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# George Herbert Poetry Competition, 2008

by David Jasper and Helen Wilcox

In September 2008, a George Herbert Festival was held in the Welsh market town of Montgomery, where Herbert was born more than four hundred years earlier. During one busy weekend, poetry-lovers were offered guided walks around the town and castle, artistic and historical exhibitions, a presentation by the “Bemerton Group” which included new musical settings of poems from *The Temple*, and a festival service held in the parish church, in the shadow of the splendid Renaissance tomb erected by Magdalen Herbert in memory of her husband, George’s father. One of the high points of the festival was an evening of poetry and music in the ballroom of Powis Castle, hosted by the Earl of Powis, John Herbert, the poet’s closest living descendant. The evening concluded with the announcement of the winning and commended poems from the Festival Poetry Competition, for which entrants had been invited to write new poems inspired by Herbert’s own lyrical style. The following is the report of the judges of this competition, Rev. Prof. David Jasper (Professor of Literature and Theology at Glasgow University) and Prof. Helen Wilcox (Professor of English at Bangor University, Wales). The report was presented orally at Powis Castle and, through a discussion of the entries, investigates the ways in which the competition both revealed and sustained Herbert’s continuing influence on contemporary poetry.<sup>1</sup> Included in the report are the texts of the commended entries, and it concludes with the winning poem, “Joseph of Arimathea” by Tony Lucas.

## *Judges’ Report*

When the seventeenth-century Welsh poet, Henry Vaughan, wrote that he had been inspired to write by “the blessed man, Mr *George Herbert*, whose holy *life* and *verse* gained many pious *converts*, (of whom I am the least),”<sup>2</sup> he was announcing his awareness of being among a group of poets who were following in the footsteps of George Herbert. *The Temple*, Herbert’s one volume of English poems, was published posthumously in 1633, and already in the 1640s Christopher Harvey produced a poetic companion-piece to *The*

*Temple*, entitled (perhaps rather blatantly in imitation) *The Synagogue* (1641), and Richard Crashaw paid homage to Herbert in a collection more modestly named *Steps to the Temple* (1646). At about the same time, the poet Cardell Goodman described himself as Herbert's echo, "endeavouring to say something after him, though I reach no farther, than to the repetition of half words and sentences."<sup>3</sup> These near-contemporaries of Herbert stood at the beginning of a long line of poets who have taken their inspiration from Herbert's inventive skill in poetic form and his distinctive lucidity of tone. Many of those whose poetry has been influenced by Herbert have been moved by the devotion and humanity of his verse and may be seen as part of a pastoral tradition in English religious poetry, characterized by David Scott as poetry of "intense engagement" and "reflective seclusion."<sup>4</sup> Among later poets, sacred and secular, who have confessed their admiration for Herbert we might include Coleridge, T.S. Eliot, Elizabeth Bishop, R.S. Thomas, Vikram Seth, and Rowan Williams, to name but a sample of the "flock of George."<sup>5</sup> They also include the Montgomery resident, J.D.K. Lloyd, who won a *Spectator* poetry competition in the 1950s with a poem inspired by Herbert's "Easter."

It is clear, then, that the poets who submitted their work to the competition sponsored by the 2008 festival, having been asked to "write in the style of George Herbert," are continuing a serious and significant poetic tradition – perhaps the most important in English devotional verse. And in our opinion, each of the sixteen poets from all over Britain who entered, together contributing twenty-seven poems, demonstrated an impressive level of poetic achievement. This has made our task as judges all the more difficult, but it is a fitting tribute to the still positive power of Herbert's impact.

Reading these new Herbertian poems, we were struck by the variety of ways in which Herbert's influence can be seen at work. Some of the entrants paid close attention to his stanza structures, particularly of those lyrics nominated as models in the competition: "The Collar," "The Flower," "The Pearl," "Redemption," "Love" (III) and "Easterwings." This last poem, an example of Herbert's visually expressive form, was wittily put to use as the basis for a number of entries: a chalice-shaped poem submitted by David King; the bell-like stanza constructed by R.A. Spencer; the expanding and contracting poetic form used to suggest breathing in Oliver Leech's poem "Air," and the

slightly irreverent parody by Lydia Bassett, not entitled “Easter-wings” but “Easter Eggs,” in which the stanza bulges as the chocolate-loving speaker recounts her moments of greatest self-indulgence.

Other entries took their inspiration from Herbert’s metaphors, whether the down-to-earth practicality of the “pulley” in Manning Goodwin’s poem of the same name, the financial metaphors of R.A. Spencer’s “Getting and Spending,” or the natural world epitomized in the “gloss of buttercup” in the anonymous poem “Absent-minded.” Several more entrants modelled their poems closely on “The Collar,” as the ingenious titles “The Open Neck” (by Tom Lerwill) and “The Choker” (by David King) reveal. “The Collar” begins in outspoken and rebellious mood – “I struck the board, and cry’d, No more.”<sup>6</sup> – and among the more unusual entries written under its influence is Philip Hellin’s “The Curb Crawler,” exploring the self-righteous impatience of the speaker who attempts to mow the grass around the graves in Montgomery churchyard. The dramatic first line arrests the reader with its bathetic near-familiarity: “I struck the curb again, and cried, “No more!”

As this last instance demonstrates, the poets who entered the competition did not feel constrained to write poems of devotion; indeed, it was an eye-opener to see just how great a variety of subjects could be explored creatively within the forms and tones of the Herbert inheritance. We have already heard about the love of chocolate and the frustrations of strimming the grass, but an equally unexpected topic is the church’s current debates about women bishops, cheekily explored in Tony Walton’s poem, “Episcopal Suffrage.” More serious subjects, successfully blending Herbert’s poetic mode with new material, include the Shroud of Turin in Tony Lucas’s poem of that name, which asserts that “To flame the mystery of love / cold facts are not enough,” and the private history of a growing family blossoming under love’s showers in “The Flower Dancers” by Bob Tristram.

The experience of reading these poems, as will be evident, was full of both pleasures and surprises. In the end, however, we had to decide upon a winner, plus a small selection of specially commended entries. In time-honored fashion we will save the winning poem to the very end of this report, and turn first to the six poems that we have chosen to commend. They are all of equal status, and the order in which we will refer to them is purely alphabetical:

We start with Jane L. Dards's "The Flower (II)." This is a fine homage to Herbert's "The Flower," using the original stanza form with understated delicacy. The poem draws a Herbert-like moral from the sight of a bright flower which is startlingly found to have "a canker in its heart," recalling something of Blake's "Sick Rose" as well as the flower in Herbert's poem "Vertue" whose "root is ever in its grave" (l. 7). Unlike Blake, however, but very much in the Herbert spirit, Dards's "Flower" ends on a note of regained faith in the divine forgiveness that will find "room" for flawed flowers in the heavenly garden.

*The Flower (II)*

by Jane L. Dards

How sweet a flower! How bright its hue.  
It lights the garden with its loveliness.  
How proud it stands, stem straight and true,  
And holds its head above the foliage.  
I pray to Thee  
That I may be  
Such succour to souls' loneliness.

And yet I find, as I draw near,  
The blossom bears a canker in its heart.  
And to my sight its flaws appear  
Revealed, as now its perfect petals part.  
I wish it were  
As soft and pure  
As I had thought it at the start.

And if my heart should bear such sin  
As now I find within this gentle bloom,  
I trust Thou will forgive again  
And not, as I have done, condemn so soon.  
For all our flaws,  
Yet give us cause  
To hope in heav'n Thou grant us room.

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David King's "Light" is our third commended poem, one of six lyrics submitted by this entrant: one for each of the nominated Herbert lyrics. We were impressed by several other poems in his submission, including "The Price," a twenty-first century equivalent of Herbert's "The Pearl," but in the end we chose "Light," modelled on "Love" (III), the last of Herbert's lyrics in *The Temple*. Herbert's poem opens with the phrase, "Love bade me welcome," and develops into an exquisitely crafted dialogue between Christ and the resistant soul, ending with the speaker's quiet acceptance of grace – "So I did sit and eat" (l. 18) – a line of supremely achieved simplicity. In King's profound and poised rewriting of this poem, Christ is the light of the world urging the speaker to follow him, "led on by Light serene," and eventually persuading him to partake of "rest" and "bread." King is particularly skilful in merging his own voice not only with the cadences of "Love" (III) but also with the language of the Bible; in true Herbertian fashion, there are clear echoes of the 23rd Psalm beautifully merged into King's closing stanza.

*Light*

by David King

Light in the distance: yet I walked away,  
 Lost in the darkest wood.  
 But Light burned fierce, as I went astray,  
 Drew me to the good.  
 As I came close, heart beating hollow,  
 Light said simply, "Follow."

How, I asked, for the way's not clear?  
 Light said, you shall see.  
 I the blind, unseeing? Ah my dear,  
 Put your trust in me.  
 Light filled my eyes and lit my path,  
 Who could now fear our Father's wrath?

Through valleys dark and shadows deep,  
 In pastures quiet and green,  
 I walked between the mountains steep,  
 Led on by Light serene.  
 You must have rest, says Light, and eat my bread:  
 So I did partake the spread.

The fourth poem to be specially commended, Ann Philips's "The Lenten Flowering," catches the puzzled tone, homely metaphors and syntactical patterns of Herbert's "The Flower," but uses them to tell a new personal narrative. In the opening stanza, the speaker's soul is at a loss, "stripped / Of sense, and ripped / Out of its human roots," recalling the suffering narrator of Herbert's "Denial," whose spirit, "like a nipt blossome, hung / Discontented" (ll. 24-25). In Philips's poem, the transformation comes as the result of her sight of "hidden hellebores" emerging from the wintry "dirt," an unmistakable parable of the resurrection. The unexpectedness of this "sign" of new life in "Lenten days" is powerfully likened to the discovery of gold "in the leaden seam / In the black bottom of the shattered mine." True to Herbert, who was a master of endings, the



poem closes with quiet submission, celebrating the “flowers of grace” and offering the speaker’s first-fruits to God.

*The Lenten Flowering*

by Ann Philips

The wind was set against me; all the day  
    It rocked my world and filled my struggling mind  
With tempest voice (no kindly thing to say),  
    All nature turning to oppress and bind.  
    My soul seemed stripped  
    Of sense, and ripped  
Out of its human roots: obtuse and blind.

But as I sat, with chin in fingers propped,  
    And gazed on my poor garden, grey and bare,  
There came a quiet as if my lungs had stopped  
    Their busy bellows-work, wanting no air:  
    My blood ran slow  
    As wind fell low  
With a vast stillness everywhere.

Sudden my Lord was with me, as the beam  
    Breaks through the thick of cloud, or as the shine  
Shows where the gold lies in the leaden seam  
    In the black bottom of the shattered mine.  
    As if I woke  
    When new day broke  
All was transmuted by a single sign:

My hidden hellebores had risen white  
    Out of the slop of dirt and sodden mire,  
Their spread leaves feeding on the wintry light,  
    The roots’ dark force at work to lift them higher.  
    So Lenten days  
    Can fill with praise  
Of him to whom all things of earth aspire.

And we, dear Lord, who sink so deep oppressed  
 By this world's weather and our own rough state,  
 May know thy flowers of grace; and we so blessed  
 Should sing for thee, All-loving and All-great;  
 And so I tell  
 What thus befell  
 Scattering my verses at thy garden gate.

Jonathan Robinson's "Give me the wings" is our fifth commended poem, and is one of three entries by this poet, all of which find inspiration in echoes and phrases from Herbert's whole *oeuvre* rather than in the example of individual poems from *The Temple*. "Give me the wings" is a plea for the capacity to rise above the limitations of mortality, and its visionary quality places the poem in the tradition of Herbert's disciple Henry Vaughan, too, who felt all too keenly the constraints of "this fleshly dress" ("The Retreat," l. 19). Robinson's poem gleams with phrases of a seventeenth-century kind: "this cloth of being human," "A world of strangeness," "petty chinks of time." The pointed repetition in its conclusion is a masterly stroke.

*Give me the wings*

by Jonathan Robinson

Give me the wings to rise  
 Above this veil of things,  
 This corrupting obscuraton,  
 This cloth of being human  
 That renders seeing to be blinded  
 By lens of mortal vision  
 Dividing thou from me,  
 Making a world beyond myself;  
 A world of strangeness  
 Where all things stand apart, without,  
 And in that self created phantom of division  
 Bow down to separation,  
 To choice, decision and exclusion  
 Where all that is takes on deceiving shape



Brief glances of the past and onerous tasks  
                        yet joy rises above  
The memories now in the distance and forgotten  
With images to cherish and to last  
Those feelings of regret and yet yearns for more  
                        Some call this love  
The sensation of the fruit and trials of life turned rotten  
                        feelings of hopelessness and loss  
Amidst the sultry gloom and trodden mire  
Trust, harmony cherished moments often joy  
                        but failing yet to see the meaning  
Lost in a deep array of promises and sweet satire  
With enemies now implicating lost feelings  
                        alas the days are brighter and anew  
Life has new meaning and pertinent desires  
Though deep and somewhat imprisoned  
Let the road ahead be tireless immobilising torments  
                        met with troubles few  
The freedoms of the troubled heart alive and fired.

We should like to thank all those who entered the competition, and congratulate the six commended poets, trusting that the time they have spent in the company of Herbert's lyrics will continue to be fruitful. We now move to the prize-winning entry itself, which is a mere fourteen lines long, a sonnet written in the mode of Herbert's "Redemption." However, like all good sonnets it packs a great deal into this confined form and handles the build-up to the final couplet with immense skill. The poem, by Tony Lucas, is entitled "Joseph of Arimathea"; it is spoken by Joseph as an older man, looking back to the time many years previously when he had hoped to be Jesus' "broker, finding credit, raising bail" but had ended up providing the temporary

tomb for his crucified savior. Now retired from the market-place, Joseph has gained the wisdom to realize that “Wealth would not have tipped the scale” in those far-off “urgent years.” The tone is resigned and meditative, and the poem subtly combines narrative and philosophy in an interior monologue during which Christ is not named but is referred to simply as “he.” The vocabulary of economics – another link with Herbert’s “Redemption” – is brilliantly woven into the texture of the sonnet, ranging from its opening references to “influence and power” as “Securities I trusted in before,” through the impact of “Rumour’s inflation” on his cautious reserve, to ultimate bankruptcy and the need for salvation. The central issue of the poem is the question underlying so much spiritual experience: who is it that has “found the way to save”?

*Joseph of Arimathea*

by Tony Lucas

Now far removed from influence and power,  
Securities I trusted in before  
And treasured, till the moment they turned sour,  
I watch the day break on a distant shore.  
On his account, throughout those urgent years  
I kept my capital. Rumour’s inflation  
Panicked the market with malicious fears,  
Devalued all my cautious moderation.

No matter. Wealth would not have tipped the scale.  
I banked on standing counted, being brave –  
His broker, finding credit, raising bail –  
But he alone had found the way to save.  
When I was bankrupt, he would set me free.  
Where I could make no purchase, he spends me.

The structure of this sonnet is faultless, with its subtle change of direction in the middle of the sonnet – “No matter” – and a fine, unexpected reversal of the relationship of financier and client in its concluding line. This is indeed a poem that has been carefully thought and

deeply felt; it is prepared to take the risks demanded of the best poetry, not only in emotional or confessional terms but also in daring to interweave different levels of meaning simultaneously. Its skills and effect, combining an ordered lucidity with the surprise of the final rhetorical twist, are profoundly and satisfyingly Herbertian. We congratulate Tony Lucas on having produced a winning poem worthy of the tradition, contributing to the ever-growing line of poets who (to quote the words of Cardell Goodman again) are still “endeavouring to say something after” George Herbert.

*Glasgow University and Bangor University*

#### Notes

1. The judges would like to express their thanks to the organizers of the Poetry Competition, Rev. Raymond Shorthouse and Mrs Joan Jones, and to John Herbert, 8th Earl of Powis, for his generosity in both hosting the evening and sponsoring the prize.

2. Henry Vaughan, “The Author’s Preface,” *Silex Scintillans* (1654), *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alan Rudrum (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 142. Further references are to this edition, by line number.

3. Cardell Goodman, *Beauty in Raggs*, ed. R.J. Roberts (Reading: University of Reading, 1958), p. xiv.

4. David Scott, “Pastoral Tradition in Religious Poetry,” *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, ed. Andrew W. Hass, David Jasper, and Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 727.

5. Although this is a light-hearted gesture towards the phrase “tribe of Ben” applied to followers and admirers of Ben Jonson, the point is a serious one: Herbert was a major influence on poets, preachers and readers in the seventeenth century. Among recent critical discussions of this phenomenon, see Sharon Achinstein, “George Herbert in the Restoration,” *English Literary Renaissance* 36, no. 3 (2006): 428-63; Helen Wilcox, “In the Temple Precincts: George Herbert and Seventeenth-Century Community-making,” in *Community-making and Cultural Memory: Literature and Religion in the British Isles, 1558-1660*, ed. Roger D. Sell and Anthony Johnson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009); and Christopher Hodgkins, ed., *George Herbert’s Travels* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, forthcoming 2010).

6. “The Collar,” *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 526. All further references are to this edition, cited by line number.