

Noun Phrases in Parallel: Reading George Herbert's 'The Quidditie' and 'Prayer (I)'

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I

'Prayer (I)' is among George Herbert's most widely anthologised and best-known poems, and has been a focus of attention among scholars and general readers alike. T. S. Eliot, contrasting it with John Donne's witty 'Holy Sonnet 14', has called it 'magical',¹ and Joseph Summers has nominated it as one of the 'best poems' by Herbert.² One manifestation of its impact on the general public is the title of a BBC Radio 4 multi-faith programme on early Sunday morning: *Something Understood*, which has obviously been taken from the last line of 'Prayer (I)'. The reason for the poem's reputation probably lies in its mysterious, or transcendental, element: critics and readers alike have a tendency to chew over something that defies ready interpretation. What contributes to the difficulty of its interpretation is, on a more visible level, the poem's sensuous and astounding imagery. But that is not all; equally, if not more, important, is the way in which the images are organised, namely, the poem's structure. Typographically and phonetically, the poem is a standard sonnet, with altogether fourteen lines, ten syllables in each line, and a slightly varied Shakespearean rhyme scheme. However, the whole sonnet consists only of a piling-up of images; grammatically, it is an enumeration of noun phrases without a single finite verb. This is not something that had often been done in an English sonnet.

Herbert uses this enumeratory device sparingly: in only one other poem in *The Temple*, 'The Quidditie', do we find the appositional structure throughout. Besides 'Prayer (I)' and 'The Quidditie', mini-samples of this technique are found in the first two stanzas of 'Dotage', and, less typically, in the first stanza of 'Sunday'.

This is not Herbert's original device. Robert Ellrodt draws on poems by Raleigh, Surrey, Spencer, Sidney, as well as some of Herbert's contemporaries to demonstrate that similar techniques were already in use; however, he emphasises that Herbert has made an original contribution, for 'ces litanies de *métaphores* dont le propos est de *définir* une même et unique réalité sont beaucoup moins fréquentes dans la poésie de la Renaissance que les séries d'*images*, qui sont la *description* d'aspects divers . . . ou bien l'énumération d'exemples divers'.³ E. B. Greenwood, in the appendix to his analysis of 'Prayer (I)', provides more examples of this technique in both English literature and classical works translated into English. According to Greenwood and his colleague J. B. Leishman, usage of the device can be found in Homer, Seneca, Dante, Chaucer, and, closer to Herbert's time, Sidney and Shakespeare. Greenwood also offers some modern examples: Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams.⁴ John Porter Houston, in his study of the rhetoric of Renaissance and seventeenth-century poetry, presents a

sixteenth-century spiritual sonnet which employs the enumeratory device, and also cites Gerard Manley Hopkins as a more recent example.⁵

Although Ellrodt considers the structure of 'Prayer (I)' a contribution to English poetry, Herbert's technique probably bears most resemblance to seventeenth-century European poetry. Houston remarks that '[t]he enumeration sonnet on *vanitas* belongs to an international stylistic movement';⁶ however, over time, the enumeratory technique was employed to list less negative items in spiritual poetry as well, and was also absorbed into secular poetry. Houston quotes French poet Martial de Brives (? -1653) on 'dew', taken from a line in a liturgical text 'Benedicite rores et pruinas, Domino':

Grains de Crystal, pures Rosées
Dont la Marjoleine & le Thin
Pendant leur feste du matin
Ont leurs Couronnes composées:
Liquidés Perles d'Orient,
Pleurs du Ciel qui rendez riant
L'esmail mourant de nos Prairies;
Benissez Dieu qui par les Pleurs
Redonne à nos Ames fletries
De leur éclat perdu les premières couleurs.⁷

'Sur l'air' by the French Protestant pastor Laurent Drelincourt (1626 -80) exploits the enumeratory device in an even more radical way and is almost parallel to 'Prayer (I)' in structure:

Vast Élément, Ciel des Oiseaux;
Corps léger, subtile Peinture ;
Maison, dont la fine structure
Comprend trois Etages si beaux :

Riche Tente, dont les rideaus,
par le Maître de la Nature,
Sont étendus, pour Couverture,
Et sur la Terre, & sur les Eaus :

Ministre du grand Luminaire ;
Hôte fidèle, & nécessaire ;
Cause, qui produis tant d'Efets :

Messenger de Calme & d'Orage :
Je voy, dans ton Sein, le Passage
Qui mène à l'éternelle Paix.⁸

This enumeratory feature is found, however, as Houston points out, in German Baroque poetry with the most prominence and frequency. The first name in German Baroque poetry that one calls to mind is probably Andreas Gryphius, and although his sonnet 'Über die Geburt Jesu' utilises the enumerative technique throughout, I shall quote only the first stanza:

Nacht, mehr denn lichte Nacht! Nacht, lichter als der Tag,
Nacht, heller als die Sonn, in der das Licht geboren,
Das Gott, der Licht in Licht wohnhaftig, ihm erkoren!
O Nacht, die alle Nacht und Tage trotzen mag!⁹

In the first stanza of Gryphius's 'Die Hölle', the apposition is stripped down to a succession of single nouns:

Ach! und weh!
Mord! Zetter! Jammer! Angst! Creutz! Marter! Würme! Plagen.
Pech! Folter! Hencker! Flamm! stanck! Geister! kälte! Zagen!
Ach vergeh!¹⁰

It would be no surprise that Gryphius, scholarly and religious, should have been familiar with this device often used in classical and spiritual literature. Interestingly, the 'night brighter than the day' corresponds with the first poem by Herbert I am to analyse, 'The Quidditie', through the idea of *via negativa*, of which I shall later make mention.

German Baroque poets also put the technique in use in secular poetry. 'Auf die Mund' by Christian Hofmann von Hofmannswaldau (1617-79) is composed of ten lines each starting with the word 'Mund!' In the first eight lines, after the theme word 'Mund' invariably comes a restrictive relative pronoun 'which', in all its German variations: *der, den, dessen, welchem*; following the pronouns, in the relative clauses, Hofmannswaldau sings praise for his beloved's mouth. Only in the last two lines is this pattern broken: 'Mund! Ach, corallen-mund / mein einziges ergetzen! // Mund! laß mich einen kuß auff deinen purpur setzen.'¹¹ The enumeratory feature is brought out even more distinctly by Paul Fleming (1609-40) in 'Auf die italienische Weise: O fronte serena', of which I shall only cite the second stanza which is more typical than the other two:

O Sonne der Wonne,
O Wonne der Sonne!
O Augen, sie saugen
Das Licht meiner Augen!
O englische Sinnen,
O himmlisch Beginnen,
O Himmel auf Erden,
Magst du mir nicht werden?
O Wonne der Sonne,

O Sonne der Wonne!¹²

Only in two places in the stanza do we see well-defined clauses. However, even in these, the main verbs are chosen so that they rhyme with the preceding noun: 'Augen'—'saugen', 'Erden'—'werden'. By thus uniting the verb and the noun phonetically, the poet to an extent manages to blur and diminish the generic difference of the verbs. The first and third stanzas of the poem are almost equally appositional; they differ from the second only in that besides noun phrases, they also include sequences of single verbs, in their infinitive or imperative forms.

Why was this device used so widely? Were the poets conscious of the stylistic movement in which they were involved? Houston analyses the reasons for this movement as follows:

It would be a vast oversimplification to attribute so broad a movement in poetic grammar to any one source or even to assume that the poets were all conscious of tending in the same stylistic direction. The background for such enumerative tendencies lies in universal rhetorical studies and in various postclassical Latin examples, as well as in the liturgical forms which entered the poet's consciousness through the intense religious education of the day and through the constant presence of the church in postreformation life.¹³

It is not surprising that the enumeratory device was used to a large extent for religious purposes. Appositional noun phrases do not require the reader's mind to analyse and digest difficult grammatical features; nevertheless, because of the lack of clear statements, the reader in the end has to make no less effort to decipher the implied linkage and meaning of the series of phrases. In other words, the piling-up of images appeals to the non-logical, rather than the logical, part of the reader's mind. Because it is devoid of complicated syntax, the enumeratory device seems simple on the surface; on the other hand, because it implies the impossibility of definition or expression, the enumeratory device may possess a higher degree of sophistication. This is exactly the effect many preachers have sought to achieve, for they believe that sermons which are simple on the surface may have different effects on audiences with different receptive levels. The most relevant part in the New Testament is probably Matthew 13, where Jesus tells the parable of the sower and his seeds, which fall respectively 'by the way side', 'upon stony places', 'among thorns', and 'into good ground', and accordingly were devoured by birds, scorched by the sun, choked by the thorns, or brought forth fruit. (Matthew 13. 3-8) Jesus concludes the parable by saying, 'Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.' (Matthew 13.9) St. Augustine, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, also observes that obscurity either converts the faithful or excludes the faithless.¹⁴

I shall at the end of the article return to the effects appositional phrases make and briefly explore the cognitive process the reader undergoes; in the meantime, I shall attempt to analyse 'The Quidditie' and 'Prayer (I)', the only two poems by Herbert where the enumeratory device is used throughout. And I begin with 'The Quidditie'.

II

'The Quidditie' is a typical example of the enumerative structure; one prominent grammatical feature in which it may differ from most such poems is that the whole poem except the last two lines is established on negations. It takes up ten lines to recount what a verse 'is not' and 'cannot' do. The syntactical structure of these sentences could hardly be more straightforward; the poem's signification on a deeper level can only be deciphered when we examine closely the appositional phrases one by one, and the hidden linkage between them.

The following is a stanza-by-stanza analysis of the poem 'The Quidditie'.

MY God, a verse is not a crown,
No point of honour, or gay suit,
No hawk, or banquet, or renown,
Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute:

The first stanza of the poem consists of one single sentence, the subject-predicative structure being 'a verse is not . . .'; what follows is a string of noun phrases that serve as compliments. These are juxtaposed by the simple connectors 'or' and 'nor'; 'no' is used as emphasis at the beginning of the second and the third lines. The syntax of this stanza, therefore, is extremely simple: its semantics will rely totally on the images and meanings the noun phrases provide.

The noun phrases are clearly grouped into several categories, of which 'crown' and 'point of honour' form the first. 'Point of honour' may need more clarification than 'crown'. According to a 1725 quotation in *OED*, under Definition 10a for the entry 'point',

There are nine principal Points in any Escutcheon. . . A. . . the Dexter Chief. B. the . . . Middle Chief. C. the Sinister Chief. D. the Honour Point. E. the Fesse Point, call'd also the Center. F. the Nombriil Point, that is, the Navel Point. G. the Dexter Base. H. the Sinister Base. I. the precise Middle Base.¹⁵

'Point of honour', therefore, refers to a certain fixed point in a shield on which a coat of arms is displayed. 'Crown' as well as 'point of honour', then, are both used as synecdoches: they represent royalty and nobility, and in Herbert's time would have called to mind political power and military excellence, while the latter would also have strongly hinted at moral merit.

The next cluster, 'gay suit', 'hawk', and 'banquet' suggest entertainment and social company. Herbert employs the word 'suit' instead of its synonyms 'garments' or 'habiliments' almost certainly to exploit its multiple connotations. The most obvious meaning, especially in conjunction with 'gay', is garment; but even in that sense, the word may also call to mind the image of a suit of armour, which will then connect to the preceding phrase 'point of honour'. It is interesting to note that 'gay' and 'suit of armour' were actually collocated by Alfred Tennyson, writing two centuries later: 'The three gay suits of armour which they wore' (*Geraint & Enid*, l. 95, 1859). A more rare meaning of suit, common in the 16th century but obsolete now, is 'kind, sort, class', which again points back to the connotations of 'crown' and 'point of honour'. Suit,

as was still commonly used until recently, also denotes pursuing or chasing, either of game in hunting or of a romantic or sexual partner; in olden times, the word also signified that which was pursued (*OED*). In this sense, 'suit' is smoothly though almost unnoticeably juxtaposed to the next word: 'hawk'.

Hawking, or the practice of using a hawk to chase after game, was a popular social activity at the time. So was banqueting. They were both activities of aristocracy, therefore imply the worldly pleasures one would have deemed to be of a high rank in Herbert's time. According to *OED*, 'banquet' once also meant 'horsemanship'; although this would form an interesting link with 'hawking' (a 1753 quotation under the entry 'banquet' noun 2), such a connection would probably be much too far-fetched.

The next cluster, 'renown', 'sword', and 'lute', are well represented by the very first noun: 'renown'. 'Sword' and 'lute' symbolise accomplishments in military affairs, and in music or arts in general. These accomplishments most certainly would have brought one 'renown'. As a group, the three nouns suggest courtly ambitions and achievements. The word 'renown' usually calls to mind the synonyms 'fame' or 'reputation', as in 'of (great) renown'. However, an obsolete usage of the word, as in 'with (great) renown', is 'with much distinction or display'. This implies putting on a show, thus connecting artfully with the preceding nouns in the same line, 'hawk' and 'banquet', which connote actions of exhibiting bravado, wealth, or social rank.

It cannot vault, or dance, or play;
It never was in *France* or *Spain*;
Nor can it entertain the day
With my great stable or demain:

But for two very short 'n₁ or n₂' combinations, the second stanza loses the noun phrase parallel structure; however, the negative enumeration form remains: the predicatives 'cannot vault, or dance, or play', 'never was', and 'Nor can . . . entertain' run along the backbone of the stanza, repeating the enumerative parallel of the first and third stanzas while at the same time providing the element of variation.

Of the three verbs used in the first line, 'vault' is probably the one most exploited in its multiple senses. It can mean 'to leap on a horse', thus points back to the images of hunting in the first stanza. Figuratively it also means 'to rise into a higher position', therefore is joined with the images of court ambitions. Like the word 'leap', it also hints at copulation, or the gratification of the flesh, which is a worldly pleasure like the ones described in the first stanza. As a noun 'vault' often means an 'arch'; one of its meanings as a verb derives from this: 'to bend like a vault', which implies skilfulness and is therefore connected with 'dance' and 'play'.

In comparison, it is difficult to elaborate on the meanings of 'dance' and 'play', because the former's connotations are too few and the latter's, too many. It is impossible, and pointless on this occasion, to exhaust all the meanings of 'play'; suffice it to say that besides its connotations of courting and mating, the word suggests amusement, treachery, swift movement or brilliant display, which is in accordance with the worldly pursuits illustrated before.

In the second line of the stanza, for once, Herbert uses proper names for the conjunctive

noun phrases. This practice is hardly seen anywhere else in the poem. The employment of the phrase *'France or Spain'* here undeniably has reasons rooted in accommodating the rhyme schemes; however, the connotations that the naming of these two countries would have induced for Herbert's contemporaries are also not to be overlooked. On the one hand, although Spain had been gradually losing its unrivalled position in Europe, it remained a country of enormous political power; France was one of the centres of high culture, and it is doubtlessly from Italy via France that many aesthetic concepts and poetical practices came to England. Therefore, to deny that a verse has ever been in France or Spain is to negate the power and authority of the courts of the two countries. On the other hand, both France and Spain were Catholic countries: before Herbert's birth, Spain had been persecuting Protestants in Flanders, which was under its reign at the time, and likewise France had been persecuting the Huguenots, both resulting in many Protestants fleeing into England; even in Herbert's lifetime, Spain was interfering in the Thirty Years War partly to assist the Jesuit Counter-Reformation. Although war broke out between England and Spain in 1624 and between England and France in 1629, Herbert's defiance of the two countries probably has its roots more in religious reasons than in political ones. In any case, as the date of composition is unknown, the poem may well have been written before the declarations of the two wars. To claim that a verse *'was never in France or Spain'* may have its religious overtones; the author may be voicing his non-compliance with Catholicism. If so, however, it is only subtly and quietly that he does it: as indicated in *'To All Angels and Saints'* and *'Church-rents and Schismes'*, Herbert is not the kind of person who would have doctrinal schisms emphasised over religious unity.

The third and fourth lines continue the list of what a verse cannot do. *'Entertain'*, when juxtaposed to *'the day'*, means *'fill up'*, *'pass (time)'*. However, it easily reminds one of its other denotations: to keep somebody amused, as in *'to entertain guests'*, which involves social activities like banqueting, playing music, or dancing; to experience, as in *'to entertain a thought'*, which implies intellectual activity like the wit and knowledge so much acclaimed in court and seemingly abounding in France or Spain; to maintain, an obsolete usage, as in *'to entertain the estate'*, which joins *'stable'* and *'demain'* in the next line.

While the Hutchinson edition of *The Temple* chooses *'my'* to modify *'stable'* and *'demain'*, the John Tobin edition (Penguin) opts for *'a'* as in the 1633 edition, some later 17th-century editions, and almost all editions thereafter. Hutchinson's argument is that *'[the] my of both MSS. is more vivid than the a which replaces it in 1633. The owner shows off his possessions to his guests.'*¹⁶ The two manuscripts here signify the Bodleian manuscript—Tanner 307 in the Bodleian Library—and the Williams manuscript—Jones B 62 in Dr. Williams's Library. Tobin, on the other hand, asserts that *'the series of non-personalised items requires the indefinite article.'*¹⁷ *'Demain'*, also spelt *'demesne'*, denotes *'possession, estate'*. Spelt either way, the word shares etymology with *'domain'*, which besides *'land property'* also signifies *'territory'*. *'Demain'* and *'demesne'* are, in fact, differentiated spellings of *'domain'*. What is worth noting here is that the word *'domain'*, initially meaning *'belonging to the lord'*, derives from *dominium*, or *'lord'*. Whether the author was conscious of this or not at the time of writing the poem cannot be verified. A reader brooding over the poem, however, or even the author reading his own poem a second or third time, may well receive from the word an impression of all territory belonging to

the Lord. That impression will be, as we shall see later, articulated as an unequivocal statement at the end of the third stanza, which is also the end of the poem.

It is no office, art, or news,
Nor the Exchange, or busie Hall;
But it is that which while I use
I am with thee, and *Most take all*.

The first half of the third stanza swings back to the noun phrase enumeration pattern. The first two nouns, 'office' and 'art', both bear double nuances. 'Office', in the sense of 'position', may immediately call to mind secular employment; however, the word can also signify divine employment, or a position in the ecclesiastical structure. An office is also a service, usually an occasional one, as in 'office for the Dead' or 'office for Baptism'. In the Church of England, the word also denotes Morning and Evening Prayer, whereas in the Roman Catholic Church, 'office' or 'Divine Office' signifies the daily service written in the breviary, comprising psalms, collects, and lections for the several canonical hours, which vary with the day. More interestingly, the 'Holy Office' is also the official name of the 'Inquisition', an ecclesiastical tribunal for the suppression of heresy and punishment of heretics in several Catholic countries in Europe, first organised in the 13th century under Innocent III. Spain became notorious for the severities of its Inquisition in the 16th century; in Herbert's time, the Jesuits of the Counter-Reformation were still seeking to restore the Inquisition. If France and Spain have been mentioned in the last stanza at least partly for their Catholic persuasions, then the implication of 'office' in the third stanza may well have a veiled linkage with that allusion to the two countries. All these connotations considered, to declare that a verse 'is no office' may comprise more significance than one would assume at a superficial glance. First, a verse is not a secular position, but for Herbert it even has nothing to do with an appointed place within the church: since positions are all man-made, a priest may not necessarily be a man of God while a holy person need not necessarily be a priest. Neither is poetry a prayer in the sense of a recitation in liturgy, or a service conducted by the rules and regulations prescribed in a priest's manual. Nor does poetry express the kind of religion which instils rigid doctrines, which is so unsure of itself that it has to put any dissidents on trial and persecute them. When these implications are read out of the statement '[a verse] is no office', the poem, so far pointing poetry away from worldly pursuits and pleasures, is actually beginning to point poetry away even from religion itself, preparing the way for surrendering it entirely to God at the end of the poem.

Like 'office', 'art' also comprises meanings that may seem to have contradictory nuances. It can be a discipline in the humanities, often regarded as challenging for comprehension, demanding in practice, and elevated in the ranking of intellectual activities. In Herbert's time, however, the sense of 'art' as 'skill', 'craft', or 'human workmanship (as opposed to nature)' was more commonly used than it is today; now-obsolete denotations also included 'artifice' and 'a subject learnt at school'. By disassociating 'verse' from 'art', Herbert both denies any unjustified value placed onto the pursuit of the highly developed art forms, probably including poetry itself, and annihilates the significance of artificially acquired skills and techniques, most likely

comprising even prosody and poetics. Herbert's distrust of poetical technique is overtly expressed in various poems, most significantly in 'Jordan' (I) and (II), and 'A True Hymne'.

'News', the last of the row in the first line, links with the two preceding nouns in the senses of secular or ecclesiastical power, intellectual achievement, and social acclaim; at the same time, 'news' also hooks up with the 'Exchange' and the 'busie hall' in the second line, where not only merchandise but also information was exchanged, and news spread about. According to Hutchinson's note, a 'busie hall' probably signifies 'the hall of a Livery Company, in which business was transacted for the sale of the members' goods.'¹⁸ Both the exchange and the hall, then, are places where transactions were made and commerce conducted. The image of commercial transaction, again, is one that bears religious overtones, especially in some poems, such as 'Redemption' and 'Dialogue', in *The Temple*: Herbert repeatedly presents Christ's sacrifice and man's redemption as an ill-proportioned transaction between God and man, a transaction for which man, because of his oblivion and negligence, is too frequently ungrateful.

After all these negations, finally come the last two lines in which Herbert explains what a verse *is*: '[I]t is that which while I use / I am with thee, and *Most take all*.' The last three words, italicised in the original, form the gist of the poem, but are also the most intriguing words of all. Hutchinson in his edition declares that he owes J. Middleton Murry the deciphering the phrase: 'The titles to esteem which verse is not are first detailed; then it is declared that verse nevertheless is the *quiddity* of them all, in the very real sense that Herbert in his poetry comes nearest to God and most partakes of the creative power that sustains all these excellences.'¹⁹ Tobin, editor of the Penguin edition, quotes on the other hand F. P. Wilson (1943), who suggests 'most take all' means that He that is 'the most powerful . . . takes complete possession of [the poet]', and Michael Piret (1988), who points out that 'Wilson's reading would seem to require "most" to function as the subject of a co-ordinate clause (i. e. "Most takes all" or "Let most take all"). But "most" also works neatly as an adverb, if we understand the act of "taking all" as a verbal construction standing in parallel relation to the act of being with God, indicative of something the speaker does while using poetry (i. e. "When I am with thee, then I most take all").'²⁰ To consider 'most' as an adverb that modifies the verb 'take' seems to me to stand on more solid grammatical grounds. However, when we take into account that 'most take all' is italicised and therefore may require to be regarded as an independent phrase, Wilson's reading also appears feasible; the cryptic form of the verb 'take' may be explained as the form of the subjunctive mode expressing an imploration, as in 'God bless us'. This may well have been an intended ambiguity. In either reading, the poet, after dissociating poetry from all things, secular or holy, in human society, eventually claims that when he writes poetry, he becomes an instrument of God, who encompasses all, and with whom he partakes of all those things with which poetry cannot be identified in a restrictive sense.

'The Quidditie', like the 'night lighter than day' sonnet by Gryphius cited in the first section, is a small versified manifestation of the doctrine of *via negativa*. *Via negativa*, though more hidden and quiet than its affirmative counterpart *via positiva*, has dominated the theological world just as long. It is interesting that the authors of Christian mysticism often remained anonymous: the author of the medieval *The Cloud of Unknowing* is unknown to us; further back

in time, the author of *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology* adopted the name of Dionysius, St Paul's Athenian convert, whereas he or she probably wrote towards the end of the fifth century A.D.

According to the author of *The Divine Names*, the unnameable, which he or she calls 'It' for convenience's sake, 'is greater than all Reason and all knowledge . . . and cannot be reached by any perception, imagination, conjecture, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding'.²¹ Human minds, therefore, 'can find no more fitting method to celebrate its praises than to deny it every manner of Attribute.'²² That may be why 'a verse', in which Herbert sees a state where his being is united with God's, is so difficult for him to define. However, the 'negative way' is not 'negative' in the usual sense: this can be confirmed in the aforementioned sonnet by Gryphius, who calls 'night' 'lighter than day' and 'brighter than the sun'. Likewise, the pseudo-Dionysius allocates the same sort of 'positive' attributes to 'darkness':

Unto this Darkness which is beyond Light we pray that we may come, and may attain unto vision through the loss of sight and knowledge, and that in ceasing thus to see or to know we may learn to know that which is beyond all perception and understanding (for this emptying of our faculties is true sight and knowledge), and that we may offer Him that transcends all things the praises of a transcendent hymnody, which we shall do by denying or removing all things that are—like as men who, carving a statue out of marble, remove all the impediments that hinder the clear perceptive of the latent image and by this mere removal display the hidden statue itself in its hidden beauty.²³

The pseudo-Dionysius emphasises that it is when we are devoid of sight and knowledge that we arrive at true understanding. The focus on the negative is to reveal that it is as important as the positive, and may provide insights that a focus on the positive cannot offer. As the author of this passage demonstrates in the metaphor of the statue, the 'negative way' is in effect to chop off all that is not, in order to disclose that which is. This is exactly what Herbert does in 'The Quidditie', and there is perhaps no better way of doing it than through the enumeratory device: he eliminates one by one all the things that a verse is not, and yet he does not, for he cannot, state what exactly a verse is. The ending, which does not name the unnameable but only approximates it, is for both author and reader a moment of epiphany.

Although 'Prayer (I)' is not constituted of a sequence of negative statements, its structure runs parallel to that of 'The Quidditie': the poem goes through a flow of images before finally arriving at the inexpressible truth. Let us now have a closer examination of how this structure works.

III

Before I go into detailed analysis of 'Prayer (I)', I shall first cite here the sonnet in full:

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,

Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
 The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
 The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
 Engine against th' Almightye, sinners towre,
 Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
 The six-daies world transposing in an houre,
 A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;
 Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
 Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,
 Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
 The Milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
 Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,
 The land of spices; something understood.

The most prominent feature of this sonnet is the lack of a predicative verb. The whole poem is the enumeration of a sequence of images, with the ultimate annihilating generality of the two-word phrase: 'something understood'. This feature has stimulated responses from various critics. Gerald Hammond (1980) comments thus:

[T]he piling up of images forces the reader to develop a growing sense of the impossibility of the poet's attempt to define the undefinable, to find the one image which might be adequate to describe his mysterious communication between man and God.²⁴

Christopher Hodgkins (1994), writing more than a decade later, is of approximately the same opinion:

Herbert circles the looming immensity of this spiritual experience in an ascending spiral of metaphors, all of them as remarkable for their brilliant particularity as for their bewildering diversity. Then, with the imageless generality of 'something understood' (l. 14), he comments ironically on the preceding struggle at definition.²⁵

Both Hammond and Hodgkins insightfully emphasise the progression from the images to the imagelessness, from the concrete to the abstract. However, the 'piling up of images' and the 'ascending spiral of metaphors' are probably descriptions too general, and lacking in accuracy. These images or metaphors that occupy the thirteen lines and a half of the sonnet do not merely increase in degrees of language or meaning; instead, they form subtle patterns which hold much to be explored.

Arnold Stein seems to be of the opinion that the patterns of the images correspond with the traditional structure of the sonnet, namely the first quatrain, the second quatrain, and the sestet. According to Stein, '[t]he first two quatrains differ radically from each other, and the sestet is

composed in a wholly new metaphorical style²⁶: '[i]n the first quatrain all the images mark the relations between man and God, and do so in terms of connection, source, and return',²⁷ whereas '[i]n the second quatrain all the relations between man and God are centered on earth, and the images express violence, conflict, guilt, fear.'²⁸

Stein's insights are accurate; however, the images may not be as static as he describes. The first quatrain of the sonnet relates how God vouchsafes man the ability of prayer, and how man imitates God, and even achieves much Godliness when exercising the God-given right to pray. The second quatrain offers surprising claims about the mightiness of man's prayer, a power put into man's hands by God, yet used against God by man.

Considering the two directions—heaven-to-earth and earth-to-heaven—in which the two quatrains work, E. B. Greenwood's term 'two-way traffic' seems aptly visual:

A very important unifying notion in the sonnet is that of two-way traffic. Herbert sees prayer as setting up a continual traffic between the two regions of earth and heaven now ascending, now descending, sometimes, as in l. 13, doing either. . . I would suggest that this idea of two-way traffic motivates on the plane of the signifier the binary nature of many of the constructions employed.²⁹

The 'binary nature' of the structuring of the images, indeed, is central to the poem: it is the cord that binds the seemingly loose noun phrases together. I shall, therefore, base my analysis of the sonnet on this central feature. I realise the tremendous difficulty of analysing the sonnet after Greenwood's 1965 classical stylistic study of the poem; I have no choice but to refer to the important insights it makes throughout my analysis, while discussing a point or two in it which seems to me uncertain. I shall equally draw on Mary Ellen Rickey who has pointed out the classical allusions some of Herbert's images make.

Although enumerative noun phrases are my main concern here, I cannot bypass in my analysis an exploration into the idiosyncratic and intriguing absence of a verb in the poem. It is this absence of a verb that makes the sonnet stand out as a radical example of the enumeratory device in poetry. Regarding this peculiar structure of 'Prayer (I)', E. B. Greenwood offers four possibilities of interpretation. He advocates that the sonnet can be viewed 1) as 'a chain of predication' with the linking verb 'is' missing after the subject 'prayer'; 2) as an evocation, or 'a single nominative expression' of the poet's contemplation on prayer; 3) as an invocation, a call to 'prayer', despite the absence of a comma after the word 'Prayer'; 4) as an incomplete part of inner speech, which is 'purely predicative'.³⁰

Although the coexistence of these interpretations gives the poem an interesting ambiguity, I find this kind of ambiguity somewhat contrived. Had the poet meant the sonnet to be in the vocative mode, as the third interpretation suggests, he would easily have indicated this by starting the poem with an 'O': 'O Prayer the Churches banquet', or by placing a comma after 'Prayer': 'Prayer, the Churches banquet'. Greenwood himself seems to agree that the sonnet cannot be a complete invocation without being at the same time an evocation: '[i]n a way it contrives to *be* a prayer at the same time as being about a prayer.'³¹ However, while the poem is clearly about prayer, it is difficult to deem it a prayer in itself: What would in that case be the

content of the prayer? 'May Prayer be all these things I enumerate'? If that were the supplication of the prayer, it would naturally follow that the poet does not yet at this stage believe that prayer is already all these things, that it already is '[t]he Christian's plummet sounding heav'n and earth', that it already is '[e]ngine against th'Almightie', '[r]eversed thunder', and '[e]xalted Manna'. If the chain of images the poet offers in the sonnet are not what he thinks prayer is, but only what he would like prayer to be, or what he implores God to let prayer be, then the surprising effects on the reader, and the insights the reader gains through these images, will surely be lost.

It is equally difficult to justify the fourth interpretation, the description of 'Prayer (I)' as 'purely predicative', as incomplete fractions of Herbert's inner speech which constitutes 'a remarkable attempt to overcome the successive, analytical and temporal character of external speech'.³² If I understand this statement correctly, it suggests possible ellipses of a subject and a verb, thus implying complete sentences could read: 'We adore Prayer which is the Church's banquet. . .' or 'How blessed we are in having Prayer which is the Church's banquet. . .' or 'The thought of Prayer evokes in me images of the Church's banquet, Angels' age. . .' If the poem were truly formed of fragments of the whole sentences given above, the incompleteness would prompt the reader to wonder what the complete propositions are and attempt at mentally retrieving the missing parts to restore the propositions, as I have done. The added words pointing to feelings and thoughts, however, divert the reader's attention to the poet or speaker in the poem as a person, and that much weakens the focus on prayer itself and all that it is. Furthermore, even with added subjects and verbs, it remains extremely difficult not to equate prayer with the enumerated images, either by putting an antecedent and a linking verb in between: 'Thanks to God who has given us Prayer, *which is* [or *which seems like*] the Church's banquet. . .', or by expressly specifying the mental association between prayer and the images: 'When contemplating on Prayer, I am *reminded of* the Church's banquet, Angels' age. . .'. Therefore, even when we treat the poem as 'purely predicative', the added-on subjects and verbs do not change the fact that whether in a sentence with a linking verb or one with an action verb, the images given become the semantic complements of the word 'Prayer'.

I feel that the same can be said of the second interpretation. Calling 'Prayer (I)' an evocation is probably easier to accept than dubbing it an invocation or a fragment of inner speech; nevertheless, this evocation still depends almost totally on identifying prayer with the metaphorical images in the poem. While the thought of prayer elicits sensations in the poet and the poet in turn elicits sensations in the reader, there is still no getting around admitting that the poet actually thinks that prayer *is* the church's banquet and that it *is* angels' age. Therefore, it still in the end points to the first interpretation, and the most commonly and readily presumed, that prayer is connected to the succeeding images by an elliptical linking verb.

Let us now look at the noun phrases which take up the space of the whole sonnet except for the one word at the beginning, the theme word 'Prayer'. These noun phrases, though seemingly loosely if at all connected, in effect follow certain patterns. A close examination of the first stanza reveals how extremely well organised it is:

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,

Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;

Quasi-caesuras occur in the first and the third lines, where as the second and fourth lines run straight to the end without interruption. Furthermore, parallels in structure are to be found in the two pairs of lines: the two phrases in the first line are both possessive phrases; the two in the third line, adverbial ones; the two long phrases in the second and fourth lines, noun phrases with present tense participles. Semantically, the structural parallels are also striking: the first line centres on God descending, the third on man ascending, and the second and fourth lines indicate what Greenwood calls 'two-way traffic'. The first line, by making mention of angels and the church, refers to the representatives of God, in heaven and on earth. Prayer, then, is what God's delegates on earth feed on and what God's delegates in heaven have always coexisted with. In the second line, 'Gods breath in man' implies 'traffic' in one direction, as the phrase immediately brings to mind Genesis 2.7: 'And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.' The word 'returning' that follows indicates 'traffic' in the other direction. Greenwood points out that in Herbert's time, both 'its' and 'his' were in use as pronouns for the neuter possessive. Therefore, 'his' in 'his birth' may either have 'man' as its antecedent, thus referring to man's birth, or, according to Greenwood, have 'Prayer' as its antecedent, thus referring to the birth of prayer and implying that 'in prayer man literally renders breath back to its source God.'³³ While the second possibility is semantically feasible, grammatically speaking, I find the distance too great for 'Prayer' at the beginning of the first line to reach down, across a couple of commas, to be the antecedent of 'his' almost at the end of the second line. Alternatively, the far more immediate 'Gods breath in man' may serve the role much better without amending Greenwood's interpretation: the breath of life that God breathed into man returns to *its* birth; man breathes that breath of life back to God in his prayer.

In the third line, each of the two core nouns has an adverbial phrase added to it: the soul *in paraphrase* and the heart *in pilgrimage*. One is tempted to ask: paraphrase of what and pilgrimage towards what? The answer, in the context of the sonnet, may be that the soul paraphrases the Word of God and the heart makes a pilgrimage to the state of holiness and heavenliness. 'The soul' points back to 'God's breath in man' in the second line, the connection being found in the above-quoted verse from Genesis: it was only through the breath of life that man became a living soul. The heart, as Greenwood justly describes, is 'the seat of the earthly affections and emotions'.³⁴ The third line, then, is an illustration of man aspiring towards heaven, striving to achieve the state of godliness. The fourth line, again, conveys the notion of 'two-way traffic', but more forcibly so than before. 'The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth' not only indicates the boundless realm in which prayer is able to wander, but also communicates the ambition that prayer may embody, and implies the rather surprising idea that both heaven and earth are actually fathomable. The *subversive* power of prayer is presented here, and the second quatrain builds on that even further.

The entire second quatrain can be seen as an establishment of the reciprocal influence,

extending images of man 'getting back to' God, so to speak, and some of these images are indeed astounding:

Engine against th'Almightie, sinners towre,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-daies world transposing in an houre,
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;

In each of the four short phrases in the first half of the quatrain, there is something that subverts the order of God and man. Although this idea can hardly be called Herbert's original one since others had already commented on the power of prayer in sermons as well as in literature, it still must have remained striking to the general public of Herbert's time, when we remind ourselves that this was a time when people believed in the Great Chain of Being. At the top of the Chain sits God, King of all, with Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones in a perpetual dance of adoration around him, beyond whom are found Dominations, Powers, and Virtues. Then come the Archangels and Angels, and with the moon and the stars ends the heavenly world. In the Kingdom of Man, which is located in the sublunary sphere and where things become imperfect, the ranks mix political and religious positions, although in theory they should be kept separate: the emperor, the pope, kings or queens, cardinals, royalty, bishops, nobility, and priests, all the way down to yeomen, peasants, and slaves. The Chain reaches further down to the Animal Kingdom, with the Lion at the top and the Worm at the bottom, then to the Plant Kingdom, until finally arriving at the Mineral Kingdom. It is no coincidence that ecclesiastical positions came to be called holy orders; secular order, as manifested in strict class systems, probably only reinforced sacred order: in people's minds the seen reflected the unseen, and the order in the visible was projected onto the order of the invisible. As a consequence, some of the phrases in the second quatrain of 'Prayer (I)' may sound extremely disconcerting: Engine against the Almighty, who is insurmountable? Sinners' tower, one like the Tower of Babel, aspiring to reach and influence heaven? Reversed thunder, generating from man and crashing towards God? Non-violent prayer likened to the lethal spear that pierced Christ's side?

While the images in the first half of the quatrain focus on prayer interacting with God, those in the second half emphasise prayer's influence on God's creation. These latter are less striking yet nevertheless fearsome images. What even God had to spend six days in creating, through prayer transposing in a mere hour? A tune which not only *all* things, *all* God's creation, hear, but *all* things, *all* God's creation, fear? Mary Ellen Rickey points out that this last line in the quatrain, 'A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear', following 'The six-daies world transposing in an houre', 'calls to mind the music of the spheres'.³⁵ Again, this refers back to the Great Chain of Being and the geocentric spheres, where, except for the sublunary level which is the Earth, order and sublimity reign, and heavenly music plays. According to the music theory of Boethius (480–524), terrestrial 'musica instrumentalis', the only category of music that human beings can actually hear, is a mere shade of the 'musica humana', music created by the harmonies that should but does not exist in human life, which in turn but faintly echoes the 'musica mundana', or music of the spheres, caused by the rhythmic motions of the heavenly

bodies. Therefore, by calling prayer a tune which all things hear and fear, Herbert is again rendering prayer an ability which challenges and subverts heavenly order.

Why does the poet employ these threatening images against a supposedly loving and gentle deity, whose children, created in his likeness, should be as gentle and loving? Both Greenwood and Rickey have commented on the phrase 'Reversed thunder' as an allusion to Jupiter, the hurler of thunderbolts. Rickey in her analysis goes on to explain the theological significance of such a seemingly violent image:

For Jupiter's subjects no retaliation was possible. The process was one-sided. They had to be content to suffer whatever punishment the god might hurl down, however capriciously assigned. But the Christian, Herbert shows in this metaphor, is invested by his loving deity with a means of using god's power itself. Through prayer, he can reverse thunder and storm the very throne of Grace—this because it is a throne of Grace, not merely of authority, as is Jupiter's. Christian prayer affords the believer abilities, then, denied the devout ancient, or if you will, the natural man.³⁶

The vehemence of the metaphors here is indeed not designed to frighten or threaten, but to convey the power man gains through prayer, an ability given by God in order that man can communicate to God his thoughts and emotions, be they positive or negative, obedient or rebellious, extolling or protesting. These images are formulated exactly to illustrate the freedom that God grants man, to demonstrate that, as Rickey puts it, God's is 'a throne of Grace, not merely of authority'.

After these shocking metaphors of the second quatrain comes a line rather deviant in the whole sonnet: 'Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse'. Its semantic deviance lies in the 'gentleness', or perhaps even banality, of the images; more significantly, the line is grammatically deviant because it contains the only five noun phrases in the poem that consist of single core nouns without any modifiers, and also the only ones that are joined with the connector 'and'. The uniqueness of this line is probably best interpreted structurally as the clear marking of the start of the sestet:

Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The Milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices; something understood.

From the second line on in the sestet, the succession of the modified noun phrases, a norm in this sonnet, resumes. 'Exalted Manna' again depicts man's possible influence on God through prayer, for manna was the food God dropped down for Moses and the other children of Israel after they escaped from Egypt and were wandering in the desert, and that for forty years. A symbol usually

of amazing grace, manna is suggested here to rise upward from man to God. Like the metaphors in the second quatrain, this image is to illustrate that man partakes so much of God's grace that he is able to generate grace himself and return it to God. 'Gladnesse of the best' is rather in the same category with the abstract nouns in the first line of the sestet, especially when we remind ourselves of the archaic meaning of 'glad': bright, shiny, or beautiful. In the next line, 'Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest', binary contrast is again at work. As Greenwood points out, 'Heaven in ordinarie' is 'a syntagma modelled no doubt on such phrases as "chaplain in ordinary"'.³⁷ What exactly is, however, 'heaven-in-ordinary'? When applied to holy or secular offices 'on earth', the phrase 'in-ordinary', as in 'chaplain-in-ordinary' or 'physician-in-ordinary', means belonging to the regular staff or to fully recognised class of such persons. 'Heaven in ordinary', then, implies readiness and regularity of service, as though whenever man is with and in prayer, heaven is, as it were, at his beck and call. When we consider another sense of 'ordinary', that of 'common' or 'normal', then 'man well drest', besides suggesting man putting on Sunday clothes to attend church, makes a faultless semantic counterpart of 'Heaven in ordinarie'. To quote Greenwood again, '[w]hereas "Heaven in ordinarie" brings heaven down to earth, so to speak, "man well drest" takes earth into the presence of heaven. . . The implication is that man puts on his spiritual best, so to speak, in order to go into the presence of his Maker.'³⁸

In contrast, the two phrases in the next line do not function as counterparts; rather, they are connected by similarity. Both 'The milkie way' and 'the bird of Paradise' suggest a state of suspension in the air: the Milky Way, inlaid in the sky, never falls off, and the bird of paradise, having no feet, hovers around without ever landing. Rickey draws our attention to the classical allusions these two images make. She compares the Milky Way, a pathway to Jupiter's palace, with the Milky Way of prayer which leads all Christians to God's presence:

Jupiter designed the Milky Way, of course, as a pathway to his palace when, incensed by the corruptions of the Iron Age, he summoned the gods to a parley to decide the fate of the world. . . Herbert's Milky Way corresponds to this one, yet is infinitely better. Like most Renaissance men, he doubtless felt himself to be living in an Iron Age, deeply in need of some cosmic reformation. the Milky Way of prayer enables him to answer God's summons and travel to His presence. The signal disparity of the two highways is revealed, however, by the fact that *all* Christians are invited to make this pilgrimage of the heart, all can undergo a kind of deification through believing prayer. . .³⁹

The 'bird of paradise' seems to have evoked more diverse responses. The Hutchinson edition of Herbert's works comments in the notes to 'Prayer (I)' that the image of the bird of paradise is employed because of the bird's brilliant colouring and the fact that it was supposed to reside constantly in the air. Greenwood considers these firm grounds on which to base the metaphor; he also quotes Jeremy Taylor, the seventeenth-century theologian, who compares human beings to birds of paradise, because we are also 'cast out from thence, and born without legs, without strength to walk in the laws of God, or to go to heaven; but by a power from above, we are adopted in our new birth to a celestial conversation, we feed on the dew of heaven'.⁴⁰ Rickey, on

the other hand, points out that several brightly coloured birds were called birds of paradise, such as peacocks and phoenixes, and that '[m]edieval exegetes took these birds from Greek literature and made the peacock concomitant with immorality . . . and the phoenix with Christ and the Resurrection'.⁴¹ Rickey feels that Hutchinson's interpretation is unlikely, since the bird of paradise was 'designated by compilers of emblem books as an associate of Fortune, compelled... to remain hovering in the air and blown about by the aimless winds, unable to control its course'.⁴² She does not accept, however, that Herbert could possibly have suggested that prayer was as haphazard as Fortune. I do not think it totally unreasonable to suggest the haphazardness of prayer: it is often said by Christians that God moves in a mysterious way, and it is not uncommon to believe that prayers are answered at the most unexpected times and in the most unexpected circumstances. After all, the piling up of metaphors in the whole sonnet is about the non-logicality, or better, the unfathomability, of prayer.

And that brings us to the concluding couplet, and the enigmatic ending. It is easy to see that the first image in the couplet, 'Church-bells beyond the starres heard', is associated with the preceding line in that, first, the Milky Way is an assemblage of stars, and second, the bird of paradise and the church-bells heard beyond the stars both evoke the image of winging upward in the air. Greenwood believes that the phrase can mean either that we, whilst in prayer, hear music from heaven beyond the stars, or that beings in heaven can hear the music of our prayer, and suggests that although Herbert could easily have replaced 'Church-bells' with a more generic term like 'music' without doing harm to the metre, the original word must have been chosen for its mundane particularity.⁴³ I feel this interpretation of ambiguity somewhat strained; to me, the phrase seems to mean only 'church-bells ascending beyond the stars'. The problem with the other interpretation seems to lie in the word 'Church-bells': is it really a synecdoche for 'music' in general, and is it really intended to mean 'music from heaven'? As a church is an edifice on earth where believers worship God, or more metaphorically, as the church is God's bride, or the visible manifestation on earth of the Invisible in heaven, one may well ask: Do churches exist also in heaven? Need souls build up houses of worship when already constantly in God's presence? Need the bride-deputy be where the Groom's voice reaches the public's ears? On the ground of these reservations, it seems to me unlikely that heavenly music can be represented by church-bells.

The next phrase, 'the soul's blood', sounds like an intriguing expression at first. How can the soul, which belongs to the spiritual realm, produce blood, which constitutes part of the carnal? However, the turning of the phrase may not seem so strange if we regard it again as the invisible manifested in the visible. Herbert's contemporaries may have even believed in the association between blood and the soul, as Greenwood quotes Robert Burton writing in *Anatomy of Melancholy*: 'Spirit is a most subtle vapour, which is expressed from the *blood*, and the instrument of the soul to perform all his actions. . .'.⁴⁴ The phrase can also be interpreted as an illustration of the earnestness of prayer: the soul is so fervent in prayer that the fervour is made material in drops of blood. Or, when we consider the significance of flesh and blood in the Christian liturgy, 'blood' may also point back to 'Christ-side-piercing spear', suggesting blood turned into wine, or suffering sublimated into spiritual nourishment.

'The land of spices' no doubt had connotations for Herbert's contemporaries of the then

'mysterious Orient', as illustrated in this statement of John Donne: 'The Western Hemisphere the land of Gold and Treasure; The Eastern Hemisphere the Land of Spices and Perfumes.' (*Sermons* xvii, 167) Furthermore, as Greenwood points out, the metaphor 'would have aroused in Herbert's contemporaries associations with that earthly paradise which Milton was to describe so beautifully in *Paradise Lost*, IV, 132-165, an earthly paradise which was traditionally taken as a "type" of the heavenly paradise.'⁴⁵ I believe another comment must be added: that this metaphor is the only one in the sonnet that appeals to the sense of smell. This complements the other four senses that have already been represented by their respective objects in the poem: sight ('The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth', 'gladness of the best', 'man well drest', 'The milkie way', 'the bird of paradise', and possibly also 'Christ-side-piercing spear' and 'the souls bloud'); the sense of hearing ('Reversed thunder', 'A kind of tune, which all things heare and fear', 'Church-bels beyond the starres heard'); the sense of taste ('the Churches banquet', 'Exalted Manna', and probably also 'The land of spices'); and finally, the sense of touch ('Softness', and perhaps also 'Christ-side-piercing spear' and 'the souls bloud').

We arrive at last at the noun phrase that ends this long succession, one that is not a concrete image, but an abstract generalisation: 'something understood'. Both Greenwood's and Stein's readings seem to focus on the partiality of the understanding of prayer. Greenwood notes that 'the significance of prayer is infinite, that we can only understand "something" of it, not everything',⁴⁶ whereas Stein draws the conclusion that prayer 'is neither definable nor wholly expressible; part of its message is always implicit, not quite expressed and perhaps not quite understood by him who prays, but understood by God'.⁴⁷ These two critics seem to be in accordance with Hammond and Hodgkins cited at the beginning of this section, in that they all consider the phrase to convey the impossibility of satisfyingly defining or expressing prayer. With regard to 'something', however, the point of departure for Greenwood and Stein appears to be 'the whole' or 'everything'; consequently, 'something' suggests incompleteness and deficiency. While this reading is totally legitimate, I suggest an alternative be considered. As there is no evidence why we should start with 'omniscience' in the first place, we may make the point of departure 'ignorance' instead. When we think of God's omniscience and assume we in the perfection of his image should also know everything, 'something' sounds lacking, reproachful, and on the whole negative. If, however, we own our ignorance (or innocence) and assume we know nothing from the outset, then 'something' turns into an addition, a progress, and the word becomes positive. This interpretation, of course, assumes that the semantic subject of 'understood' is man; if we take God for the semantic subject, then the phrase will still have the positive implication that man has succeeded in communicating with God, for God has understood man's message, that 'something', however inadequately expressed. Prayer, rather like 'the peace of God, which passeth all understanding' (Philippians 4.7), can never and will never be fully understood, but that is how it is meant to be and is sufficient.

IV

As we have seen from the two examples above, the enumeratory technique gives the reader a syntax that cannot be any simpler, yet connotations that cannot be more hidden and ambiguous.

In a monograph entitled *Time and Style: A Psycho-linguistic Essay in Classical Literature* (1962), Thornton (Harry) and Thornton (Agathe) explore the appositional structure in classical literature; however, since the objects of their analysis are mostly narrative poems, their focus is on appositional verb phrases rather than appositional noun phrases. A much more recent study, *Etudes sur l'apposition: Aspects du détachement nominal et adjectival en français contemporain, dans un corpus de textes de J.-P. Sartre* (1998) by Franck Neveu, though detailed and competent, is unfortunately less relevant to our issue in question: a rigorous linguistic study, Neveu's work is concerned with apposition in the grammatical, rather than rhetorical, sense.

Thornton and Thornton's description of how human beings process language in *Time and Style*, although using the terms of a psychology that was still very much a part of philosophy, retains certain validity even today. They emphasise that our process of language takes place in a temporal sequence, and undergoes three phases: differentiation, retention, and assimilation.⁴⁸ They illustrate this process in the analysis of a simple English sentence, 'These cakes are all sold', and describe how we differentiate a word's sound and meaning through our auditory sense-perception, retain them for future reference while expecting to hear more words, and finally assimilate the meaning of a word in conjunction with the other words in the context.⁴⁹ These phases take place on a larger scale, of course, when we process larger units of language. If we apply the same principles to the processing of a succession of noun phrases, it may seem that, since nothing exists between the noun phrases to connect them, since they are all fragmentary and independent, we can differentiate and assimilate them one by one immediately, without retaining their meanings for future reference. This is, however, only deceptively so; when presented with a list of seemingly independent items, we still tend to make an attempt at making sense of it. For instance, when we hear a list like 'mountain, river, forest' or 'pen, ruler, notebook', we probably assume at once that the items on the list all belong to the same category: 'nature' and 'stationery' in these cases. In contrast, a list like 'pen, river, molecule, merit' would probably be more stimulating to us than the two previous ones, because our minds almost automatically begin to question why these items are placed in a cluster. Thus, the processing of appositional noun phrases takes place much less on a syntactical level than it does on an associative level. The average reader of an enumeratory poem will have no difficulty in absorbing the individual meaning of each noun phrase; however, it is the whole, the *Gestalt*, which is not represented by any single noun phrase, nor even by any single cluster of noun phrases, that the reader must work out, and it is only in this way that he or she receives from the poet the unsaid message.

As a poetic device, the enumeratory technique is simple on the surface but more exacting at the core. In 'The Quidditie' and 'Prayer (I)', Herbert probably employed a technique which he had long been familiar with, both in his practice as a country parson, delivering sermons to an unpretentious congregation, and in his practice as a Christian, exploring Creation for signs of God and explaining them in a way satisfactory to himself and others.

Notes

- ¹ T. S. Eliot, *George Herbert* (Northcote House, 1962) 25.
- ² Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954) 181.
- ³ Robert Ellrodt, *L'Inspiration personnelle et l'esprit du temps chez les poètes métaphysiques anglais* (Paris: Librairie Jose Corti, 1960), vol. 1: 368, Footnote 40.
- ⁴ E. B. Greenwood, 'George Herbert's sonnet "Prayer": A Stylistic Study', *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism* 15 (1965): 43.
- ⁵ John Porter Houston, *The Rhetoric of Poetry in the Renaissance and Seventeenth Century* (Louisiana State University Press, 1983) 162-3, 166.
- ⁶ Houston 162.
- ⁷ Houston 163-4.
- ⁸ Houston 165-6.
- ⁹ Karl Pörnbacher, ed. (groundwork Edgar Hederer), *Deutsche Dichtung des Barock* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1979) 109.
- ¹⁰ Andreas Gryphius, *Sonette* (ed. Marian Szyrocki; in *Neudrucke deutscher Literaturwerke Neue Folge* 9, gen. ed. Richard Alewyn and Rainer Gruenter, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1963) 91.
- ¹¹ *Herrn von Hoffmannswaldau und anderer Deutschen auserlesener und bisher ungedruckter Gedichte* (based on a 1697 edition, ed. Angelo George de Capua and Ernst Alfred Philippson; in *Neudrucke deutscher Literaturwerke Neue Folge* 1, gen. ed. Richard Alewyn and Rainer Gruenter, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1961), vol. 1: 74.
- ¹² Pörnbacher, ed. 55.
- ¹³ Houston 165.
- ¹⁴ St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (The Liberal Arts Press, 1958), Book V, viii. 22: 132.
- ¹⁵ All OED quotations are taken from the 1989 2nd Edition.
- ¹⁶ F. E. Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941) 500.
- ¹⁷ John Tobin, ed., *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems* (Penguin Books, 1991) 359.
- ¹⁸ Hutchinson, ed. 500.
- ¹⁹ Hutchinson, ed. 500.
- ²⁰ John Tobin, ed. 359.
- ²¹ Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, trans. C. E. Rolt (SPCK, 1920, 1940) 59.
- ²² Dionysius 60.
- ²³ Dionysius 194-5.
- ²⁴ Gerald Hammond, 'Herbert's "Prayer (I)"', *Explicator* 39. 1 (1980): 42.
- ²⁵ Christopher Hodgkins, "'Showing Holy": Herbert and the Rhetoric of Sanctity', *New Perspectives on the Seventeenth-Century English Religious Lyric*, ed. John R. Roberts (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1994) 227.
- ²⁶ Arnold Stein, *George Herbert's Lyrics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968) 183.
- ²⁷ Stein 107.
- ²⁸ Stein 108.
- ²⁹ Greenwood 33.
- ³⁰ Greenwood 29.
- ³¹ Greenwood 29.
- ³² Greenwood 29.
- ³³ Greenwood 36.
- ³⁴ Greenwood 36.

³⁵ Mary Ellen Rickey, *Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert* (University of Kentucky Press, 1966) 44.

³⁶ Rickey 43.

³⁷ Greenwood 39.

³⁸ Greenwood 40.

³⁹ Rickey 43–44.

⁴⁰ Greenwood 41.

⁴¹ Rickey 45.

⁴² Rickey 44.

⁴³ Greenwood 41.

⁴⁴ Greenwood 41.

⁴⁵ Greenwood 42.

⁴⁶ Greenwood 42.

⁴⁷ Stein 108.

⁴⁸ Harry Thornton, Agathe Thornton, *Time and Style: A Psycho-linguistic Essay in Classical Literature* (London: Methuen, 1962) 77.

⁴⁹ Thornton and Thornton 78–80.