63).

<sup>33</sup>*neque sane dubitamus vlli, si prae defectu aquae, commeatûsque inopia, desererentur collegia, pulcherrimaeque Musarum domus tanquam viduae effoetae, aut ligna exvcca & marcida, alumni suis orbarentur, quin communes Reipublicae Lachrymae alterum nobis Fluuium effunderent* (Herbert, "Ad R. Naunton" 50).

<sup>34</sup>*Nuper enim dedisti nobis Librum, plenissimum Musarum, quae cum olim gauderent Fluuijs, nunc etiam aquas, in quibus habitant impertis[!]* (Herbert, [To King James] 44).

<sup>35</sup>For a detailed discussion of early modern stewardship, see Crover, "Gardening, Stewardship and Worn-out Metaphors."

<sup>36</sup>I am grateful to Katie Calloway for pointing out that Herbert is likely consciously invoking specifically Jewish priesthood with these words and could expect his contemporaries to recognize that connection.

<sup>37</sup>My reading here is similar to those of Dyck and Rienstra.

<sup>38</sup>On Herbert's supplanting the metaphor of a "book" of nature with a "cabinet" or household here and elsewhere in *The Temple*, see Calloway, *Literature and Natural Theology in Early Modern England* 92-96.

## WORKS CITED

- Ash, Eric. *The Draining of the Fens: Projectors, Popular Politics, and State Building in Early Modern England*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2022.
- Bach, Rebecca. *Birds and Other Creatures in Renaissance Literature: Shakespeare, Descartes, and Animal Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Balla, Angela. "Herbert and Gerson Reconsidered: Mystical Music and the Conciliarist Strain of Natural Law in 'Providence'." *Connotations* 33 (2024): 285-327. <https://www.connotations.de/article/herbert-and-gerson-reconsidered/>.
- Borlik, Todd Andrew. "George Herbert. 'Man' and 'Providence.'" *Literature and Nature in the English Renaissance: An Ecocritical Anthology*. Ed. Todd Borlik. Cambridge: CUP, 2019. 70-75.
- Borlik, Todd Andrew. Introduction. *Literature and Nature in the English Renaissance: An Ecocritical Anthology*. Ed. Todd Borlik. Cambridge: CUP, 2019. 1-23.
- Borlik, Todd Andrew. "Renaissance Literature and the Environment." *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Literature*. 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1311>. 27 May 2024.



- Bushnell, Rebecca. *The Marvels of the World: An Anthology of Nature Writing Before 1700*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2021.
- Calloway, Katie. "A Particular Trust: George Herbert and Epicureanism." *Connotations* 32 (2023): 114-44. <https://www.connotations.de/article/a-particular-trust-george-herbert-and-epicureanism/>.
- Calloway, Katie. *Literature and Natural Theology in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: CUP, 2023.
- Camden, William. *Britain, or a Chorographical Description of the Most Flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland*. Trans. Philemon Holland. London, 1610.
- Cox, Jacqueline. "'The finest place in the University': George Herbert (1593-1633), Public Orator." *Cambridge University Library Special Collections*. 4 Sept. 2020, <https://specialcollections-blog.lib.cam.ac.uk/?p=20632>. 27 May 2024.
- Crover, Sarah. "Gardening, Stewardship and Worn-Out Metaphors. Richard II and Justin Trudeau." *Early Modern Culture* 13 (2018): 152-63.
- Crover, Sarah. *Stage and Street: The Cultural History of the Early Modern Thames*. U of British Columbia, 2015.
- Dyck, Paul. "The Providential Rose: Herbert's Full Cosmos and Fellowship of Creatures." *Connotations* 33 (2024): 259-84. <https://www.connotations.de/article/the-providential-rose-herberts-full-cosmos-and-fellowship-of-creatures/>.
- Feerick, Jean, and Vin Nardizzi. *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Freis, Catherine, and Greg Miller. Introduction. *George Herbert's Latin Prose: Orations and Letters*. Ed. and trans. Catherine Freis and Greg Miller. Fairfield, CT: George Herbert Journal Special Studies & Monographs, 2020. v-xxviii.
- Freis, Catherine, and Greg Miller. "Notes." *George Herbert's Latin Prose: Orations and Letters*. Ed. and trans. Catharine Freis and Greg Miller. Fairfield, CT: George Herbert Journal Special Studies & Monographs, 2020. 97-138.
- McColley, Diane Kelsey. *Poetry and Ecology in the Age of Milton and Marvell*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.
- Fudge, Erica. *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture*. New York: St. Martin's P, 2000.
- Glimp, David. "Figuring Belief: Herbert's Devotional Creatures." *Go Figure: Energies, Forms, and Institutions in the Early Modern World*. Ed. Judith H. Anderson and Joan Pong Linton. New York: Fordham UP, 2011. 112-31.
- Herbert, George. *George Herbert's Latin Prose: Orations and Letters*. Ed. and trans. Catharine Freis and Greg Miller. Fairfield, CT: George Herbert Journal Special Studies & Monographs, 2020.
- Herbert, George. "Ad F. Bacon, Cancell. gratiae de fluuio [June 14, 1620] / To Francis Bacon, Chancellor Thanks Concerning the River [June 14, 1620]." *George Herbert's Latin Prose: Orations and Letters*. Ed. and trans. Catharine Freis and Greg Miller. Fairfield, CT: George Herbert Journal Special Studies & Monographs, 2020. 46-49.



- Herbert, George. "Ad Ful. Grevil. gratiae de Fluuio [June 14, 1620] / To Fulke Greville Thanks Concerning the River [June 14, 1620]." *George Herbert's Latin Prose: Orations and Letters*. Ed. and trans. Catharine Freis and Greg Miller. Fairfield, CT: George Herbert Journal Special Studies & Monographs, 2020. 52-53.
- Herbert, George. "Ad R. Naunton, Secret. gratiae de Fluuio / To Robert Naunton, Secretary of State Thanks Concerning the River." *George Herbert's Latin Prose: Orations and Letters*. Ed. and trans. Catharine Freis and Greg Miller. Fairfield, CT: George Herbert Journal Special Studies & Monographs, 2020. 50-51.
- Herbert, George. "[To King James] gratiae de fluuio contra Redemptores. 1620.14.Ju / [To King James] Thanks Concerning the River in Reply to the Contractors June 14, 1620." *George Herbert's Latin Prose: Orations and Letters*. Ed. and trans. Catharine Freis and Greg Miller. Fairfield, CT: George Herbert Journal Special Studies & Monographs, 2020. 44-45.
- Herbert, George. "Man." *The English Poems of George Herbert*. Ed. Helen Wilcox. Cambridge: CUP, 2007. 415-27.
- Herbert, George. "Providence." *The English Poems of George Herbert*. Ed. Helen Wilcox. Cambridge: CUP, 2007. 330-36.
- Hiltner, Ken. "Environmental Protest Literature of the Renaissance." *What Else is Pastoral? Renaissance Literature and the Environment*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2011. 125-55.
- Hutchinson, F. E. "Commentary." *The Works of George Herbert*. Ed. F. E. Hutchinson. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1941. 475-608.
- Johnson, Zane Calhoun. "'all Things Unto our Flesh are Kind': Corporality and Ecology in the Temple." *George Herbert Journal* 42.1 (2018): 128-45.
- Johnson, Nicholas. "Anima-tion at Little Gidding." *Early Modern Ecostudies: From the Florentine Codex to Shakespeare*. Ed. Thomas Hallock, Ivo Kamps and Karen Raber. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 145-65.
- Raber, Karen. *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2013.
- Ralph, Laura E. "'Why are we by all creatures waited on?': Situating John Donne and George Herbert in Early Modern Ecological Discourse." *Early Modern Studies Journal* 3 (2010): 1-17. <https://earlymodernstudiesjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/ralph3.pdf>
- Remien, Peter. *The Concept of Nature in Early Modern English Literature*. Cambridge: CUP, 2019.
- Rienstra, Debrah. "'I Wish I were a Tree': George Herbert and the Metamorphoses of Devotion." *Connotations* 32 (2023): 145-64. <https://www.connotations.de/article/debra-k-rienstra-i-wish-i-were-a-tree-george-herbert-and-the-metamorphoses-of-devotion/>.
- Schoenfeldt, Michael. *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton*. Cambridge: CUP, 2000.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Works of Spenser: The Faerie Queene*. A Variorum Edition. Vol 4. Ed. Ray Hefner. London: OUP, 1966.