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Autor: Mortimer, Anthony
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Words in the Mouth of God: Augustinian Language-Theory and the Poetics of George Herbert

Anthony Mortimer

In her study of Herbert, *Utmost Art*, Mary Ellen Rickey remarks that few characters in literature, apart from Don Camillo, have been more comprehensively instructed by the deity than the speaker of *The Temple*.¹ One might object, however, that Herbert's God goes to no great lengths to explain Himself. Brief, terminal, and frequently reproachful, His interventions have none of the patient and painstaking detail one would normally associate with comprehensive instruction.² In what may be called the "dialogue poems" God tends to have the last word which is often His only word; and it is the fact of God's utterance as much as its content that proves crucial to the speaker's experience in the poem and problematic in our reading of that experience.

Why is it that words in the mouth of God, despite their brevity and rarity, seem to loom so disturbingly large in *The Temple*? In *Paradise Lost*, however distressed we may be by what God says, we are not likely to question Milton's right to make Him speak since the whole poem relies on the assumption that divine inspiration enables the poet to "assert eternal providence / And justify the ways of God to men." But the speaker of *The Temple*, sometimes self-assertive though never self-confident, is a very different proposition. A. D. Nuttall puts the matter succinctly:

¹ Mary Ellen Rickey, *Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1966), p. 128.

² The one exception is "The Sacrifice" where Christ is the only speaker. It is no accident that this poem offers William Empson a splendid pretext for pursuing his longstanding feud with the Almighty. See the revised edition of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1953), pp. 226-33.

Herbert, the character within the poem, displays the inept incomprehension of mere humanity, but Herbert the author undertakes to supply on God's behalf the answers only God can give.³

Thus, if words in the mouth of God loom large in *The Temple*, it is precisely because they would seem to contradict the speaker's own explicit premiss: "I cannot skill of these thy wayes" ("Justice I").⁴ On the one hand, if man's understanding is really so inadequate, then what the poet makes God say or assumes God has said will be equally inadequate, and the poem can reach no meaningful conclusion. On the other hand, if God's utterance is seen as meaningful, then man's understanding, which has created that utterance, can hardly be defined as inadequate. Even if we were to take the poems at their face value and accept God's words as divine dictation to the poet, the problem would still remain. The implicit claim would still be that the poet can hear and reproduce the divine utterance, that he possesses a kind of hotline to God. Such a claim may seem natural in the inspired narrator of *Paradise Lost*, but it sits awkwardly on the inept speaker of *The Temple*. How then can we reconcile the humility of Herbert's poetic stance with the presumption that puts words in the mouth of God?

At this stage, my argument requires that I make two very simple points. They can be made crudely and without evidence because they have already been amply discussed by previous critics.

1) Many of Herbert's most celebrated poems, and particularly those in which God speaks, seem to end by denying implicitly or explicitly either the significance of the experience they recount or the very function of sacred poetry. They are, in Stanley Fish's phrase, "self-consuming artifacts."⁵

2) Despite its High Anglican paraphernalia – its loving enumeration of church furnishings, its repertoire of feast-days, its liturgical reference – *The Temple* relies on a theology that is often called Protestant, but is more accurately defined as Augustinian. William Halewood has demon-

³ A. D. Nuttall, *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante and St. John* (London, 1980), p. 3.

⁴ Quotations from Herbert are taken from *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1967, corrected reprint of 1941).

⁵ Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Los Angeles, 1970). See also Barbara Leah Harman's discussion of "collapsing poems" in *Costly Monuments: Representations of the Self in George Herbert's Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

strated the pervasive influence of the Augustinian revival on seventeenth-century religious poetry, both Catholic and Protestant; and he argues convincingly that *The Temple* reflects Augustine's view of the process of salvation, a process in which God is the only actor, for He both makes the will of man righteous and thus prepares it for assistance, and assists it when it is prepared.⁶

Now one can hardly doubt that there is a connection between the theological background and the apparent status of the poems as "self-consuming artifacts." The Augustinian process of salvation obviously defeats all man's efforts to "weave [himself] into the sense" ("Jordan II"), including the effort of poetry, and leaves God's miraculous, unmerited, arbitrary intervention as the only significant event. A fair description, perhaps, of what occurs in poems like "Redemption," "Jordan I," "Jordan II," "Dialogue," "The Holdfast," "The Collar," and "Love III"; but it does not shed much light on the problem we started out with: how does the inept human speaker presume to put words in the mouth of God? Let us rephrase the question. Assuming that God takes every step in the process of salvation, what function is left to sacred poetry? Or, at a more general level, what do we make of man's claim (and especially the poet-priest's claim) to use language as a means of *teaching* knowledge of salvation? We should not forget the plain sense of Herbert's last instructions when he sent the manuscript of *The Temple* to Nicholas Ferrar at Little Gidding:

If he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not let him burn it; for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies.⁷

That, at least, would suggest that for Herbert sacred poetry was either teaching or nothing.

I shall now argue that if we want to make sense of Herbert's words in the mouth of God, if we want to understand what function he could have assigned to language in the teaching of divine truth, then we

⁶ For discussions of Herbert's theology see William Halewood, *The Poetry of Grace: Reformation Themes and Structures in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (New Haven, 1970), and Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (London, 1954). Summers reminds us (p. 76) that Augustine is the only early church father whose works are mentioned in Herbert's will. A. D. Nuttall (p. 75) believes that "Herbert's poetry pierces the contemporary theology of Protestantism to the half-Platonic Augustinian ontology which lies behind it."

⁷ Izaak Walton, *The Lives* (London, 1864), p. 303.

should look not just to Augustinian theology in general, but to a specific text where Augustine deals explicitly with language and teaching. I refer to *De Magistro*, known in English as *The Teacher*. But first a word of warning. This should not involve anything as naive as “The Influence of *De Magistro* on Herbert’s Poetry.” *De Magistro* is a relatively minor work and we have no evidence that Herbert ever read it.⁸ What matters is that *De Magistro* provides us with a model of how, in Augustinian thought, language functions in relation to divine truth. If the conclusions reached by *De Magistro* are implicit throughout Augustine’s work, and if Herbert’s theology is indeed Augustinian, then it seems reasonable to suppose that *De Magistro* will illuminate the poetics of *The Temple*. One need not ask whether Herbert was conscious of following an Augustinian model: the only real issue is whether the model helps us to read Herbert.

De Magistro takes the form of a dialogue between Augustine and his son Adeodatus. The scope of this paper prevents me from lingering over the density and complexity of its often tortuous argument, but it is not hard to discern the points that are relevant to a reading of Herbert. Augustine begins by asking what is the purpose of speech, to which Adeodatus answers that it must be either to teach or to learn. But, says Augustine, we learn by asking questions, and our questions teach our interlocutor what we mean. Hence all language is ultimately reduced to the single function of teaching. We then get a long section designed to show that nothing can be taught without signs:

Thus we have still found nothing that can be shown by itself, except language, which signifies itself among other things; but since it is itself a sign, it seems that there remains absolutely nothing that can be taught without signs.⁹

⁸ It is worth noting, however, that in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century editions of Augustine’s complete works, *De Magistro* appears next to *De Libero Arbitrio*, a dialogue that Herbert probably would have read.

⁹ Quamobrem nihil adhuc inuentum est, quod monstrari per se ipsum queat praeter locutionem, quae inter alia se quoque significat; quae tamen cum etiam ipsa signum sit, nondum prorsus exstat, quod sine signis doceri posse uideatur, *De Magistro*, 10, 30. For the Latin text of *De Magistro*, cited hereafter as DM, I have used the edition of the Bibliothèque Augustinienne, *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, 6, *Dialogues Philosophiques III; De Magistro, De Libero Arbitrio* (Paris, 1976), with introduction, French translation and notes by Goulven Madec. The English translation, slightly amended, is that of Joseph Colleran in *Ancient Christian Writers*, 9 (London, 1950).

Having brought Adeodatus to this stage, Augustine then develops a counter-argument to the effect that we learn nothing from signs:

If we consider more diligently, you will probably find nothing that may be learned by means of its signs. For when a sign is presented to me, if it finds me ignorant of the reality of which it is a sign, it cannot teach me anything; but if it finds me knowing the reality, what do I learn by the sign?¹⁰

If we cannot teach without signs and if signs of themselves cannot teach, what function remains for language? Augustine's way out of this impasse is to abandon the idea of teaching (*docere*) and learning (*discere*) in favour of a theory of recall (*commemorare*).

It is indeed purest logic and most truly said that when words are uttered we either know what they signify or we do not know. If we know we recall rather than learn, but if we do not know, we do not even recall, though perhaps we receive the impulse to enquire.¹¹

The word *commemorare* might seem to suggest something like a Platonic theory of knowledge as memory derived from a previous existence. But, as Goulven Madec points out, Augustine explicitly rejects the Platonic theory in *De Trinitate*. And even without this evidence, the idea of recall in *De Magistro* can hardly be confused with memory in the Platonic sense. What we recall is "the truth that presides within" and this truth is identified with Christ, the Interior Teacher, who alone grants knowledge of intelligible realities.

Regarding, however, all those things which we understand, it is not a speaker who utters sounds exteriorly whom we consult, but it is the truth that presides within, over the mind itself, though it may have been words that provoked us to make such consultation. And He who is consulted, He who is said to dwell in the inner man, He it is who teaches, Christ, that is the unchangeable and eternal wisdom of God. This wisdom every rational man does consult.¹²

¹⁰ Quid? quod si diligentius consideremus, fortasse nihil inuenies, quod per sua signa discatur. Cum enim mihi signum datur, si nescientem me inuenit, cuius rei signum sit, docere me nihil potest; si uero scientem, quid disco per signum? (DM, 10, 33).

¹¹ Verissima quippe ratio est et uerissime dicitur, cum uerba proferentur, aut scire nos quid significant aut nescire; si scimus, commemorari potius quam discere; si autem nescimus, nec commemorari quidem, sed fortasse ad quaerendum admoneri (DM, 11, 36).

¹² De uniuersis autem quae intellegimus, non loquentem qui personat foris, sed intus ipsi menti praesidentem consulimus Veritatem, uerbis fortasse ut con-

I mentioned earlier that the conclusions of *De Magistro* are implicit throughout Augustine's work. Goulven Madec provides abundant evidence for this affirmation, but two particularly striking passages cry out for quotation.¹³

If we both see that what you say is true, if we both see also that what I say is true, where, I pray you, do we see it? I, assuredly, not in you, and you not in me, but both of us see it in the unchangeable Truth itself that is above our minds.
(*Confessions*, XII, 25)

You have understood; how have you understood? Did I strike your ear? Did I kindle the light in your heart? Doubtless, if what I have said is true, if you have not only heard but also understood, then two operations have occurred; let us distinguish them: hearing and understanding. I am the author of the hearing; who is the author of the understanding? I spoke to your ear so that you would hear; who spoke to your heart so that you would understand? Without any doubt, someone has also said something to your heart so that there is not only this noise of words which strikes your ears, but also some truth which descends to your heart. Someone has also spoken to your heart, though you see him not. If you have understood, my brothers, then someone has spoken to your heart. Understanding is a gift of God.

(*In Iohannis Evangelium*, 40. 1)

"There is," says Augustine, "a miserable servitude of the spirit in this habit of taking signs for things" (*De Doctrina Christiana*, 3, 5, 9). These passages alone should be enough to show that the doctrine of the Interior Teacher, deriving from a radical disjunction between sign and thing, is an essential aspect of Augustine's epistemology, and one that Herbert, whether he read *De Magistro* or not, could have absorbed from a long tradition of Augustinian thought.

It is, however, not only the epistemology, but also the argumentative procedure of *De Magistro* that is relevant to Herbert. For the treatise does seem to offer an apparently self-consuming artifact. We might assume, at the start, that the *magister* of the title is Augustine himself who sets out to teach Adeodatus the function of language. Yet the upshot of the argument is that neither Augustine nor anyone else can claim to be a teacher since the only true teacher is Christ within the mind. Essential to Augustine's strategy is the fact that the Interior

sulamus admoniti. Ille autem qui consulitur docet, qui in interiore homine habitare dictus est Christus, id est incommutabilis Dei atque sempiterna sapientia. Quam quidem omnis rationalis anima consulit (DM, 11, 38).

¹³ Cited by Madec in DM, introduction, pp. 34–36.

Teacher does not emerge until the predictable claims for human discourse have been examined and found wanting. *De Magistro* does not announce its intention of proving the existence of the Interior Teacher. We do not start with the statement of a thesis which is then defended against objections and shown to be correct. Instead we get what appears to be, during four fifths of the dialogue, a purely secular discussion of language. It is only when this secular discussion breaks down, through the demonstration of two irreconcilable theses (we cannot teach without signs and signs teach nothing), that the Interior Teacher is brought in to explain how we know what we know. Thus *De Magistro* does more than demonstrate the existence of the Interior Teacher; it rehearses or acts out the process by which we become conscious of His presence, a process that involves the use of language to prove the limits of language. Like so many Herbert poems, *De Magistro* comes near to denying its own utility. And again, as in Herbert, the apparent defeat of language signals the failure of man's effort to weave himself into the sense of divine providence.

I have used the phrase "the apparent defeat of language," and the adjective was not a standard piece of academic caution. I now want to argue that Augustine's theory of language offers an escape from the dilemma posed by self-consuming artifacts, an explanation of how Herbert can both denigrate sacred poetry and allow his poems to stand, a justification for putting words in the mouth of God. This should not involve making Herbert into a more comfortable poet. If Augustine eventually offers a redemption of language, that redemption is only achieved at a price that both Herbert and his readers may be reluctant to pay. Barbara Harman has remarked:

We do not simply want to ask how the culture disables speech and selfhood, but also how, and in what ways, it enables them. The questions, of course, belong together and the mistake is not in asking the former but in *not* asking the latter.¹⁴

My contention is that *De Magistro* offers some illumination as to the way Herbert's particular religious culture enables speech. Let us postpone, for the moment, the question of selfhood, for it may well be that the disablement of self is the price exacted for the enablement of speech.

One of the most obviously self-consuming poems in *The Temple* is

¹⁴ Harman, *Costly Monuments*, p. 34.

“Jordan II” where, having described the frustrations involved in trying to write sacred poetry, Herbert concludes:

But while I bustled, I might hear a friend
Whisper, *How wide is all this long pretence!*
There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:
Copie out onlie that, and save expense.

It has been suggested that the “sweetnesse readie penn’d” refers to the word of God in Holy Scripture, but there is good reason to doubt whether this is the primary meaning. The poem, as most commentators have observed, is modelled on the opening sonnet of Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* where Astrophel, having vainly sought “fit words” and “inventions fine” (Herbert’s “quaint words and trim invention”), is told by the Muse, “look in thy heart and write.” The conclusion of “Jordan II” is analogous. The poet is not being invited to copy another book, but rather to consult the sweetness of love inscribed in his heart by the Interior Teacher. The final lines prove this by their very existence: they are not to be found in the Bible, and yet they are already copied, presented as the direct speech of an inner voice. We need not exclude a recourse to Scripture, but the priority is clear: before copying the Bible the poet copies the voice that instructs him to copy; he does what he is told by repeating what he is told.

The end of “Jordan II” is, therefore, both an instruction to copy and an acting out of that instruction. But where does this leave the rest of the poem? We are reminded of “Jordan I”:

I envie no mans nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with losse of rime,
Who plainly say, *My God, My King.*

To which it has been objected that we are indeed punished with “losse of rime” since the phrase “My God, My King,” though it may be a pious ejaculation, hardly constitutes a sacred poem. The problem is obvious enough. If sacred poetry can only be justified as a copy of “sweetnesse readie penn’d,” we must find some way of redeeming *all* the words in a poem and not simply those explicitly attributed to the Interior Teacher. And we can only redeem all the words if we see language as ultimately escaping from man’s intention and controlled by God’s providential design. As Herbert puts it in “The Flower”:

We say amisse,
 This or that is:
 Thy word is all, if we could spell.

It is worth remembering the multiple dictionary definitions of “spell”: to preach, to discourse, to read, to consider attentively, to decipher, to discover. One is tempted to rewrite “Thy word is all” as “All words are thine” and many more examples could be cited to show that in *The Temple* language is no less predestined than man. Here are two stanzas from “Assurance”:

But I will to my Father
 Who heard thee say it. O most gracious Lord,
 If all the hope and comfort that I gather,
 Were from my self, I had not half a word,
 Not half a letter to oppose
 What is objected by my foes.

But thou art my desert:
 And in this league, which now my foes invade,
 Thou art not onely to perform thy part,
 But also mine; as when the league was made
 Thou didst at once thy self indite,
 And hold my hand, while I did write.

When the Lord holds the poet’s hand, it is not only a gesture of comfort and guidance, but also an assertion of authority, of absolute control over the text. “Thou didst at once thy self indite” suggests not so much “you did the writing yourself” as “you made sure that the writing expressed your self, not mine.” Since the poet has no words of his own (“not half a word / Not half a letter”), one can only conclude that *all* the words in the poem belong to God, and thus there is no longer any radical difference between the words of the poet and words explicitly placed in the mouth of God.

And yet appearances do count for something. “Thy word is all, if we could spell”: some act of deciphering may be needed before we can see how man’s words belong to God. Many of Herbert’s poems seem designed to provoke this act of deciphering in the reader, and there is no better example than “The Collar.” This poem has already received so much detailed explication that another full-scale analysis would be superfluous here. It is, however, relevant to my theme because it demonstrates so perfectly the impossibility of escaping from God’s words. The speaker, in his quest for secular pleasures, uses imagery that recalls

the sacrament of Holy Communion and hence the true nature of the divine joys he proposes to abandon. Moreover, many of his statements ring true in a sense that runs counter to his rebellious intention.

Sure there was wine
 Before my sighs did drie it: there was corn
 Before my tears did drown it.

.....
 leave thy cold dispute
 Of what is fit and not. Forsake thy cage,
 Thy rope of sands
 Which pettie thoughts have made

.....
 He that forbears
 To suit and serve his need,
 Deserves his load.

A divine irony runs throughout, for it is indeed the speaker's sighs and tears, his "cold dispute" and "pettie thoughts" that prevent him from suiting and serving his need with the wine and corn of the sacrament.

Even at the phonic level the disorder of the speaker's rebellion seems to foreshadow the order of its resolution:

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
 At every word,
 Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*
 And I reply'd, *My Lord.*

One would need to read the whole poem aloud to demonstrate why the crucial words "Child" and "Lord" *sound* so inevitable. In fact, the "eye" and "or" sounds have been established from the start as the dominant vowels of the poem:

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more.
 I will abroad.
 What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
 My lines and life are free; free as the rode,
 Loose as the winde, as large as store.

There is no need to flog this kind of analysis to death; it is clear that the sounds that compose "Child" and "Lord" echo throughout the poem in a way that cannot be a coincidence. Thus our deciphering must lead to the recognition that the speaker, whatever his intention, has no chance of escaping from the constraints of a language that belongs to God. It is no accident that Herbert makes "word" rhyme with "Lord," for lan-

guage itself has become a divine "collar" that imprisons the human speaker. Further confirmation is provided by "Heaven" where God replies with answers that simply echo the last word of the speaker's question, the implication being that man is unable to formulate a question that does not already contain its divinely ordained answer. Or again one could look at "The Altar" where, at first sight, it seems contradictory that the poet should speak of rearing "a broken Altar" whereas what we see is a perfect altar-shape. But this, surely, is a way of demonstrating God's absolute control over language.

Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame
To praise thy name:
That if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.

The stones are, of course, words since this is an altar made of language; and words are predestined by God to praise Him, independently of the destiny or intention of the human speaker. In a very modern sense, the poet's utterance has been "framed" by God.

We should now be in a position to ask how *The Temple's* redemption of language is related to the linguistic theory of *De Magistro*. We have heard a great deal recently about the arbitrary sign and the non-transparency of language (much of it in a jargon that exemplifies non-transparency); but it is clear that Augustine's apparent denigration of language, his demonstration that signs cannot teach, belongs to a very different order of ideas. It is essentially a tactical move; human discourse is humbled in order to pave the way for a genuinely interior and transcendental epistemology. Words are reduced to their exteriority, to their materiality as mere sounds ("this noise of words which strikes your ears") only to reveal the interior basis of all communication. Words fail to communicate as long as we insist on thinking of dialogue as a horizontal man-to-man exchange. They are redeemed for communication when we posit a vertical dimension, when we recognize that all dialogue is triangular: you, me, God.¹⁵ To put it in aphoristic fashion, words do not give knowledge of the truth, but the truth that dwells within (the Interior Teacher) gives knowledge of words. And the passage we have already cited leaves no doubt that this is more than an explanation of

¹⁵ See Madec, DM, introduction, pp. 33-34.

how we achieve knowledge of salvation; it is a global epistemology “regarding all those things which we understand” (*De uniuersis autem quae intellegimus*). It is not hard to see where this leads. If only the Interior Teacher can grant meaning to words, then words can have no meaning contrary to His providential design. If words do not recall the truth that dwells within or provoke consultation with that truth, they will be simply meaningless, mere sounds uttered exteriorly. To read *The Temple* in this light is to understand how Herbert can both presume to put words in the mouth of God and allow his own supposedly personal utterance to remain on the page. There is no real danger. Since words make sense only when we consult the Interior Teacher, language must be considered as a closed system that is proof against all presumptuous intrusions of the self. As the “Dedication” puts it:

Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee;
 Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came,
 And must return. Accept of them and me,
 And make us strive, who shall sing best thy name.
 Turn their eyes hither, who shall make a gain:
 Theirs, who shall hurt themselves or me, refrain.

The poet’s words are so little his own that he is forced to compete with them, hoping to express in his own life and action some part of the divine praise that is already inscribed in language (“Accept of them and me, / And make us strive, who shall sing best thy name”). And the circular process of the “first fruits” that return to the Lord also involves the reader “who shall make a gain.” Herbert’s words derive from the Interior Teacher and they return to Him when the reader makes sense of them by consulting the same Teacher within his own mind.

Thus Herbert’s poems may be said to deny the significance of the experience they recount only insofar as they claim to be representations of the self in a horizontal dialogue between author and reader. But all man’s attempts to “weave [the] self into the sense” are dissipated when we consult the Interior Teacher, and such consultation is provoked by the fact that self-representation is shown as ultimately self-consuming. The linguistic theory of *De Magistro* does not ask us to contrast man’s false individual text with God’s true and universal one: it does imply that only God’s text, inscribed in our mind by the Interior Teacher, can make reading and meaning possible. Our experience of Herbert’s poetry is surely analogous. The inept speaker does, in fact, communicate, but

his very ineptitude suggests that the communication has little to do with his intention. He is “the author of the hearing”; we are taught to look elsewhere for “the author of the understanding.”

It could, of course, be argued that God’s hold over language as a closed system that expresses nothing but His design provides a constant source of tension in *The Temple*. But how do we react to this tension? It may depend largely on the reader’s own degree of Christian orthodoxy whether he sees the speaker of *The Temple* as a courageous individual desperately trying to assert the autonomy of human discourse in the face of God’s tyranny over words, or as a blinkered petulant pleader who vainly tries to evade the truth of the Interior Teacher by insisting on mere self-representation. *De Magistro* will not help us here. We remain as free as William Empson to put *The Temple* to subversive uses, provided we do not attribute a subversive purpose to the Augustinian poetics of George Herbert.