The Providential Rose: Herbert's Full Cosmos and Fellowship of Creatures

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Abstract

Though Herbert's writing is full of references to creatures and to human life in relation to non-human life, Herbert criticism has predominantly read his work as inner and devotional, often to the exclusion of the external and environmental. Richard Strier's claim that Herbert's deepest impulses require an empty cosmos, empty of all but him and God, is the most striking instance of this consensus. However, Wendell Berry finds in Herbert's poem "Providence" the choice expression of a very different theological view, one that celebrates not private intimacy with God, but rather a public and creaturely intimacy, shared with all creation. This article traces a line of thought inspired by Berry's observation, one that begins with Herbert's instructions to parsons on gardening and cultivating herbs, through Herbert's poem "The Rose" and its surface rejection of pleasure, to "Providence," where we find a deeply formed and provocative picture of a cosmos in which humanity serves as priest, in a priesthood defined not by mastery but by attention and articulation. Returning to "The Rose," we see that the poem grants the flower itself a mastery in which it teaches us, via its shared flesh and mind, as it participates with us in a fellowship of creatures.

> Now, if I do not give every thing its end, I abuse the Creature.
> *A Priest to the Temple* (265)[1]

In chapter 23, "The Parson's Completeness," of *A Priest to the Temple, or The Country Parson*, George Herbert gives parsons the beginnings of a list of plants to grow in their gardens, a list that includes roses. It is easy to lose sight of how essential gardening was to Herbert. Herbert writes about plants often, both as plants and as vehicles for other things, but this speech is easily overlooked, like plants themselves, for (I will venture) two reasons. One, we tend to read Herbert as a poet moving from vehicle to tenor. No matter how sharp and strikingly material Herbert's verse gets, we proceed as if knowing that he has his poetic mind on other things. He appears to tell us so himself, for instance in "Vertue," which celebrates the day, the rose, and Spring before declaring that only the seasoned soul "chiefly lives," though the world "turn to coal" (15-16). And this leads us to the second reason: we proceed as if Herbert's Christianity tells us that material life does not ultimately matter. It seems that Herbert's poetic Christianity doubly informs us that we should look past the plants to that which they signify. But we are inclined to overlook the stubbornly persistent doctrine of bodily resurrection, a resurrection Herbert names as fleshly and which makes it impossible to privilege the spiritual over against the material.[2] As "Faith" says, though the body turns to dust, Faith "cleaves unto it […] [R]eserving all for flesh again" (42-44). And, as Jessica Rosenberg points out, "Vertue" does not simply contrast the material world and the soul but balances the moral and material senses of the word "virtue," first celebrating "the seasonal flux of material 'vertue'" (or power) before turning "to the 'season'd timber' of the virtuous soul" (Rosenberg 94). The poem's attention to the gathering and compacting or combining of plants suggests not the hard divide between nature and grace that characterizes Puritan and later Protestant thought, but rather that such attention itself has spiritual value. In Herbert's *Temple* and *Priest to the Temple* we find a manifestly bodily sense of the plant, a shared humoral nature key to human health. And we find that plants share with humanity not only a kindness (both a shared nature and a fellow-feeling)

of the flesh but also a kindness of mind.[3] For Herbert, nature serves grace, and natural vertue becomes party to the transforming work of grace in producing virtue as seasonal life itself helps season not only the body but also the soul.

The reconsideration of Herbert as gardener addresses a crux in readings of Herbert's poetry and religion, a crux I will show here by considering two very different readers of Herbert. Richard Strier, weighing the various concerns of Herbert, finds that his "orientation is fundamentally devotional" (167) and that, while Herbert does write about the world, his "deepest religious impulses require an empty rather than a 'full' cosmos" (168). Strier means something specific by this, to which I will return, but my point here is that in his reading the turn away from vehicle toward tenor and the turn away from the world toward God fit each other exactly. His is a particularly sharp articulation of Protestant and secular thought since Herbert: faith is private and inward and concerned with heaven and not earth. The other reader, Wendell Berry—not a Herbert critic but a farmer, writer, and environmental activist—pictures Herbert in a way exactly opposite to Strier's view:

> We and all other creatures live by a sanctity that is inexpressibly intimate, for to every creature, the gift of life is a portion of the breath and spirit of God. As the poet George Herbert put it:
> *Thou are in small things great, not small in any* […]
> *For thou art infinite in one and all.* (Berry 98)

Both Strier and Berry recognize in Herbert a poetic capacity to produce a real sense of intimacy with God. They differ sharply though: Strier says that Herbert's intimacy with God happens as he turns away from everything else, while for Berry that intimacy happens as Herbert realizes it is shared with all life, all creatures.

In this article, I will reconsider one of Herbert's "world-renouncing" poems, "The Rose," in light of the poem from which Berry quotes, "Providence." My argument in a nutshell is that "The Rose" is indeed a poem of renunciation, but that the renunciation it achieves is not a turn from the world or from the rose itself but rather a turn from the appetitive posture that consumes the world. Its turn from appetite for

pleasure is a turn toward the rose as a plant and as a fellow creature, one that can be broken down into remedies, but one that is better recognized as a teacher. "Providence" crucially fills in the picture that makes this turn possible by showing that Herbert's intimacy with God happens as he recognizes his own creatureliness, becoming open in body and spirit to the ministrations of fellow creatures. And, paradoxically, this work of recognition happens in Herbert through the hierarchical figure of the priest.

The Parson's Garden

In Chapter 23 of *A Priest to the Temple,* "The Parson's Completeness," Herbert addresses the variety of knowledge required of a country parson, including a working familiarity with both law and medicine. Of the two, it is medicine that most attracts Herbert's theological imagination, and within medicine it is the herbal that he delights in, for many reasons: herbal knowledge and practice is readily affordable and available to all, it is located in the immediate environment, and it most readily lends itself to spiritual insight, as it is in itself the presence of the wisdom of God:

> In the knowledge of simples, wherein the manifold wisedome of God is wonderfully to be seen, one thing would be carefully observed; which is, to know what herbs may be used in stead of drugs of the same nature, and to make the garden the shop: For home-bred medicines are both more easie for the Parsons purse, and more familiar for all mens bodyes. So, where the Apothecary useth either for loosing, Rubarb, or for binding, Bolearmena, the Parson useth damask or white Roses for the one, and plantaine, shepherds purse, knot-grasse for the other, and that with better successe. (261)

Natural vertue—the knowledge of simples—does not compete with Grace but rather serves it:

> Now both the reading of [the method of phisick], and the knowing of herbs may be done at such times, as they may be an help, and a recreation to more divine studies, Nature serving Grace both in comfort of diversion, and the benefit of application when need requires; as also by way of illustration, even

> as our Saviour made plants and seeds to teach the people: for he was the true householder, who bringeth out of his treasure things new and old; the old things of Philosophy, and the new of Grace; and maketh the one serve the other. (261)

Nature serves Grace as the parson reads and knows herbs, a practice that assists his studies in Divinity. The parson in this way follows the example of Christ, the true householder. For Herbert the parson's work brings together the old knowledge and the new: the Adamic priesthood and the Christian ministry join. Herbert observes that one reason Jesus used plants and seeds to teach the people was to "set a Copy for Parsons" (261). For Herbert, the parson follows Christ in part by making the garden the shop. To put this in terms of current concerns, we might say that for Herbert priesthood involves knowing oneself as a body in a particular place and in relationship to other bodies, understanding a local boundedness felt not as limitation but as constituting the familiar relationships that make well-being. Here is Wendell Berry's Herbert.

Thinking with and about "The Rose"

We see the gardener-parson's sensibility in action in "The Rose." The poem presents as a religious voice we might expect, one renouncing pleasure and the world.[4] Upon further reading, though, we might hear a renunciation not of the world but of the appetite that gluttonously feeds upon it, and instead of that gluttony, a call to attend to a plant, a rose. We might ask whether a plant is good to think with or good to think about.[5] Herbert offers a third choice: that a plant might school us. For my purposes, I will name "thinking with" as the emblematic and symbolic reading of the rose and "thinking about" as the humoral reading of the rose. We can think with a rose about other things (beauty, love, Christ) or, thinking about a rose, consider how its parts might be medicinally reconstituted for our health. And both of these Herbert does. But to stop at either would be to miss how thoroughly Herbert takes us to plant school, to have us learn from our kin.

The poem's speaker responds to an offer of pleasure with a flat refusal. We do not hear the offer, only the sharp trochaic response:

> Presse me not to take more pleasure
>   In this world of sugred lies,
> And to use a larger measure
>   Then my strict, yet welcome size. (1-4)

Whatever the offer, the speaker has immediately reframed it as to "take more pleasure," and to "use a larger measure" than his own strict size. Our strictly regulated speaker refuses the offer, following his forthright "press me not" with a supporting logic:

> First, there is no pleasure here:
>   Colour'd griefs indeed there are,
> Blushing woes, that look as cleare
>   As if they could beautie spare.
>
> Or if such deceits there be,
>   Such delights I meant to say;
> There are no such things to me,
>   Who have pass'd my right away. (5-12)

There is no pleasure in this vision of the rose, only beautified suffering, or alternately, any delight is no delight to the speaker who has surrendered his right to such delight as the world offers. Herbert fashions himself a disciplinarian, rejecting earthly delights, creating an awkward situation by contrasting his own discipline with his host's hospitality, which he equates with deceit. The poem—and social situation—turns on the volta of the following stanza:

> But I will not much oppose
>   Unto what you now advise;
> Onely take this gentle rose,
>   And therein my answer lies. (13-16)

Until its turn in line 13, the poem sounds much like the overly-scrupulous demands of "Conscience": "Not a fair look, but thou dost call it

foul: / Not a sweet dish, but thou dost call it sowre" (2-3). No matter how welcome the size, the first three stanzas work by negation only. But then the speaker stops his opposition and instead offers the gift of a gentle rose. The lesson changes. It no longer denies pleasure but itself becomes pleasurable, a delightful rebuke:

> What is fairer then a rose?
> What is sweeter? yet it purgeth.
> Purgings enmitie disclose,
> Enmitie forbearance urgeth.
>
> If then all that worldlings prize
> Be contracted to a rose;
> Sweetly there indeed it lies,
> But it biteth in the close.
>
> So this flower doth judge and sentence
> Worldly joyes to be a scourge:
> For they all produce repentance,
> And repentance is a purge.
>
> But I health, not physick choose:
> Onely though I you oppose,
> Say that fairly I refuse,
> For my answer is a rose. (17-32)

The pleasures of the rose are a kind of trap: it is fair and sweet, and yet it bites and purges. These stanzas develop an argument in two parts: the rose is fairest and sweetest, and yet the rose also purges, discovering enmity and urging forbearance. More particularly, the "if" of line 21 sets out a condition: *if* worldly desire be contracted to a rose, then the rose sweetly lies and bites. Both meanings of "lies" pertain. Imagine the rose as an object of desire, and it will deceptively appear passively available, but when one grasps it, its thorns bite. Likewise, both senses of "contract" are in play. "Worldlings" can bind themselves to the rose as an object of desire and simultaneously shrink their desires to that object. But in this action, the plant itself resists contraction to object of desire and insists on a different relationship. It corrects its misuse, turning worldly joy to a scourge.

Is the poem thinking with or about the rose? Helen Vendler celebrates the poem as an achievement of gentle rejection, arising from Herbert's "more-than-delicate conscience" (86). Vendler shows Herbert thinking with a rose. In her reading the speaker has been offered a rose and returns a rose (see 84). What changes is the rose's emblematic meaning: an emblem of pleasure is poetically transformed into an emblem of health.

While Vendler demonstrates how Herbert thinks *with* a rose, Coburn Freer shows how he thinks *about* a rose. He offers a reading tonally different from Vendler's, in which Herbert tells an earthy joke "at his questioner's expense," one that his "parishioners might well have understood and appreciated [...]. Disclaiming all general interest in physic, he offers a common laxative" (163-64). Herbert delicately says something indelicate, reminding the audience of the effects of overeating, lightly tracing the outline of the scatological, leaving it to the hearer to figure out. Even as the speaker chooses words that rise above the physicality of digestion, the syntax suggests the bodily tension of indigestion: "Purgings enmitie disclose, / Enmitie forbearance urgeth" (19-20). Overindulgence obstructs the body, producing a close that bites, whereas purging discloses.

As we have seen, Herbert certainly thinks about roses. As he writes in "Providence," "A rose, besides his beautie, is a cure" (78). John Gerard's *Herball* praises the rose as deserving "the chiefest and most principall place among all floures" for its beauty, "vertues," and fragrant smell, as well as its symbolism of the English scepter (1259), but is mostly interested in the second of these, its vertues or uses in treating illness. These vertues arise from the plant's humoral "temperature." Like the humoral human body, the body of the rose has an overall complexion combining humours.

If we for a moment take Vendler's picture, that the speaker has been offered a rose, then the speaker, thinking about roses, mentally breaks down the rose into its parts, identifying those parts by their medicinal effect on the human body, in which its sweetness gives way to purging, disclosing enmity. He avoids/voids the rose's beauty by reducing it to,

as Freer says, a laxative. This reading gives insight, but not enough. Herbert offers back the best of flowers, beautiful and fragrant and good for loosening the obstructed human body. But the poem decidedly does not reduce the whole rose to its remedial parts, but, rather, having drawn attention to the remedying effects of the rose, returns to the rose in its wholeness. To understand how our gardener-parson is thinking with and about the rose, we need to read "Providence."

The Full Cosmos of "Providence"

"Providence" gives us the cosmic setting in which "The Rose" and the gardener-parson dwell. But its status is contested. Strier downplays the poem as presenting a philosophical picture that gives no spiritual consolation. His conclusion that Herbert prefers an empty cosmos arises from a reading that splits Herbert's cosmological and devotional concerns, prioritizing the latter over the former. The philosophical problem of the full cosmos is that it paradoxically leaves no room for the freedom of God. God rules over it but has left himself with no space to move. Arthur O. Lovejoy, in his classic study *The Great Chain of Being*, quotes Herbert's "Providence" in order to illustrate this fullness (see 60):

> Thy creatures leap not, but expresse a feast,
> Where all the guests sit close, and nothing wants.
> Frogs marry fish and flesh; bats, bird and beast;
> Sponges, non-sense and sense; mines, th'earth & plants. (133-36)

The Chain of Being has the qualities of plenitude, continuity, and unilinear gradation; it has no lack and cannot have lack. Herbert's "feast" of creation is full: there are no empty spaces, and the in-between creatures such as frogs and bats show that every possibility has been realized, in one continuous hierarchy. Strier argues that this idea of fullness—a closed and full universe already containing all possibilities—answers a cosmological question but not Herbert's devotional one. The

latter demands a different solution, for which Strier points to "Longing," a poem that evokes the Great Chain as well as the Book of Nature but finds in them no satisfaction and demands instead the radical and decisive movement of God, a God who will drop all things and attend to Herbert. The difference, as Strier puts it, is between "the static cosmos of philosophical theology and the dynamic world of practical devotion. A full cosmos leaves no room for movement or response" (171).

But to put "Providence" and "Longing" in a contest is to misread both. "Providence" is a hexameral poem, a hymn of creation that does not mean to also account for redemption, but that rather assumes this redemption. And "Longing" does not turn from a picture of cosmic harmony to a devotional remedy but rather utters a cosmic agony, one registering deeply in the heart. The two must be read together.

To be clear, I agree entirely with Strier that Herbert cannot be consoled by a philosophy of cosmic fullness. Notably, the "guests sit close" of "Providence" becomes in "Longing": "Thy board is full, yet humble guests / Finde nests" (53-54). The "yet" is profound: when one does not feel kindness, then fullness turns to exclusion; "Longing"'s desire for the kindness of Christ shifts the vision of a full nature to one of exceptional inclusion, thus breaking the rule of fullness. Herbert ultimately is less interested in demonstrating the beauty of the Chain of Being than in the difficulty and possibility of finding a place of kindness, of intimacy, of belonging. But for Herbert the relationship of beauty and belonging is not a contest. "Longing" does not only find the Great Chain unsatisfying; it presents the Gospel story itself, in the most direct of terms, and finds *it* unsatisfying: "Lord, didst thou leave thy throne, / Not to relieve?" (61-62). For Herbert, Christ must be the Lord of creation *and* of salvation, a fact powerfully affirmed by the answering poem "The Bag," which presents a picture of the Son of God spontaneously descending, "undressing all the way," through not an empty space but a full one, being made glorious through the descent itself. Crucially, Herbert does not answer the love cry of "Longing" with the one-on-one experience of "Love (III)" but with a story of the Lord of the Cosmos who becomes flesh, reveals his heart, and joins creaturely humanity

with God. In "The Bag," the Son moves radically and decisively through a full universe. Everything he touches becomes blessed, becoming fuller in his descent.

In Herbert's hands the Chain of Being does not chain God and does not prevent intimacy, and so Strier's claim that Herbert prefers an empty cosmos rings hollow. In fact, the moment that Lovejoy quotes him, Herbert turns and defies the Chain's constraining logic:

> To show thou art not bound, as if thy lot
> Were worse then ours; sometimes thou shiftest hands.
> Most things move th' under-jaw; the Crocodile not.
> Most things sleep lying; th' Elephant leans or stands. (137-40)

The human philosophical problem of a God bound by the fullness of his own creation gives way to an active and engaging sense of wonder, where exception becomes not only natural but also theologically and devotionally delightful.[6] And here we see a deep Herbertian commitment to trouble logical structures that would bind or convert God to a structure or principle.

Herbert's insistence on the intimacy of God, irreducible to formulation, can be felt from the beginning of "Providence," which figures Providence itself not within a picture of a diachronic eye in heavens watching history unfold (as Raleigh's *History of the World* frontispiece 1614) but as experienced in a synchronic creaturely closeness, felt in quill in hand.

> O sacred Providence, who from end to end
> Strongly and sweetly movest! shall I write,
> And not of thee, through whom my fingers bend
> To hold my quill? shall they not do thee right?
>
> Of all the creatures both in sea and land
> Onely to Man thou hast made known thy wayes,
> And put the penne alone into his hand,
> And made him Secretarie of thy praise. (1-8)

Herbert comments on the physical action of writing not often but to striking effect, such as in "Jordan (I)": "there is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd: / Copie out onely that" (17-18). But only in this poem—

in which he asks the characteristic Herbertian question "shall I write, / And not of thee?"—does he use the word "quill." He looks at his hand and sees the flight feather of a bird, crafted by hand into a pen, and he sees his fingers curving around it.[7] The materiality of writing matters in this passage, and more particularly, the interrelatedness of creatures matters at this moment. He is about to sing of creatures, and he cannot do so without an instrument made of another creature, and he cannot do so without the strong and sweet movement of Providence through his fingers as through all things.[8]

It is the creaturely closeness of "Providence" that Strier most crucially misses. Herbert sings of creatures as a creature. To be sure, Herbert is clear on the uniqueness of humanity. God has, of all the creatures, put the pen only into man's hand. But the particularity does not trump the commonality; it rather entirely depends upon it. The central action of the poem is its offer of worship, an offer made on behalf of all creatures:

> Wherefore, most sacred Spirit, I here present
> *For me and all my fellows* praise to thee. (25-26; italics mine)

Tellingly, Strier says of these lines that "Herbert *speaks not for himself* but for 'all the creatures both in sea and land'" (169; italics mine). However, this is not what the poem says. Herbert presents praise for himself *and* others. And what is more, the everyday affection of "me and all my fellows" expresses not just connection but friendly intimacy and, indeed, solidarity. Herbert speaks as one of a fellowship, and this fellowship of creatures spells out a sensibility gently present throughout his work.[9] To miss it is to miss how profoundly embodied a poet Herbert is, with consequences both for how we read his poetry and what we might learn from him about Christian spirituality and ecology.

Strier himself has best pointed to the centrality of creation doctrine to Herbert, showing how "Love (III)" depicts *agape*, the love that creates its object (see 78-83). "Who made the eyes but I?" Love asks (12). At its most intimate, most personal, Herbert's poetry discovers creation; at its greatest moment of grace, the poetry finds nature redeemed. That this redemption should not be understood exclusive of the rest of the world

is registered in Herbert's use of "creature": "Providence" includes five of the eleven times that Herbert uses the word in *The Temple.* For Herbert, "creature" marks not only a distinction but ongoing relationships: humanity is to God creature to Creator, in which creation is not complete but rather the condition of existence.[10] As he says in *A Priest to the Temple* "Preservation is a Creation; and more, it is a continued Creation, and a creation every moment" (*Works* 281). In *The Temple* this relationship-acknowledging distinction between Creator and creature unites creation. Herbert either applies it directly to himself, to humanity, or to all creation. Herbert's extraordinary sense of intimacy with God is profoundly of a piece with his fellowship of creatures.

Joel Swann has pointed out the tenderness Herbert has for herbs, a sharing of names that he seems to have enjoyed.[11] In "Man" Herbert writes that "Herbs gladly cure our flesh; because that they / Finde their acquaintance there" (23-24). This sharing of flesh with herbs comes as no offense to Herbert but as friendship, one humans are apt to overlook, forget, and abuse:

> More servants wait on Man,
> Then he'l take notice of: in ev'ry path
> He treads down that which doth befriend him,
> When sicknesse makes him pale and wan. (43-46)

Herbert here goes further than scripture, which in Genesis 2 declares herb life the common food of man, beast, fish, and fowl (see Shannon 4). While the great "what is man?" psalm, Psalm 8, declares that all things are under man's feet, the herb being under foot in Herbert's "Man" refigures mastery as oafishness. This inter-species friendship is not only figurative, and not only material:

> All things unto our *flesh* are kinde
> In their *descent* and *being*; to our minde
> In their *ascent* and *cause*. (34-36)

Herbert works in neither a human-animal dualism nor in a spirit-flesh dualism. While another poem, "Dulnesse," describes the condition of dullness as being lost in flesh, unable to find mind, "Man" confirms that what humanity shares with all creation is both flesh and mind. Herbert does not feel squeamish about flesh itself and about sharing it with plants and animals. To be lost in flesh as a sin-sick soul is the opposite of being keenly aware of one's creaturely connection to other creatures. And alternately, in "Vanitie (I)", the scientist or "subtle Chymick" "devest[s] and strip[s] the creature naked" finding "callow principles" and imparting "his minde" (15-18). As described by Herbert, this way of knowing, based on a human-creature binary, involves not fellow-feeling but violation and imposition.

Again, Strier is right that the creation itself does not console Herbert. On the one hand, he often feels displaced from it, as in "Employment" (1):

> I am no link of thy great chain,
> But all my companie is a weed.
> Lord place me in thy consort; give one strain
> To my poore reed. (21-24)

And, on the other hand, while he takes pleasure in the created world, he is keenly aware of its creaturely mortal limits, as in "Vertue":

> Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
> The bridall of the earth and skie:
> The dew shall weep thy fall to night;
> For thou must die. (1-4)

Even more importantly, he understands that to look for consolation primarily in the created world is idolatrous. As he puts it in "The Pulley," there is no rest, no ultimate consolation, in creation itself. If there were, then humanity "would adore my gifts in stead of me, / And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature" (13-14).[12]

What, then, is the purpose of "Providence," if not consolation? The poem does not long for consolation but rather takes up the human

priestly vocation of offering praise, a priestly action that paradoxically requires humble attention to the smallest of creatures as well as the large. The poem is a hymn of praise, one that simultaneously recognizes that the hymn will happen whether or not humanity sings and sharply prods humanity to take up its particular vocation.

The prod to sing comes by way of a sharp distinction between humanity and the other creatures, a distinction framed as capacity and lack:

> Beasts fain would sing; birds dittie to their notes;
> Trees would be tuning on their native lute
> To thy renown: but all their hands and throats
> Are brought to Man, while they are lame and mute.
>
> Man is the worlds high Priest: he doth present
> The sacrifice for all; while they below
> Unto the service mutter an assent,
> Such as springs use that fall, and windes that blow. (9-16)

The claim that "Man is the worlds high Priest," voicing praise on behalf of a mute world must strike environmentally-conscious readers as inappropriate and even arrogant. And, as Debra Rienstra observes in her article on "George Herbert and the Metamorphoses of Devotion," what begins as an apparently arrogant declaration of human superiority is gradually revealed in the poem as a call to receive the guidance of all creatures.[13] So, given that the sense of non-human creaturely lack diminishes and even disappears in the poem, we might ask why Herbert introduces it. The distinction itself is substantial: Herbert is talking about the uniquely human gift of speech and its right end. And the sharpness of the distinction works here as a prod, not to encourage human arrogance but to puncture it. This is no celebration of Man but a call to action: it is important that we not separate speaking on behalf of the creatures on the one hand and receiving guidance from those creatures on the other. The boldness of Herbert's declaration of human priesthood is necessary because that role constitutes the imperative to listen and receive. While listening requires utmost humility and quiet,

it must not be mistaken for a state admitting complacency or one of lordly prerogative.[14] As Herbert insists from the beginning of the poem, the demand of the position is urgent, and as he draws to a conclusion, the demand exceeds the capacity of fallen humanity.

Further, Herbert's naming of Man as world's high priest invokes the Adamic priesthood and thus involves all people in the vocation of the gardener priest, a vocation that calls all into active attention outward. If we are ashamed of how we have collectively behaved in relation to other creatures and the creation, then notably Herbert gives no room to indulge this shame—no more room than he does in "Love (III)."[15] Though he surely did not have this possibility in mind, he has left no room for a denial of human capacity and particularity; rather, he insists that humanity do well that which only humanity can do.

But what is more crucial than the declaration of humanity as the world's high priest is the way that the poem characterizes Providence itself. The character of Providence deeply defines what it means to be figured as priest. Providence, again, is not the far-off view of a disembodied eye; it is a movement to be felt and a song to be heard. And with this sense the Chain of Being gives way to something more organic and intimate. Notably, Herbert describes both the reading of Scripture and the reading of nature as a responsiveness to the Holy Spirit, and Herbert's language for both is strikingly parallel. In "Providence" he addresses the "most sacred Spirit" who "sweetly temper'st all. *If we could heare* / Thy skill and art, what musick would it be!" (25, 39-40; italics mine). For Calvin sin blinds humanity, but here sin has deafened us.[16] Herbert uses the same conditional mode in "The Flower" for biblical reading: "Thy word is all, *if we could spell*" (21; italics mine).

Herbert's priest figure here is not a worldly master but the gardener-parson-poet who attends to the wisdom of each creature in a world in which use and wonder accompany each other. That any creature is useful to human life becomes a matter of praise. For example, the coconut becomes a divine marvel: "The Indian nut alone / Is clothing, meat and trencher, drink and kan, / Boat, cable, sail and needle, all in one" (126-28). The more ordinary things are, the more one is inclined to take them

as a matter of natural course, the more Herbert riddles us into the sense that they are everyday graces:

> Light without winde is glasse: warm without weight
> Is wooll and furre: cool without closenesse, shade:
> Speed without pains, a horse: tall without height,
> A servile hawk: low without losse, a spade. (101-04)

Far from celebrating the dominion of humanity, the poem enacts human life as participation in a world of relationships in which meanings are not fixed but discovered in awe and gratitude.[17]

While "Providence" begins with the characteristic Herbertian problem—the problem of directing poetry to its true beloved—poetry itself can only ever accomplish this within the paradox of its own lack, its own superfluity (see Todd 109). The Gospel axiom that God's strength is made perfect in human weakness comes home here in a particular way: that humans as "secretar[ies] of praise" can only faithfully inscribe what they hear by way of submission, attending to the infinity of God in the herb.[18] Human humility is paradoxically central to the action of praise:

> But who hath praise enough? nay, who hath any?
> None can expresse thy works, but he that knows them:
> And none can know thy works, which are so many,
> And so complete, but onely he that owes them.
>
> All things that are, though they have sev'rall wayes,
> Yet in their being joyn with one advise
> To honour thee: and so I give thee praise
> In all my other hymnes, but in this twice. (141-48)

This poem praises God twice, as an offering of praise (as in "all my other hymns") and in the very creaturely being of the writer, whose fingers bend to hold his quill.[19] The double praise of "Providence" is in the *agape* realization that the Creator has made the singer.

As the human creature takes up the role of priest in "Providence," poetry becomes kind, following the kindness of the herb. The herb in kindness heals the body as the poem in kindness both praises God and

tunes poet and reader to praise. And here I will pick up the terms I introduced earlier. The poem both thinks with and about creatures, paradoxically taking up its hierarchical role by being schooled.

The Providential Rose

So how does "The Rose" move providentially? The poem does not sing praise but rather offers a reparative rebuke. It demands that we not take the rose for less than it is but gestures toward a fullness, a creaturely wisdom that exceeds itself. To tease this out, I will follow Vendler's lead and picture the scene, imagining what has been offered, to which the rose acts as return. Instead of imagining the original offer of a rose, let us think about how and how much roses were used. As in the Middle East today, in Early Modern England roses were not only viewed and smelled but were also consumed. Given the ubiquity of rose water and even rose petals in sweets let us imagine not a rose being offered but instead some delicacy made of a rose. Let us imagine that the poem offers back a whole rose for roses broken down for artificial pleasure.

Returning to Gerard, one learns that one of the most common uses of the rose was in confections: "pretty things made of roses and sugar" (1265).[20] Rose petals were also "stamped" in order to produce "the most fine and pleasant yellow colour that may be devised, not only to limne or wash pictures and Imagerie in books, but also to colour meates and sauces" (1268). What if our speaker is not simply trading on a bit of spoiler knowledge to deflate a festive atmosphere but instead speaks out of a daily knowledge of plants? The first stanza of the poem, with its "press me not" rejection of "sugred lies" (1-2) in favour of a "strict" (4) diet, fits as a response to an invitation to eat a (one more?) "pretty thing" (Gerard 1265). The "[c]olour'd griefs" and "[b]lushing woes" of the second stanza respond to the decorative colours produced with roses. The speaker does not introduce the rose as an object lesson; he is offered pleasures and instead sees roses, the roses constituting the deceits/delights before him. He declines artifice made of roses and instead offers a real one, a whole rose.

What is this artificial rose our speaker has been offered? Hannah Wooley, in *The Ladies Directory,* gives some idea of the possibilities. Wooley, who as the title page proclaims, "hath had the honour to perform such things for the entertainment of his late majesty, as well as for the nobility," presents "choice Experiments and Curiosities," recipes that could be made by people with the resources, usually sugar, flour, and rose water, which is almost ubiquitous in the book. The products of these recipes range from preserved fruits and candied flowers to cakes and "rich court perfumes," to medicinal waters. (The inclusion of the latter suggests that Herbert's poem operates not within a sharp cultural binary but rather within a common concern to mix pleasure and health.) Most cake recipes in the book include rose water (usually mixed with large quantities of sugar), and so our speaker could be responding in "The Rose" to many things. Yet some recipes stand out, in light of the poem, for their use of roses for both flavour and colour. For instance, "sugar plate" uses rose water and flower petals (of burrage, roses, or marigolds) for colour (7). And sugar plate itself is used to make lozenges, which can be used to "perfume wine" (16). Alternately, "A pretty sweet-meat taught me by a Jew" also uses the standard rose water boiled with sugar, as well as almonds, and also "two ounces of the leaves of Damask roses, beaten fine" (55). The rose here accounts for both the "sweet" and the "pretty" of the treat. The flower becomes reconstituted most artfully, though, in Candied Flowers, whole petals (minus their white, bitter tips) saturated in hot liquid sugar, and dried on a clean cloth: little sweet roses.

Besides presenting a real rose as the source of ingredients, there is a humoral sense in which Herbert presents the whole body of the flower, a body akin to the bodies of the speaker and auditor. In other words, in presenting the source, even the laxative (that source's effect), the speaker presents a body that affects bodies. Even as he plays on the laxative effect, Herbert presents a thing that cannot be reduced to either that effect or to the effect of beauty and taste achieved in the confection. "My answer is a rose" (32) should be taken seriously, as it finally appeals not to a disembodied symbolic meaning but to an irreducible

body, with its own nature and effects on other bodies, with which it shares humoral parts. This is ultimately a play on the flesh, on the flesh's claims on the soul, as it were. The wholeness of the rose unites beauty and truth, both delighting and judging the beholder.

Nature's grace becomes evident as we attend to the flower, and in this sense the poem's opening words might take us back to the talking rose of "The Quip." For a fleeting moment, as we move from the title "The Rose" to the poem's first words, "press me not," we might just think that the rose itself is speaking.[21] And even though remedies as well as confections come through the pressing of the rose, this hint of the rose's own voice returns to the sense in "Providence" that, as "Trees would be tuning," roses also might have something to say, given that "each creature hath a wisdome for his good" (61). It is the wisdom of the rose that this poem articulates. To return to the Herbertian lines quoted by Berry, "thou art in small things great, not small in any" ("Providence" 41).

"The Rose" invites its audience to look again, to know and to learn from the rose itself as a fellow creature. It presents the rose as a body to be read, like the poem itself, which does not so much, as Vendler says, accompany the rose as evoke it. And the poem itself presses as the life of the flower of "Repentance" (2-6): its trochaic rhythm and catalectic endings produce an energetic and clipped effect. The flower is not pressed, but it presses. The deictic "*this* flower" (25; italics mine) has a particularity to it that signals both an actual flower and suggests the poem itself as a rose, a song of the rose that is both a recognition and an uttering of the unvoiced.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Herbert gives us a way between a cosmos-emptying interiority and a romanticizing of nature: a creaturely seriousness toward God and neighbour, in which the latter names all kinds of kinship. This seriousness takes the form of Herbert's "strict, yet welcome size" ("The

Rose" 4). Zane Calhoun Johnson argues that for Herbert humanity communes with the other creatures "primarily though the act of ingestion" (142), and that the belly is the primary location of inter-creaturely connection. Herbert does attend and celebrate the close interweaving of the creation in what we call the food chain. But notably "The Rose" pivots on the speaker's resolve not to consume the flower, either as "sugred" "pleasure" (1-2) *or* as "physick" (29), and rather to choose health, a health observable in the unconsumed rose. Is this a rejection of the creaturely communion that Johnson sees? Herbert's strictness of diet, his renunciation of appetite, has a "double aime": "either of Abstinence a morall vertue, or Mortification a divine" (*Works* 267). Ingestion is certainly part of Herbert's picture, but there is a creaturely fellow feeling that precedes it, a corporally-grounded relationship that abides whether Herbert is eating or not.

If not eating is the ground of creaturely communion for Herbert, then what? Herbert takes flowers as parallel lives; his presentation of the rose in its wholeness as a sign of the healthy person in this poem should be understood in connection to "The Flower's" more fully developed sense of creaturely fellow feeling, especially as the poem imagines the hidden life of flowers in winter:

> Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart
> Could have recover'd greennesse? It was gone
> Quite under ground; as flowers depart
> To see their mother-root, when they have blown;
> Where they together
> All the hard weather,
> Dead to the world, keep house unknown. (8-14)

Herbert's plain and striking "who would have thought?" moves to a "shrivel'd heart" and then, through an enjambment, into "greennesse": Herbert has figured himself as plant life so naturally that we barely register the figuration, before taking us to a place we can never visit, where the mother-root keeps house.[22]

We see this fellowship also in "Life" where Herbert bids "deare flowers" farewell, observing that when alive they are fit "for smell or ornament / And after death for cures" (14-15). He continues: "I follow straight without complaints or grief, / Since if my sent [scent] be good, I care not, if / It be as short as yours" (16-18). In the matter of the greatest importance for creaturely bodies, Herbert takes a lesson in faithfulness from below.[23]

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NOTES

[1]All Herbert references are to Hutchinson. Poems are cited by line number, prose by page number.

[2]On the general persistence of the doctrine in Christian history, see Bynum 1-17; and for its seventeenth century life, see Gil 1-28.

[3]I use "humanity" for Herbert's "man" in accordance with current use, but the term problematically suggests a human/animal binary that, as Laurie Shannon argues and as this essay bears out, was foreign to early seventeenth century England and to Herbert; see Shannon 1-28.

[4]Jack Goody explains the complex history of Christianity and flowers, especially roses, which from the beginning of the faith were rejected as signs of luxury but which came to be spiritual signs (see 120). Important here is the reconciling of theology and botany in the thirteenth century (see 150).

[5]Shannon (5) raises Levi-Strauss's question of thinking *with* and offers in response thinking *about*.

[6]As Russell M. Hillier puts it, "All creatures in Herbert's providential account of Creation are thrilling with mystery" (639).

[7]Unlike in Hollywood depictions, quill-making includes cutting off all the feather's barbs. What Herbert observes looks more like a pen than a feather.

[8]Vaughan's "The Book" develops this sense more fully.

[9]Herbert's naming of other creatures as "fellows" was not unique—Montaigne had called animals "fellow-brethren" while John Rowland would later refer to other creatures as "fellow-commoners"; see Shannon 4.

[10]Julia Reinhard Lupton in the opening of "Creaturely Caliban" points out that the word "creature" derives from the future-active participle *creatura*, indicating an ongoing action: "the *creatura* is a thing always in the process of undergoing creation" (1). She further observes that "*creature* marks the radical separation of creation and creator" (1). For Herbert, and for the very idea of providence, there is a radical *distinction* rather than *separation*. Perhaps the dilemma represented by Caliban arises as humans assume mastery over other humans, an assumption that presumes separation from the Creator.

[11]Joel Swann, "Herbert's Herbs," as presented at the Paris George Herbert Conference, May 20, 2017.

[12]The devotional and ethical end of the contemplation of Providence is to counter human pride. As the introduction to the 1602 English translation of Theodoret's *Mirror of Divine Providence* puts it, "at this time, wherein Atheisme like an ill weed, is growne to such height, as it seemeth to ouershadow the plants of true Religiō, while men attributing to Nature, what belongs properly to the Creator of Nature, do both depriue God of his glory, and also discouer their impiety, to the danger of their owne soules, and the hurt of others" [A2r].

[13]Angela Balla goes further, describing the speaker's "fallen anthropocentrism that corrupts the speaker's joy with smugness" (297). I especially appreciate Balla's critical sharpness in her conference paper, as it motivated me to respond. My sense of both Balla and Rienstra's arguments is that they see in the poem an initial position and then a turn from that position, a turning characteristic of Herbert's verse. I recognize the turn in tone but also see the constellation—another of Herbert's methods—in which priesthood is a crucial term, with meanings discovered as the poem proceeds so that we end with a complex sense. The possibilities of pride and distortion are certainly there, but the actual vocation of world's priest is functionally cleared of them by the serious and humbling work of ministry.

[14]Michael McCanles gives a brilliant account of the poem's form and action. What gives me pause, though, is his picture of the poem as showing "God and self serenely at one in a total vision reflecting the interpenetration of God's will and man's" (93). There is an urgency to this serenity, perhaps best expressed in Herbert's instructions to pray "with a grave livelinesse [...] pausing yet pressing" (*Country Parson* 231).

[15]Again, Strier's reading of the poem is essential on this point.

[16]Notably, for Calvin human blindness is not a mechanical problem but resides in the nexus between eye and mind; it is an ignorance constituted by presumption; see Lee Palmer Wandel on Calvin and Montaigne and the eye, 149-50.

[17]And, as Richard Todd observes, the poem goes beyond its Psalm 104 source in its stress on "the interaction of the creatures with each other and on man's interaction with them" (103).

[18]In this context it is striking that Herbert uses "infinite" only twice in *The Temple*, once to describe the "infinite sweetness" of Scripture ("H.Scriptures I" 1) and a second time in "Providence," describing all things great and small (41-44).

[19]I read the poem as Wilcox does in her edition of Herbert's English poems, and in distinction to Glimp, who sees Herbert using praise of all the other creatures to make up for his own lack. Glimp's reading is in many ways crucial, but his emphasis on Herbert's "sense of devotional insecurity" (n36) misses the way in which, following Psalm 104, the speaker of "Providence" receives himself as Divine gift, a reception that precedes praise. As the BCP Morning Prayer service says: "O Lord, open thou our lips. And our mouth shall show forth thy praise" (Cummings 241).

[20]See Jack Goody on flowers as a common source of sweetness and scent, particularly in a time when sugar was a luxury (see 181).

[21]The opening words, "press me not," which though they do not carry what is to us the most obvious floral meaning—the flower pressed in a book, a practice that came to England in the nineteenth century —applies to other treatments of flowers, as well as to the pressing of the rain (see "Providence" 117-20).

[22]Herbert reserves the word "mother" almost exclusively for the church and does not describe the earth as mother. The word here though fits Herbert's larger sense of creation as household and Christ as householder.

[23]My thanks to Glenn Clark, Judith Owens, Katie Calloway, Debra Rienstra, and the *Connotations* readers and editors for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay. Thanks also to the Canadian Society of Renaissance Studies, at which I presented an early version of this essay, especially to Ken Graham and Gary Kuchar. Thanks also to Seika Dyck, Chris Huebner, Jason Peters, and Greg Wiebe for conversations that helped me clarify my argument. And thanks to Warren Cariou for sharing his roses with me, to try in recipes.

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