

Sonnets in Context: Reading George Herbert's 'The Sinner', 'Avarice', and 'The Holdfast'

Li Jiang (李 絳)

Among the poets of his time, George Herbert was one of the most inventive of verse form. Browsing through *The Temple*, one finds such a variety of line and stanza patterns that one is tempted to doubt that ever two poems in the collection are written in the same form. According to Joseph H. Summers, Herbert 'used about 120 line and stanza patterns in the more than 165 poems of *The Temple*'.⁽¹⁾ Nevertheless, among this great variety 15 poems share exactly the same number of lines, the same metric pattern, the same shape: they are written in the sonnet form.

It may seem puzzling that a virtuoso of verse form like Herbert would have confined himself in a prescribed, fully established form, and that at the beginning of the 17th century, when the 16th-century glory of the sonnet was gradually dwindling into twilight. But critics have pointed out that Herbert was inventive even within this form, more so even than Donne. In his classical study on Herbert, Joseph H. Summers devotes one chapter to the discussion of Herbert's inventiveness in 'a traditional mode and a traditional form', namely the allegory and the sonnet.⁽²⁾ Summers points out the heavy use of enjambment and caesuras in one of the sonnets the youthful Herbert sent to his mother as a New Year present: 'My God, where is that ancient heat towards thee', as well as the reversed positions of octave and sestet in 'Holy Baptisme (I)'.⁽³⁾ Jerome Mazzaro and Michael Spiller have also drawn our attention to how Herbert ran syntax against metrics: by using enjambment, he frequently blurred the boundary between the octave and the sestet, and that between the first four lines of the sestet and the final couplet (Herbert made persistent use of two rhymeschemes: *ababcdcdeffegg* and *ababcdcdefefgg*, thus ending every single sonnet with a couplet).⁽⁴⁾ Herbert also integrated the allegorical narrative, his *forte*, into two of his sonnets: 'Redemption' and 'Christmas'. 'The Holdfast', although not a narrative in the strictest sense, also contains elements of a development and a dénouement.⁽⁵⁾ In Donne's sonnets the blurring of the octave and sestet is hardly found (the exceptions being probably Sonnets V and VI of *La Corona*, i.e. 'Crucifying' and 'Resurrection', and Holy Sonnet V), while the narrative form is completely absent.

Equally original is how Herbert arranges his sonnets in *The Temple*. Although Elizabeth Stambler has compared Herbert's collection of poems to the love sonnet sequences which were all the vogue in the late English Renaissance,⁽⁶⁾ *The Temple* is not a sequence consisting solely of sonnets, nor are the fifteen sonnets grouped as an independent unit like Donne's *Holy Sonnets* or *La Corona*. Herbert scatters them, seemingly, 'here and there' in *The Church*, the main section of *The Temple*. However, if we leaf through *The Church* while keeping an eye on the sonnets, we cannot help noticing that they seem more or less to form clusters instead of being distributed evenly throughout. The rough diagram below shows the distribution of the sonnets in *The Church*: the spelt-out titles are those of the fifteen sonnets; each asterisk represents a non-sonnet poem, and for longer strings of non-sonnet poems I have put the asterisk counts in brackets.

***** The Sinner * Redemption *** Holy Baptisme (I) ** Sinne (I) *** Prayer (I) ** Love (I)
 Love (II) ***** The Holy Scriptures (I) The Holy Scriptures (II) *****[21]
 Avarice **** (the first part of) Christmas *****
 *****[57] The Holdfast *****[13] Josephs
 Coat ***** The Sonne * The Answer *****[24]

Three fifths of the sonnets cluster at the beginning of *The Church*; after a considerable interval come two sonnets, then comes the longest interval, 57 lyric poems; 'The Holdfast' then makes a lonely appearance, before three sonnets form another small cluster toward the end of *The Church*. It is apparent that these sonnets are not arranged according to their mutual form. What is it then that determines their placement?

To answer this question, there is no circumventing the reference to a much discussed topic: the unity of *The Temple*. T. S. Eliot, who was responsible for the re-evaluation of Metaphysical poetry in general, was probably also the first to assert that *The Temple* was 'to be studied entire'⁽⁷⁾. More discussion followed, and by the 1980s consensus on the subject had been adequately established for John T. Shawcross to make the following summary:

It is a cliché of criticism of the poetry of George Herbert that the stanzaic form, structure, and metrics of the individual poems in *The Temple* have major significance for meaning within each poem and within the sequence. [...] It has also become a standard to view the collection as an organized sequence whose arrangement, first, leads the reader into the church and to the altar; second, has the reader reexperience the church year beginning with Christ's Passion; third, offers an allegorical journey through a person's physical and spiritual growth; and fourth, develops the poet's encounter with and conquest of artistic problems as he attempts to construct the temple of God, that is, every individual, and the animation spirit within.⁽⁸⁾

Events during the church year are represented by poems such as 'Good Friday', 'Easter', 'Whitsunday', 'Trinity Sunday', 'Christmas', and 'Lent'; the thread of personal growth begins with 'Holy Baptisme (I) & (II)' and ends with the last five poems of *The Church*: 'Death', 'Dooms-day', 'Judgement', 'Heaven', and 'Love (III)'. As for artistic problems, at least about a dozen poems in *The Temple* refer to problems of composing poetry, such as 'Denial', 'Dulnesse', 'Jordan (I) & (II)', 'The Quidditie', 'A true Hymne', to name but a few. The sonnets, then, just like other poems in *The Temple*, are arranged in a way so that they link in imagery, diction, and – above all – theme with surrounding poems and form small sequences with them. But why would Herbert have chosen the sonnet form for a certain theme, while he was so resourceful in verse forms?

The sonnet differs from other verse forms in function and structure. In the introduction to his edition called *Sonnets of the English Renaissance*, J. W. Lever describes the function of the sonnet as follows:

Frequently it was used for dedications, formal eulogies, or political and moral epigrams. [...] But its essential function was to chart the intimacies of personal experience. Here its very limitations gave it strength. [...] [I]t chose to survey internal landscapes and penetrate

the moment.⁽⁹⁾

Often the sonnet was used to praise or to persuade, and that may have enhanced its rhetoric and rationality. It was also an instrument to explore and to contemplate on the self, and that may have given it layered depths. As for its form,

[T]hrough the intricacy of its structure and the tightness of its form the sonnet promoted a special degree of intensity and complexity.

The degree of complexity the form was made to carry differed from writer to writer and poem to poem. But in its essential function the Italian sonnet embodied a dual thought-process of perception and cognition which could reflect, with remarkable precision, the tensions and contrarities of experience.⁽¹⁰⁾

In the Italian form, the sonneteer is obliged to align his thoughts and arguments with the octave and the sestet; in the English form, he is required to draw a conclusion in the final couplet. As mentioned before, Herbert ends each of his sonnets with a couplet, even though he never follows the strict Shakespearean sonnet form. Together with the exacting demands on metrics and rhymeschemes, the sonnet form usually taxes a poet's abilities to the full. With these restrictions, it is hard to imagine the sonnet form allowing emotions to overflow as freely as in more liberal verse forms. Might the sonnets in *The Temple* form sequences with their respective adjacent poems, while functioning as the rational and poised balance in these sequences?

Considering the scale of this essay, I shall examine only three sonnets in *The Temple*, 'The Sinner', 'Avarice', and 'The Holdfast', and see how they link with surrounding poems and how they function in their respective sequences. Well aware that three cannot be representative of fifteen, I shall make a brief mention of the room for exploration in the other sonnets, as well as in the clusters the sonnets in *The Temple* seem to form, at the end of this essay.

'The Sinner'

(Order of vicinal poems: 'The Sacrifice', 'The Thanksgiving', 'The Reprisall', 'The Agonie', ['The Sinner'], 'Good Friday', 'Redemption', 'Sepulchre', 'Easter', 'Easter-wings')

The Church, the principal section of the tripartite *Temple*, opens with a poem both entitled 'The Altar' and given the shape of an altar. As stated in Shawcross's summary on the unity of *The Temple*, the poet thus leads the reader into the church and to the altar. The poems that immediately follow, starting with 'The Sacrifice', describe Christ's Passion and endeavour to understand fully its significance. In his book *'This Book of Starres': Learning to Read George Herbert*, James Boyd White gives a convincing reading of the beginning sequences in *The Church*.⁽¹¹⁾ After discussing 'The Altar' and 'The Sacrifice', White groups the succeeding nine poems into a sequence, which spans from 'The Thanksgiving' to 'Easter-wings'. Sibyl Lutz Severance in her numerological study on *The Temple*, on the other hand, includes 'The Sacrifice' in her grouping and names these ten poems the 'Passion poems'. Ten, according to Severance

and her predecessor Alastair Fowler, represents God.⁽¹²⁾ Although Severance's assigning significance to the numbers of stanzas in a poem, of lines in a stanza, or of syllables in a line and so forth may at times seem far-fetched, there can be little doubt that the ten poems from 'Sacrifice' to 'Easter-wings' are poems about the Passion, and White singles 'Sacrifice' out most probably because it is several times longer than the other nine. White argues that the sequence focuses on how we should respond to Christ's Sacrifice on the cross, and how it becomes the triumph of Easter,⁽¹³⁾ while Severance asserts that '[m]ovement in the ten poems... is from fact to representation'.⁽¹⁴⁾

'The Sinner' is the first sonnet of *The Church*, and is contained in this sequence of poems on the Passion. 'The Sacrifice' is the long lament of Christ on the cross over man's cruelty and ignorance; 'The Thanksgiving' and 'The Reprisal', the next two poems, contemplate on Christ's Passion and the means of man's recompense for it; 'The Agonie', the fourth poem in the sequence and also the one preceding 'The Sinner', reflects again on the Passion, but this time also bringing up the issue of the measurement of Sin and Love:

Philosophers have measur'd mountains,
Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, and kings,
Walk'd with a staffe to heav'n, and traced fountains:
But there are two vast, spacious things,
The which to measure it doth more behove:
Yet few there are that sound them; Sinne and Love. ('The Agonie', ll. 1-6)⁽¹⁵⁾

'The Sinner' retains the concepts of measuring and trying to know sin, while in the final couplet presenting a recurrent image pair in *The Temple*, namely 'writing in the heart' and 'writing in stone':

Lord, how I am all ague, when I seek
What I have treasur'd in my memorie!
Since, if my soul make even with the week,
Each seventh note by right is due to thee.
I finde there quarries of pil'd vanities,
But shreds of holinesse, that dare not venture
To shew their face, since crosse to thy decrees:
There the circumference earth is, heav'n the centre.
In so much dregs the quintessence is small:
The spirit and good extract of my heart
Comes to about the many hundred part.
Yet Lord restore thine image, heare my call:
And though my hard heart scarce to thee can grone,
Remember that thou once didst write on stone.

The heart-stone image occurs in *The Temple* both before and after this sonnet, but its appearances closest to the sonnet in question are found in 'Good Friday', the poem immediately after 'The Sinner', and in 'Sepulchre', three poems ahead:

Since bloud is fittest, Lord, to write
 Thy sorrows in, and bloudie fight;
 My heart hath store, write there, where in
 One box doth lie both ink and sinne: ('Good Friday', ll. 21-24)

O blessed bodie! Whither art thou thrown?
 No lodging for thee, but a cold hard stone?
 So many hearts on earth, and yet not one
 Receive thee? ('Sepulchre', ll. 1-4)

Where our hard hearts have took up stones to brain thee,
 And missing this, most falsly did arraigne thee;
 Onely these stones in quiet entertain thee,
 And order. ('Sepulchre', ll. 13-16)

Other writing-in-heart/-stone poems include 'The Altar', where the poet claims that 'A HEART alone / Is such a stone, / As nothing but / Thy pow'r doth cut' (ll. 5-8), 'The Sacrifice', where the figure of Christ complains that Caesar 'clave the stonie rock, when they were drie; / But surely not their hearts, as I well trie' (ll. 122-3), and 'Nature', where the poet asks God again to smooth his rugged heart, which has grown into a stone, and to engrave His law therein (ll. 13-18).

Let us now take a closer look at the sequence 'The Sinner' and its adjacent poems constitute. 'The Agonie' discusses the measurement of Sin and Love, but does so only in qualitative terms. 'Who would know Sinne' is advised to go to Mount Olivet, the site of the Agony, where Christ prayed alone to the Father and was betrayed by Judas immediately after; '[w]ho knows not Love' is advised to witness the site of the Passion, where Christ was nailed on the cross. These two sites are linked with the image of Christ's blood: at the site of the Agony his blood is what man's sin induces, while at the site of the Passion it becomes 'juice' and 'wine' for man who has sinned. Thus the image of blood completes a circle: man sins, and his sinning causes Christ to bleed out of pain, yet Christ turns that blood into the very way of salvation for man. If 'The Agonie' brings home to the Christian reader the depth of man's Sin and the profundity of Christ's Love, it is not by concrete measurements but by making the reader see vividly the circle of man's sin, which causes Christ's pain, which gives rise to his blood, which he turns into love to save man from his sins.

The sonnet 'The Sinner', on the other hand, employs quantitative terms. It begins with the contrast between the week and Sunday, the six days versus the seventh: 'if my soul make even with the week, / Each seventh note by right is due to thee.' (This concept is also a recurrent one, and appears again in 'Sunday', which I shall discuss later in connection with 'Avarice'.) The speaker then implies that the portion of heavenliness in his life is even less than one seventh, and vanities occupy more space than their due, if any at all is due to them: he finds in his soul 'quarries of pil'd vanities', while 'shreds of holinesse... dare not venture / To shew their face'. The quintessence is small in the dregs, the speaker claims, and he quantifies the imbalance by further declaring 'The spirit and good extract of my heart / Comes to about the many hundred part'. Although in 'The Agonie', the preceding poem, the persona asserts that it behoves us to

sound Sin and Love, the images he presents in that poem in fact imply that they are unfathomable. It is in 'The Sinner' that we are actually measuring and counting, or at least shown the measuring and counting of, the portions of sin and virtue in the persona's life.

The poem that follows, 'Good Friday', again builds on the image of counting. It opens with six abrupt rhetorical questions, put evenly in the first three stanzas:

O my chief good,
How shall I measure out thy bloud?
How shall I count what thee befell,
And each grief tell?

Shall I thy woes
Number according to thy foes?
Or, since one starre show'd thy first breath,
Shall all thy death?

Or shall each leaf,
Which falls in Autumne, score a grief?
Or can not leaves, but fruit, be signe
Of the true vine? (ll. 1-12)

But these questions are not answered later in the poem. 'Good Friday' is one of Herbert's seven double poems — two (half-)poems of different verse forms combined in one. From Line 13 to the end of the first (half-)poem, there still lingers an attempt of requiting Christ's griefs one by one, although no specific number is mentioned: 'Then let each Houre/ Of my whole life one grief devoure' (ll. 13-14). In the second (half-)poem even this subtle measurement in the desire to correspond disappears: the image of writing-in-the-heart recurs, and the speaker implores God to write in his heart with His blood (as quoted above), fill his heart and keep it in possession.

Although 'The Sinner' and the two poems before and after all embody the image of counting, 'The Sinner' is the only one that actually does the counting. In 'The Agonie' and 'Good Friday', the mention of measurement is rather a rhetorical device to present man's sins and Christ's Passion as immeasurable. The striking blood image in 'The Agonie' and the six rhetorical questions at the beginning of 'Good Friday' appeal to the reader's senses and emotions rather than to his rational mind. 'The Sinner' is the most analytical of the three; it balances the poet's lament over Christ's Passion and his aspiration (though doomed to failure, as the poet himself knows) for its recompense in the adjacent poems.

'Avarice'

(Order of vicinal poems: 'Sunday', ['Avarice'], 'Ana-{Mary Army}gram', 'To all Angels and Saints')

'Avarice', a very anti-Petrarchan sonnet, is the only one of Herbert's sonnets that addresses

an enemy:

Money, thou bane of blisse, & sourse of wo,
 Whence com'st thou, that thou art so fresh and fine?
 I know thy parentage is base and low:
 Man found thee poore and dirtie in a mine.
 Surely thou didst so little contribute
 To this great kingdome, which thou now hast got,
 That he was fain, when thou wert destitute,
 To digge thee out of thy dark cave and grot:
 Then forcing thee by fire he made thee bright:
 Nay, thou hast got the face of man; for we
 Have with our stamp and seal transferr'd our right:
 Thou art the man, and man but drosse to thee.
 Man calleth thee his wealth, who made thee rich;
 And while he digs out thee, falls in the ditch.

Reading back a little and then forward will reveal to us how 'Avarice' forms a smooth flow together with its preceding and successive poems. 'Sunday', the poem that precedes 'Avarice', starkly contrasts the image of Sunday with that of the rest of the week. Sunday is allotted such words as *calm, bright, supreme delight, couch, balm and bay, light, torch, [a man's] face, release, the pillars [of] heav'ns palace, mirth, flight*, while weekdays are associated with *care, dark, [a man's] back-part, burden, endless death, [a] spare and hollow room, vanities, ground*. The week is the toil, and Sunday the rest; the week concerns the body, and Sunday the soul. Herbert speaks as if the purpose of one's life is to await and live the Sundays:

The Sundaies of mans life,
 Thredded together on times string,
 Make bracelets to adorn the wife
 Of the eternall glorious King. (ll. 29-32)

With such praise for the spiritual and contempt for the carnal in 'Sunday', it should not be difficult to perceive how 'Avarice' trails along the same vein of argument. For weekdays are workdays, and work, when seen as toil and burden, is invariably endured with the sole purpose of earning a living. 'Avarice', while talking of greed instead of toil, addresses money, and therefore supplements 'Sunday' with another aspect of daily work and reinforces the *contemptus mundi* motif that makes appearance in 'Sunday', though rendered somewhat inconspicuous by the ecstatic praise.

An even more obvious linkage of the two poems is a verbal one:

The other dayes and thou
 Make up one man; whose face thou art, [...] ('Sunday', ll. 6-7)

Nay, thou hast got the face of man; ('Avarice', l. 10)

The ‘face of man’ which should have been Sunday, the day of rest, the day of the soul, has been engraved in metal and imprinted on paper to represent money. ‘Avarice’ thus both complements the argument against the carnal in ‘Sunday’ and directs our attention from what should be (in Herbert’s opinion, of course) to what unfortunately is.

The poem immediately after ‘Avarice’ is a two-line poem (the shortest in *The Temple*) amusing itself over how ‘Mary’ can be turned into ‘Army’, thus linking semantically with ‘enemy’, of whom money is one, and how that Army consists of ‘hosts’, thus gliding smoothly into the next poem which addresses the angels, or heavenly hosts, as well as the saints.

In ‘To all Angels and Saints’, we find images visibly parallel to those in ‘Avarice’:

Man found thee poore and dirtie in a mine.
 Surely thou didst so little contribute
 To this great kingdome, which thou now hast got,
 That he was fain, when thou wert destitute,
 To digge thee out of thy dark cave and grot:
 Then forcing thee by fire he made thee bright: (‘Avarice’ ll. 4-9)

Thou [i.e. the Virgin Mary] art the holy mine, whence came the gold,
 The great restorative for all decay
 In young and old;
 Thou art the cabinet where the jewell lay:
 Chiefly to thee would I my soul unfold: (‘To all Angels and Saints’ ll. 11-15)

While ‘Avarice’ scorns money’s ‘base and low’ parentage of a dark mine and its forced brightness, ‘To all Angels and Saints’ clarifies what the holy mine is, and what the real gold is that has come thence.

‘Sunday’, ‘Avarice’, ‘Ana-{Mary Army}gram’ and ‘To all Angels and Saints’, then, form a sequence in which each poem supplements the previous one and anticipates motifs in the next. But does ‘Avarice’, the only poem written in the sonnet form in the small sequence, function in any way different from the other poems?

A quick scan will reveal that ‘Avarice’ is sandwiched between two poems that both end with exclamation marks. In the case of the two-line ‘Ana-{Mary Army}gram’, the whole poem is an exclamation. ‘Sunday’ and ‘To all Angels and Saints’ not only both start with a dramatic ‘O’: ‘O Day most calm, most bright’, ‘O glorious spirits’, but also both continue the apostrophe with either a string of asyndetic noun phrases or a series of relative clauses:

O Day most calm, most bright,
 The fruit of this, the next worlds bud,
 Th’indorsement of supreme delight,
 Writ by a friend, and with his blood;
 The couch of time; cares balm and bay: (‘Sunday’ ll. 1-5)

O glorious spirits, who after all your bands

Leaping with thee from sev'n to sev'n,
 Till that we both, being toss'd from earth,
 Flie hand in hand to heav'n! (ll. 60-63)

This reference to the self is embedded in a fervent wish, a romanesque longing to soar with Sunday to another level of consciousness. The persona's quasi-mergence with Sunday conveys his religious ecstasy. In 'Avarice', however, the first personal pronoun appears in a very different context: 'I know thy parentage is base and low' (l. 3). Unlike 'Sunday' or 'To all Angels and Saints', the first person here is connected with knowing and represents the speaker's unruffled rational mind. Despite being a personal pronoun, the 'I' in 'Avarice' is rather impersonal: but for metrical reasons, the line could well be rewritten: 'Thy parentage is base and low' without losing too much of the original meaning. The first personal pronouns in 'Sunday' and 'To all Angels and Saints', on the other hand, are indispensable to their respective poems to express either an ardent longing or personal complications.

Although 'Avarice' is connected with the other two poems in meaning and in imagery, and although the three, together with the two-line poem in between, constitute a smooth flow, 'Avarice' the sonnet is the brain that counterpoises the ecstasy that has been and the inner conflict that is to come.

'The Holdfast'

(Order of vicinal poems: 'Justice (II)', 'The Pilgrimage', ['The Holdfast'], 'Complaining', 'The Discharge')

'The Holdfast' may seem to have a less obvious linkage with the two preceding poems, 'Justice (II)' and 'The Pilgrimage'. Similarities, nonetheless, exist. The first half of 'Justice (II)' describes the fear God's justice instils in man: 'The dishes of thy balance seem'd to gape, / Like two great pits;' 'Thy hand above did burn and glow, / Danting the stoutest hearts, the proudest wits.' (ll. 7-8, 11-12) The second half claims that Christ's love, so profound that he died for man, dissolves that fear: 'Thy hand is white, / Thy scales like buckets, which attend / And interchangeably descend, / Lifting to heaven from this well of tears.' (ll. 15-18) In Herbert's persuasion, God's wrathful justice is induced by man's 'sinne and error' (l. 3), man's fall from Eden into the imperfect world, and Christ's death was the only way of reconciliation between God and man. The next poem, 'The Pilgrimage', builds on the image of the fallen world. In the mini-allegory, the persona undergoes a series of trials and tribulations: 'the gloomy cave of Desperation', 'the rock of Pride', 'Fancies medow', 'Cares cops', 'the wilde of Passion', before coming to 'the gladsome hill', but only to find that his goal is still further away:

My hill was further: so I flung away,
 Yet heard a crie
 Just as I went, *None goes that way*
And lives: If that be all, said I,
 After so foul a journey death is fair,

And but a chair. (ll. 31-36)

The tone of the ending may sound pessimistic, but read in light of 'Justice (II)', 'death' may not have as negative a nuance as generally assumed. In 'Justice (II)', Christ's death is what reconciles God's wrath and man's sin; Herbert as a Christian considers no sufficient recompense for that sacrifice, not even his own death (as mentioned above in the discussion of the beginning poems in *The Church*). The persona's death in 'The Pilgrimage', then, read together with the preceding poem, may be said to function in three ways: it is a partial repayment for Christ's death; it is a partial expiation for his own sins; it is a sign of leaving the fallen world, the 'foul journey', for the eternal rest. Both poems begin with sombreness and end with the arrival at some kind of a resolution.

Like 'Justice (II)', 'The Holdfast' in the final couplet also makes mention of the new Covenant by Christ's death, but an even more eye-catching resemblance with its two preceding poems probably lies in the structure of development. 'The Holdfast' is a miniature pilgrimage itself in theological understanding:

I threatned to observe the strict decree
 Of my deare God with all my power & might.
 But I was told by one, it could not be;
 Yet I might trust in God to be my light.
 Then will I trust, said I, in him alone.
 Nay, ev'n to trust in him, was also his:
 We must confesse that nothing is our own.
 Then I confesse that he my succour is:
 But to have nought is ours, not to confesse
 That we have nought. I stood amaz'd at this,
 Much troubled, till I heard a friend expresse,
 That all things were more ours by being his.
 What Adam had, and forfeited for all,
 Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall.

The catechistic feature of 'The Holdfast' is evident; it is therefore no wonder that Stanley Fish, who subtitled his book on Herbert *George Herbert and Catechizing*,⁽¹⁸⁾ dubs this sonnet 'the quintessential Herbert poem'⁽¹⁹⁾. Fish's reading emphasises the passivity, the submissiveness, the *giving up* of the speaker,⁽²⁰⁾ while Susannah B. Mintz, in an article contradicting that reading, stresses the activeness of the speaker as the human agent of the catechising.⁽²¹⁾ There is not enough space here to go into a lengthy discussion of the two readings; I shall only note that I find Mintz's reading, though a sensitive and eloquent one, missing the theme of the mergeance of God and the individual which characterises 'The Holdfast' as well as a number of other poems in *The Temple*. Both Fish and Mintz, at least, read this sonnet as an inner dialogue, a catechism, and therefore presumably both acknowledge the stages and layers of the persona's process of understanding.

The object of the speaker's progressive understanding in this sonnet is a recurrent conception in Herbert's poetry — that of 'mine' versus 'thine': If the individual is God's, does he

possess anything at all? What about his endeavours and what about his weaknesses? The next two poems, 'Complaining' and 'The Discharge', also reverberate this mine-and-thine motif:

Do not beguile my heart,
Because thou art
My power and wisdom. Put me not to shame,
Because I am
Thy clay that weeps, thy dust that calls.

Thou art the Lord of glorie;
The deed and storie
Are both thy due: ...

('Complaining', ll. 1-8)

Thy life is Gods, thy time to come is gone,
And is his right.
He is thy night at noon: he is at night
Thy noon alone.
The crop is his, for he hath sown.

('The Discharge', ll. 11-15)

These two poems incorporate the theme of ownership like 'The Holdfast', but we shall see later that they do not share the same tightness of catechistic rationality.

The tone of the speaker in these five poems when read as a sequence shows a high degree of instability. Although 'Justice (II)' ends with a satisfactory resolution, the speaker in the next poem ('The Pilgrimage') is afflicted all over again, and 'Complaining', the poem immediately after 'The Holdfast', gives away the fact that the persona has not fully assimilated what he thinks he has accepted: though he heroically asks in 'Justice (II)', 'Gods promises have made thee mine;/ Why should I justice now decline?' (ll. 22-23), in 'Complaining' he seems to forget his earlier statement and pleads, 'Art thou all justice, Lord? / Shows not thy word / More attributes?' (ll. 11-13)

The tone of 'The Pilgrimage', until the last two lines, is no doubt a frustrated one. Its description of the 'way' being 'long' and 'weary', the vocabulary it uses to describe the suffering on the way, 'gloomy', 'ado', 'abash'd', 'struck', 'tears', 'deceiv'd', both contribute to convey the frustration. Although the ending is not as pessimistic as it may sound when read in light of 'Justice (II)', as argued before, the tone of the poem is still far from being cheerful.

Although 'The Pilgrimage' and 'The Holdfast' both build up along a 'way' before arriving at an 'end', 'The Pilgrimage' employs distinct imagery and has a narrative line in the most common sense, while 'The Holdfast', apart from words like 'amaz'd' or 'troubled', builds itself almost totally on a logical development. Three times the speaker makes a vow to show his faith to God, and three times is denied the very right to make that vow. The vows and the denials, like in a proper catechism, follow a tight line of progressive arguments. When it finally reaches the conclusion that 'all things... [are] more ours by being his', and that 'What Adam had... Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall', the poem seems to have dissolved the frustration in the previous poem: however foul the journey of life and however restful death may be, they are all God's and there is no failing in Him.

Among the five poems under discussion, 'The Holdfast' is the only one that employs neither visual metaphors nor rhetorical questions. 'Justice (II)' starts with a fearsome image of God's justice compared to a balance, and later by introducing Christ's Sacrifice changes the image of the balance into a reassuring one; 'The Pilgrimage' describes an allegorical journey with a frustrated tone lingering through the whole poem; when we come to the small catechism in 'The Holdfast', the speaker appears to have his disconcert calmed and conquered by reasoning. Nevertheless, he is soon to become unsettled again.

At the end of 'The Holdfast' the speaker seems to be fully content to have concluded that all that is his is God's, and by being God's it is all the more his own. But in 'Complaining', the next poem, he uses exactly that conclusion to appeal to God his feeling of being wronged. Out of dissatisfaction with the way God treats him, he uses imperatives and interrogatives in the negative: 'Do not beguile my heart', 'Put me not to shame', 'Art thou all justice, Lord? / Shows not thy word / More attributes?', 'Have I no parts but those of grief?', 'Let not thy wrathfull power / Afflict my houre, / My inch of life'. Although he also uses possessive pronouns in this poem just like in 'The Holdfast', the 'mine' and the 'thine' are no more equal, as one would have expected them to be after witnessing the union of the individual and God at the end of the catechism in the last poem: 'thou art / My power and wisdom', but 'I am / Thy clay that weeps, thy dust that calls'; 'Thou art the Lord of glorie; / The deed and storie / Are both thy due: but I a silly flie'; 'Art thou all justice', and 'Am I all throat or eye, / To weep or crie?' Here the persona seems to break from the union with God reached at the end of 'The Holdfast': he becomes once more an individual that has his own will, and turns deaf to the voice of 'a friend', which appears in 'The Holdfast' as well as several other poems in *The Temple*, which might be telling him this time that to complain is also God's. The composure of the last poem disappears; agitation sets in.

'The Discharge' begins with five rhetorical questions, and the tone is as restless as that of 'Complaining'. The addressee, however, shifts from God to the persona's own 'busie enquiring heart'. If 'Complaining' is a poem of plea, 'The Discharge' is one of admonishment. Once more, the image of counting emerges, this time combined with the mine-and-thine motif:

Hast thou not made thy counts, and summ'd up all?
 Did not thy heart
 Give up the whole, and with the whole depart?
 Let what will fall:
 That which is past who can recall? (II. 6-10)

Thy life is Gods, thy time to come is gone,
 And is his right. (II. 11-12)

And well it was for thee, when this befell,
 That God did make
 Thy business his, and in thy life partake:
 For thou canst tell,
 If it be his once, all is well. (II. 16-20)

The speaker questions his heart whether it has not already made his careful calculations, and has

given up 'the whole' and departed with 'the whole'. We may see the calculating and giving up as done in 'The Holdfast': /I/ have weighed 'me' against 'thee' and have decided to give up all that is 'mine' to be 'thine'. The poem then goes on to argue that the past is over and the time to come is already God's, and by Line 20 it has arrived at a resolution complete in itself. 'The Discharge' may as well have ended there; if it did, it would be making the same statement as in 'The Holdfast' and would 'discharge' the speaker of the ownership of his person in the same way. But the poem continues for another 35 lines, the first of which being probably the topic sentence:

Onely the present is thy part and fee. (l. 21)

The speaker, then, takes one step out of the union of 'mine' and 'thine' of 'The Holdfast' and endeavours to make his busy enquiring heart understand that the present is the only thing it possesses. Though veins of reason run through the whole poem, 'The Discharge' makes use of interrogatives and negative imperatives similar to those in 'Complaining', and the chiding tone here cannot be missed:

They [i.e. 'present things'] ask enough; why shouldst thou further go?

Raise not the mudde

Of future depths, but drink the cleare and good.

Dig not for wo

In times to come; for it will grow. (ll. 26 – 30)

God chains the dog till night: wilt loose the chain,

And wake thy sorrow?

Wilt thou forestall it, and now grieve to morrow,

And then again

Grieve over freshly all thy pain? (ll. 46 – 50)

The speaker reasons with his heart, or his lower self, but not for reasoning's sake: he is unsatisfied with his heart's desire to linger on the past or to divine the future. Both 'Complaining' and 'The Discharge' come into being out of the persona's dissatisfaction: his dissatisfaction with his Lord, his dissatisfaction with his own self. They have both roamed away from the composure of 'The Holdfast', and either complain or chide even with the rational mind succumbing fully to God's ownership of the individual.

I have tried to demonstrate, in three cases, how a sonnet in *The Temple* may form a sequence with its surrounding poems, linking with them in imagery, diction, subject matter and so forth, while functioning as the composed, rational element in the sequence. But does this model apply to all fifteen sonnets in *The Temple*? And what could the clusters of sonnets, described at the beginning of this essay, signify?

To answer these questions obviously requires a longer and more thorough study. But I shall make two final points here. The first is that this model may apply to different sonnets to different degrees; sometimes it may be more difficult to perceive the composure or rationality in one

sonnet than in another. One of such difficulties, for example, might be with the enumerative sonnets: 'Sinne (I)', and even more typically, 'Prayer (I)'. The latter, justly categorised by Joseph Summers as one of 'Herbert's best poems'⁽²²⁾, has also been one of Herbert's most widely anthologised and discussed poems. Summers's own comment on the enumeration of the sonnet was '[n]ever before had the sonnet been put to such use in English.'⁽²³⁾ Its uninterrupted flow from image to image was undoubtedly fresh in English sonnets, and that was probably what compelled T. S. Eliot to use it in a comparison with John Donne's Holy Sonnet 14 to show Donne's intellect in contrast with Herbert's sensibility.⁽²⁴⁾ Nevertheless, though both 'Sinne (I)' and 'Prayer (I)' may seem devoid of an obvious logical development, the enumerative technique is a convention of devotional poetry. John P. Houston states that '[t]he enumeration sonnet on *vanitas* belongs to an international stylistic movement', and he provides one such example of a sixteenth-century English sonnet.⁽²⁵⁾ The two Herbert sonnets in question are of course not on *vanitas*. 'Positive' enumerations, however, are also found in other parts of Europe at approximately the same time, Laurent Drelincourt, also a Protestant pastor, being perhaps one of the most typical:

Sur l'air

Vast Élément, Ciel des Oiseaux;
Corps leger, 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 sure 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.

(Vast element, heaven of the birds, light body, subtle painting; house whose delicate structure includes three such beautiful floors; rich tent, whose curtains are spread out by the Master of Nature as a cover, over both earth and the waters; minister of the great luminary, faithful host and necessary; cause producing so many effects, messenger of calm and of storms, I see, in your depths, the passageway leading to eternal Peace.)⁽²⁶⁾

The syntactical similarity between this sonnet and Herbert's 'Prayer (I)' is almost uncanny. Drelincourt's other enumeration sonnets include 'Sur l'homme — Petit monde', which is a

'positive' inventory, and 'Sur les vents', which is one on *vanitas*.⁽²⁷⁾ Another tradition seen in 'Sinne (I)' and 'Prayer (I)', though perhaps more subtle in the latter, is the use of *correctio*. Houston calls it 'an ever more favored device of amplification in the baroque period'⁽²⁸⁾. We have already seen it at work in 'The Holdfast', and it is undoubtedly one of Herbert's favourite techniques. The two sonnets, then, follow conventions in devotional poetry, and may have appeared more formal and more solemn to Herbert's intended readers who were more aware of the traditions than readers of our own time.

As for the clusters of sonnets and the intervals in between, which have not been the main concerns of this essay, my presumption is that they may coincide with the ups and downs of the poet's spiritual and artistic pilgrimage in *The Temple*. As shown in the diagram in the beginning of this essay, more sonnets are found at the opening of *The Temple* and fewer at the end. May this be a contrast between rationality and intuition? Although Stambler is 'more than a little in disagreement with Martz' idea that *The Temple* concludes on a "plateau of assurance" because 'over the entire length of Herbert's volume we find Petrarch's emotional contrarities'⁽²⁹⁾, I see neither carelessness nor coincidence in the arrangement of the last few poems of *The Church*: the small sequence of 'Death', 'Dooms-day', 'Judgement', 'Heaven', and 'Love (III)' must have been Herbert's deliberate choice, and compared with the poems at the beginning of *The Church*, they do seem to offer much more assurance both to the persona himself and to the readers. That fewer sonnets are found toward the end of *The Church*, then, might tally with the process of the persona giving up earthly rationality and opening up to his Lord's love. But whether this presumption holds true evidently needs a thorough testing out.

Although Herbert was not one of the major sonneteers of his age, he was certainly among the few most inventive. His originality sparkled in the innovating of structure and metrics, the incorporating of fresh themes or modes, and also in the arranging of his sonnets in his collection and the finding of new functions for them.

NOTES

- (1) Joseph H. Summers, 'Sir Calidore and the Country Parson', in *Like Season'd Timber: New Essays on George Herbert*, ed. Edmund Miller and Robert DiYanni (Peter Lang, 1987), p. 208.
- (2) Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954), p. 171.
- (3) *ibid.*, pp. 180, 181.
- (4) Jerome Mazzaro, 'Striking through the Mask: Donne and Herbert at Sonnets', in *Like Season'd Timber*, pp. 243, 245.
Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 183.
- (5) Although not focusing exclusively on the sonnets, Frank J. Warnke makes mention of Herbert's narrative forms vs Donne's impassioned arguments in the introduction to *European Metaphysical Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 13.
- (6.) Elizabeth Stambler: 'The Unity of Herbert's "Temple"', in *Essential Articles for the Study of George Herbert's Poetry*, ed. John R. Roberts (Archon Books, 1979), pp. 328-350.
- (7) T. S. Eliot, 'George Herbert', *The Spectator*, CXLVIII, 12 March 1932, p. 361.
- (8) John T. Shawcross, 'Herbert's Double Poems: A Problem in the Text of *The Temple*', in *Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne': Essays on George Herbert*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry

- Pebworth (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), p. 211.
- (9) J. W. Lever, *Sonnets of the English Renaissance* (University of London: The Athlone Press, 1974), Introduction, p. 1.
 - (10) *ibid.* pp. 1-2.
 - (11) James Boyd White, '*This Book of Starres*': *Learning to Read George Herbert* (The University of Michigan Press, 1994), Chapter 3: 'Sequences'.
 - (12) Sibyl Lutz Severance, 'Numerological Structures in *The Temple*', in '*Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne*', p. 242. Fowler's study from which Severance takes the numerological symbols is: Alastair Fowler, *Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970 (quoted from Note 3 of Severance's article).
 - (13) White, '*This Book of Starres*', p. 129.
 - (14) Severance, 'Numerological Structures in *The Temple*', in '*Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne*', p. 244.
 - (15) All quotations of George Herbert's works are taken from F. E. Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford University Press, 1945, 1953).
 - (16) Esther Gilman Richey, 'Words within the Word: The Melodic Mediation of "To all Angels and Saints"', *George Herbert Journal*, vol. 15, No. 2 (Spring 1992), p. 33.
 - (17) *ibid.*, p. 40.
 - (18) Stanley Fish, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (University of California Press, 1978).
 - (19) Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (University of California Press, 1972) p. 176.
 - (20) *ibid.* pp. 174-6.
 - (21) Susannah B. Mintz, "'He my succour is": A Language of Self in Herbert's "The Holdfast"', *George Herbert Journal*, vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 1-19.
 - (22) Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert*, p. 181.
 - (23) *ibid.* p. 183.
 - (24) T. S. Eliot, *George Herbert* (Northcote House, 1962), p. 24.
 - (25) John Porter Houston, *The Rhetoric of Poetry in the Renaissance and Seventeenth Century* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1983) p. 162.
 - (26) *ibid.* p. 165-6.
 - (27) Houston also provides a list of German enumerative sonneteers: 'The literature of enumeratory sonnets on *vanitas* or devotional themes has long been familiar to readers to [sic] German poetry. Those poets customarily called baroque, Daniel von Reigersfeld Czepko, Paul Fleming, Andreas Gryphius, Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg, Martin Hanke, and Quirinus Kuhlmann, all used syntax of this sort, as did Christian Hofman von Hofmannswaldau in the domain of secular baroque poetry. Indeed no other seventeenth-century lyric poetry seems quite so characterized by enumeratory patterns as German.' *ibid.* p. 163.
 - (28) *ibid.* p. 170.
 - (29) Elizabeth Stambler, 'The Unity of Herbert's "Temple"', in *Essential Articles for the Study of George Herbert's Poetry*, p. 331.