

Voices of the Dramatic Persona: An Exploration of George Herbert's Self-Writing in *The Temple*

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Abstract

Dramatic form was frequently applied in the meditation of devotional poets in the Baroque age. As a representative devotional poet of that age, Herbert also used the dramatic form and constructed a dramatic persona in some poems. Through the dramatic persona, Herbert projected himself and his own experiences, which include his body sufferings, his confession and self-analysis and his quelled emotion; and therefore, the dramatic persona in *The Temple* can be called Herbert's self-writing. Such self-writing shows the turn to the inwardness, the self-consciousness and the individual, which are one feature of the Baroque writers and their writing in the Baroque age.

Key words: George Herbert; *The Temple*; Dramatic persona; Self-writing; Individualism

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INTRODUCTION

One dominant feature of the literary works in the Baroque age is to emphasize the internality and individuality of experience, which is closely related to the advent of individualism in the late 17th century. What ultimately unites all these writers in this period is the examination

of an inner world placed against the deceptive appearances of the outer world, and the concern of the individual experience. Such concern was more obviously demonstrated in the works of the religious poets of the Baroque period. During this period, many poets made endless explorations of self or the essence of self, just as what F. J. Warnke points out the Baroque literary artist, whether dramatist or lyric poet, is so serenely sure of his identity that he can play tricks with it—splitting himself into aspects of his own personality; distancing himself from the apparitions and desires most immediate to himself, and achieving simultaneously the expression of the force of those desires and an ironic liberation from them; taking on, a person, that is not and yet in some strange way, is his own (Warnke, 1972, p.138). And the dramatic form is one of the important ways for the devotional poets to explore the self. In fact, it was frequently assumed by the meditation, and that its progression depends on the meditator's creation of the self as a kind of dramatic character on an inner stage, "the essential process of all true meditative poetry depends on the interaction between a projected, dramatized part of the self, and the whole mind of the meditative man" (Martz, 1969, p.7). As a poet of the Baroque age, it is without any doubt Herbert would be influenced by such cultural atmosphere. In *The Temple*, Herbert applies the dramatic form by constructing a dramatic persona, which is one element applied to indicate the character of a drama. In a broader sense, this term is applied to indicate a person who plays any role in any situation. It is used in sociology as well as in cultural studies to describe the multiple identifications one may adopt in an attempt to emphasize the expression of one's own individualism. The illustration of dramatic persona shows that it is closely related to self-projection and self-writing, demonstrating the different masks of the self and showing the self-consciousness of the writer. In *The Temple*, the reader is confronted with the setting in which a dramatic

persona first complains to and rebels against God, then confesses and begs for the forgiveness, and finally eulogizes God; during the whole process, God becomes the implied audience. Through the narration of the dramatic persona, the reader can hear the complaining and rebellious voice, the penitential and imploring voice and the laudatory voice. Ihab Hassan points out that "literature is literature of the self, a self in the world, self and world made into words..... the literature of personal quest". (Hassan, 1988, p.420) Then, through the different voices in *The Temple*, how did Herbert relate the dramatic persona with different voices to his own experience? Why can we call the dramatic persona a self-projection of Herbert? These are the questions this thesis tries to explore.

1. THE COMPLAINING AND REBELLIOUS VOICE OF THE DRAMATIC PERSONA AND HERBERT'S SELF-PROJECTION

It was till the Renaissance that human beings became aware of themselves as individuals, and it was till the Renaissance that individual consciousness took the place of collective consciousness which was dominant in the medieval ages. Self-consciousness became more outstanding in the Baroque period and stimulated people in this age to pursue the "self". The focus on the body is one of the most important ways to pursue the self, because "the body is a fundamental part in the construction of subjectivity, as well as the formation of relational contexts between that subject and his or her social order" (Fuery & Mansfield, 2000, p.72). The dramatic persona in *The Temple* pays much attention to his body and complains much about its sufferings. Such complaining voice is most typical in "Affliction" (I). In this poem, the dramatic persona applies to the form of dramatic monologue to complain to the implied audience God. From the first to the fourth stanza, the dramatic persona narrates that he used to serve God whole-heartedly, and was thus blessed by God; therefore, his days "were straw'd with flow'rs and happiness; /There was no moneth but May" (line 21-22). May is the month of new-born things, therefore the two lines indicate the speaker's life used to be full of vitality and happiness. However, such happy state begins to change gradually, and the tone of the dramatic persona changes from content to discontent. In the last two lines of the fifth stanza, the dramatic persona says: "But with my years sorrow did twist and grow, /And made a partie unawares for wo". (line 23-24) The two lines can be called transitional lines; since then the dramatic persona begins to complain about the body sufferings: sickness tortures the bones, agues dwell in the veins, all of which make the breathing of the dramatic persona become groans. Because of the body sufferings, the speaker's soul feels so sorrowful that it is difficult for the dramatic persona

to believe that he is still alive. Apart from the body pains, the dramatic persona has lost his intimate friends. Under such circumstances, he falls into the following state: "Thus thinne and lean without a fence or friend, /I was blown through with ev'ry storm and winde". (line 35-36) The "fence" can be understood as blessing given by God, and "friend" refers to the kindness of friends. Because of the loss of God's blessing and friends' care, the dramatic persona is entangled in the world of strife. Therefore, the dramatic persona complains and even declares that "well, I will change the service, and go seek/Some other master out" (line 63-64), which indicates that he considers abandoning God and finding another master to serve and believe in. Such complaining and rebellious voices can be heard in many other poems as well. At the very beginning of "Affliction" (II), the dramatic persona says: "Kill me not ev'ry day, /Thou Lord of life" (line 1-2). This addressing shows that God is the implied listener. In this poem, the dramatic persona connects his sufferings with the death of Christ, and demonstrates that although his sufferings are not so treasurable as the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, he has to endure the endless pains. Such sufferings are also described in "The Crosse" through the lines "one ague dwelleth in my bones, /Another in my soul" (line 13-14). In "Dotage" the dramatic persona does not speak out the pains suffered by his body, but each line of this poem contains such words as "sorrows", "miseries", "anguish", "vexations", "griefs" and "calamities". And the line "fetching their proof from the very bone" implies that the words listed above are related to the pains of the body. In "Longing" the present state of the dramatic persona is described through "sick and famisht eyes", "doubling knees and weary bones" and "hoarse" throat and soul. Being in such situation, the dramatic persona can't help asking God whether the pains are endless. In the third and fourth stanza, the dramatic persona submits and praises God so as to plea God to pay attention to his pains, but in vain. Then he complains more and becomes rebellious in the six stanza by saying "Shall he that made the eare, /Not hear" (line 35-36). The one who made the ear refers to God, but God was blind to the pains of the speaker. Getting no response from God, the dramatic persona accuses of God in the following stanza:

Lord, didst thou leave thy throne,
Not to relieve? how can it be,
That thou art grown
Thus hard to me?
Were sinne alive, good cause there were
To bear. (line 61-66)

God leaves his throne refers to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the purpose of which is to save people. Then why is God so strict with the speaker? In the end, such complaining voices become begging voices, through

which the dramatic persona begs for the healing of the pains from God.

The consistent traits of the Baroque prose writers are an emphasis on individual experience, and avowed concentration on matter instead of manner, and a conviction that appropriate expression derives naturally, almost organically from the particularities of thought and substance rather than the categories of convention and the rhetoric. (Warnke, 1972, p.41) As a Baroque devotional poet, George Herbert was concerned with his individual experience as well. But people in the early modern times did not have the specific language to describe the experiences and the self (Bedford, Davis & Kelly, 2007, p.1). The expressions of the excitement, satisfaction, desires and afflictions are the ways for people at that time to show their self-experience. Therefore, we can say that by constructing a complaining and rebellious speaker, Herbert shows his own experience of suffering. This can be detected in the biographies of Herbert. He was consumptive, inclining from childhood to indigestion, colds, and fevers. When he became an adult, he was frequently tortured by agues and nasitis. Indigestion haunted him all the time. In order to get rid of the pains brought by indigestion, Herbert made studies of diet and translated Luigi Cornaro's essay on diet. In *The Country Parson*, Herbert discusses diet and fast frequently. He writes that "The Country Parson by fasting keeps his body tame, serviceable and healthful, and his soul fervent, active, young and lusty as an eagle" (Palmer, 2010, p.334). When studying in Cambridge, he wrote a letter to his stepfather Sir John Danvers and mentioned his experiment with diet. In this letter, Herbert wrote that: "Now this Lent I am forbid utterly to eat and fish, so that I am fain to diet in my chamber at mine won cost." (Hyde, 1906, p.70) Besides, Izzak Walton's biography of Herbert recorded that Herbert treated his quotidian fever through fasting. These incidents show that just like the dramatic persona in *The Temple*, Herbert was tortured by physical pains. Besides, Herbert's mother Magdalene and sister Elizabeth suffered from pains as well. Apart from the physical pains of Herbert and his relatives, he also witnessed the death of many relatives, including the death of Margaret Herbert and her husband John Vaughan in 1615; his elder brother Charles Herbert and William Herbert died in 1,617 subsequently. Therefore, Herbert was surrounded by the atmosphere of death. But in a letter to his mother, Herbert confessed that "For my self, dear Mother, I always fear'd sickness more then death, because sickness hath made me unable to perform those offices for which I came into the world." (Hutchinson, 1945, p.373) By referring to the personal experience, it can be said that Herbert projected himself into the complaining and rebellious dramatic persona in *The Temple*.

2. THE PENITENTIAL AND IMPLORING VOICE OF THE DRAMATIC PERSONA AND HERBERT'S SELF-AWARENESS

The mediator always takes the dramatic form and the progression of meditation depends on the meditator's creation of the self as a kind of dramatic character on an inner stage. (Warnke, 1972, p.140). Besides, the essential process of all true meditative poetry depends upon the interaction between a projected, dramatized part of the self, and the whole mind of the meditative man (Martz, 1969, p.7). Therefore, the dramatic elements are very important in meditation and meditative poetry. *The Temple*, as a collection of meditative poems, also shows the dramatic feature by constructing a penitential and imploring speaker in it. By applying dramatic form, the dramatic persona scrutinizes the sins of human beings as well as those of his own. Such self-scrutiny is in fact a self-denial which Herbert applies to get self-knowledge and self-exploration, leading to the self-awareness of the poet.

Original sin is the Christian doctrine of humanity's state of sin resulting from the fall of man, the sin of consuming from the fruit of the Forbidden tree, which is also called the tree of knowledge of good and evil. During the Reformation, it is illustrated as "all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God." (Tappert, 1959, p.29) In *The Temple*, the lust for intelligence, reason and science is repeatedly presented as a kind of sin resulting from original sin. In the first three stanzas of "Vanitie", the dramatic persona points out that the astronomers can explore the mysteries of the sphere, the divers can dive into the sea to look for the hidden pearls, and the chemists can master the rules and principles of all things. The endless exploration of the chemists can be shown through "explore into the bed-chamber". The word "bed-chamber" was used by Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum*. By using this word, Francis Bacon encouraged readers to explore further, leaving behind "the outer courts of nature" to "find a way at length into her inner chambers" (Bacon, 2009, p.8). The astronomers, divers and chemists all represent intelligence, reason and scientific development. In the fourth stanza, the dramatic persona holds that although human beings can explore the mysteries of the sphere, find the things hidden by God and master the rules, they ignore God. In sharp contrast with the human being's ignorance of God, God is the one

who yet his glorious law
Embosomes in us, mellowing the ground
With Showers and frosts, with love & aw" (line 21-23)

Through such comparison, the dramatic persona criticizes the behaviors of the astronomers, the divers

and the chemists and declares that what they explore is death, because while exploring, they miss "life" given by God. That is why Stier interprets the poem as part of a deliberate Protestant attack on human reason when operating without divine grace (Strier, 1983, pp.40-42). And Vendler described the cumulative attack on scientific discovery as "a fearful reputation, however masked, of intellectual enquiry" (Vendler, 1975, p.182). The same voice can be heard in "The Agonie". At the very beginning, the dramatic persona discussed "philosophers". In the seventeenth century, the word "philosopher" refers to the learned people, especially the natural scientists. Such people can accomplish many things by using their intelligence, such as measuring the depth of the sea, the dimension of the country, and get the knowledge about the spheres. But in the last line of the stanza, the dramatic persona points out that no matter how intelligent they are, they cannot measure the sin of human beings or Jesus Christ's love. "Sinnes Round" is composed of three stanzas, and the first line of the first stanza is the same as the last line of the third stanza, which is "Sorrie I am, my God, sorrie I am", forming a shape of "round", or a circle. These two lines set the basic tone of the poem as penitential. In this poem, the dramatic persona describes the process of "invention" as "the cockatrice they hatch and bring", "the fire spit forth from the Sicilian hill". "Cockatrice" is a mythical creature accredited with the fatal power of a basilisk, related to the serpent but hatched from a cock's egg; while "the Sicilian hill" refers Mount Etna, which has volcano on it. And the mythical one-eyed Cyclops was said to have forged his destructive wars beneath this mountain with the benefit of its fires (Rickey, 1966, p.51). Therefore, the comparison of invention as "cockatrice" and "the fire from the Sicilian hill" demonstrates the fatal power of invention. Such descriptions respond to the view put forward by Stier that Herbert's attack on wit and artifice appeared in these poems: He presented the process of sin as that of creation.

The penitence about the intelligence, reason and science of human beings are closely related to the development of new science in the sixteenth and seventeenth century:

The seventeenth century was conspicuously an age of controversy, warfare and disorder; it was, above all, an age in which a new scientific and rationalistic world-view progressively ousted the old religious and symbolic world view which had conditioned European thought and Art since the Middle Ages. Intellectual innovation is one of the major causes of the Baroque shift in sensibility, but the religious and political disturbances of the time explain more cogently why seventeenth-century men were generally unaware that such a shift is taking place. (Warnke, 1972, p.16)

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, astronomy, geology, physiology, anatomy and alchemy had made great progress: Copernicus heliocentric took the dominant

place of Ptolemy's geocentric, the geographical discovery enlarged the horizon of human beings, the development of physiology and anatomy enabled people to know more about their body and the mystery of life, and alchemy inspired people's scientific exploration. Whatever the benefits accruing thereby to science and technology and human life as a whole, the discovery of a world-picture had a disturbing effect on poetry in general and a destructive effect on devotional poetry in particular. What one might call poetry of total statement, giving utterance simultaneously to a highly personal consciousness and a sense of the relatedness of that consciousness to the absolute and transcendent, was rendered all but impossible by a cosmology which placed the individual at an incalculably great imaginative distance from the root of all being (Warnke, 1972, p.143). "Among the older Metaphysical poets, Donne and Herbert show distress and uncertainty at the implications of the new science, but they manage ultimately, if precariously, to hold on to the old unitary conceptions" (Warnke, 1972, pp.152-153). Herbert's belief in the old unitary conceptions can be detected in two other poems, "The Providence" and "The Man", in which Herbert discusses the spheres from a geocentric view and also praises God's creation of all the things in the world, including man. Therefore, to Herbert, the belief in new science might form a kind of sin and needs confession so as to gain salvation, because confession is a form of narrative self-fashioning, person in peril of objectifying the sinning self as "the story of a third person," or in Herbert's terms, "the man who once against thee fought". Moreover, the potentially insidious nature of one's sinfulness and rekindle the very sins confession purports to (Schoenfeldt, 1991, p.52). Therefore, through the penitential and imploring speaker's voice, Herbert shows doubt with and anxiety about the new science, and the confessional dramatic persona is a projection of Herbert's self who shows doubts about intelligence, reason and new science, and also shows his self-awareness.

3. THE EULOGISTIC VOICE OF THE DRAMATIC PERSONA AND HERBERT'S TRANSITION TO PEACE

Martz thinks that self-analysis is an important way applied by meditation. In these practices of self-analysis, we may find another reason why, in this meditative poetry, we feel the end so firmly implicit in the beginning: the poet understands the situation thoroughly; he has dealt with it repeatedly, and he knows from the outset how the rebellion must be, and will be, quelled. Here we appear to have a discipline essential- though not alone- in producing the peculiar, tense coexistence of conflicting elements under steady control, moving toward a predetermined end: The outstanding quality of all the finest achievements in

English religious literature of the seventeenth century, from its shortest lyric to its grand epics in poetry and prose (Martz, 1962, p.135). Martz's description of self-analysis is the exact situation in *The Temple*. After experience the complaining, rebellious emotions, the dramatic persona confesses and implores, and in the end, his furious emotion gradually quells, and comes to eulogize God.

The eulogistic voice is quite outstanding in the two poems entitled "Antiphon". Antiphon is a writing form, in prose or verse, consisting of verses or passages sung alternately by two choirs in worship. Herbert's "Antiphon" is based on such form and combines different voices in it. The first "Antiphon" is composed of five stanzas, each containing the voice of Choir and the versicles of the priest. The first, third and fifth stanza are choir, and the content are repetitious, which are "Let all the world in ev'ry corner sings, /*My God and King*". The second and the fourth stanza are versicles. In the second stanza, the dramatic persona says that the heaven is not too high, the earth is not too low, and the praises of human beings can grow up to the place where God dwells. The dramatic persona in the fourth stanza shows that the psalms in the church would not be kept out and implies that the psalms can enter the heaven and be heard by God, which conveys the same meaning of the second stanza. Besides, by saying "the heart/Must bear the longest part", the dramatic persona shows that the heart is the best place to praise God. The second "Antiphon" merges the voices of choir, angels and the voice of men, which are considered to be a kind, scared music. The first stanza of the poem is as follows:

Chor. Praised be the God of love
Men. Here below,
Angels. And here above:
Chor. Who hath dealt his mercies so,
Ang. To his friend,
Men. And to his foe; (line 1-7)

The voice of the choir, men and angels in the first three lines shows that both human beings and angels praise God. From the fourth and six line, the voice of the choir first puts forward a question, and the angels and men answer the question respectively, which shows the fact that Jesus Christ was kind to his friend as well as his foes who had betrayed him. Therefore, the grace and kindness of Jesus Christ are eulogized. In the fourth stanza, the eulogistic voice appears again:

Cho. Lord, thy praises should be more.
Men. We have none,
Ang. And we no store.
Cho. Praised be the God alone,
Who hath made of two folds more. (line 19-23)
The voice of the choir shows that the praises for God

are far from enough and the praises should only belong to God.

Wreath is traditionally associated with praise or honor as the classical victor's laurel and the funeral wreath. And Herbert's poem "A Wreath" applied anadiplosis, and the interlocking structure makes the poem appear to be a circle, or to be more exact, the poem becomes a crown of praise formally. In the first and second line, the dramatic persona shows that the wreath he made is a gift to God. Then the dramatic persona begins the description of himself: God knows his sinful life. "Crooked winding ways" is applied to show that his sins are like the winding ways which lead him far away from God and being far away from God is just like being dead because the real life is to lead a simple life. After a kind of self-analysis, the dramatic persona expresses his wish that he can get rid of his sins, live a simple life so that he can get to know more about God and imitate God. In the end, the words of the dramatic persona imply that he would eulogize the Grace of God because of his treatment of human beings, and for this, the wreath of the dramatic persona is far from enough to praise God; instead he declares that he would use the crown of honor to praise him.

"A Dialogue- Antheme Christian. Death" was written in the form of a dialogue between Christian and Death. Wilcox says that this poem takes an antiphonal form of church anthem setting mainly biblical texts to music in dialogue structure, which became increasingly popular in the English church during Herbert's time (Wilcox, 2007, p.581). By dealing with Death, the dramatic persona eulogizes Jesus Christ. At the very beginning of the poem Christian questions Death by putting forward a question: "Alas, poore Death, where is thy glorie?/Where is thy famous force, thy ancient sting?" (line1-2). The dramatic persona questions the strength of death here. Death's answer is shown in italicized words "*Alas poore mortall, void of storie,/Go spell and reade how I have kill'd thy King*" (line 3-4). The answer of Death refers to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, through which Death tries to brag his power. After hearing Death's answer, Christian refutes and says "Poore death! and who was hurt thereby?/ Thy cures being laid on him, makes thee accurst." (line 5-6) Christian's answer implies that after the original sin of Adam and Eve, the immortal human beings became mortal and had to experience death since then, and although Death cast the curse, he himself was cursed as well. Hearing Christian's answer, Death threatens that he would make Christian die. But Christian answers in this way:

Spare not, do thy worst.
I shall be one day better than before:
Thou so much worse, that thou shalt be no more. (line 8-10)
Christian in fact challenges Death, and declares that no matter what Death will do to destroy human beings,

human beings would not be defeated and will become stronger than before. And the last line "that thou shalt be no more" is quite similar to the line "And death shall be no more, death, thou shalt die" (line 14) (Donne, 1966, p.114) by John Donne, which shows that after experiencing death, human beings would be saved by God in the end, thus, praising the saving power of God.

The change from rebellious, complaining emotion to confession and self-reflection and finally to praise is firstly closely related to the collective religious culture at that time: in the baroque age, although individualism gradually came into being, it was still in an embryonic stage, and people who began to turn to the internality were still bounded by the religious collectivism. That is why the speaker, after the rebellious emotions, finally returns to eulogize God. Besides, such change is also related to the life experience and consciousness of Herbert. The year from 1626 to 1629 seems to have been the blackest of all for Herbert. Suffering almost constantly from ill health, he was at the same time tortured by his sense of lack of purpose and meaning in his life. All the years of preparations and study were apparently to go for nothing. With such problems came also the suspicion that in his desire for great place he had confused God's glory with his own vanity. The problems confronted by Herbert could only be solved through an attempt at total submission to the will of God. Therefore, Herbert gave up his worldly pursuit and accepted the ordination. Since then he was whole-heartedly devoted to the service, which made him emotionally more peaceful. Before his death, he told his friend Duncan that:

Sir, I pray you give my brother Farrer an account of the decaying condition of my body, and tell him I beg him to continue his daily prayers for me; and let him know that I have considered, that God only is what he would be; and that I am, by his grace, become now so like him; and tell him, that I do not repine, but am pleased with my want of health; and tell him, my heart is fixed on that place where true joy is only to be found; and that I long to be there, and do wait for my appointed change with hope and patience. (Walton, 1857, p.340)

Herbert's descriptions show that despite the body sufferings he experienced, he still loves God and feels grateful for his Grace. Therefore, he now treats the sufferings positively as a way to true and eternal joy, and his feelings also change from complaining and rebellious to grateful, thus leading to the eulogistic voice.

Meditation consists of a series of rigorous intellectual actions having as their aim the right ordering of memory, understanding, and will be so as to accomplish a successful experience of religious devotion (Martz, 1962, pp.25-75). In a successful meditation, "gradually the will take fire and the appropriate affections arise." (Martz, 1963, p.xxii) When the affections have arisen, the meditator is in a position to let the will come into play in a 'colloquy,' or emotionally immediate discourse with God or with some aspect of himself (Warnke, 1972,

p.140). The dramatic form is frequently applied so as to accomplish the experience of religious devotion. The speaker, who has experienced the complaining and rebellious emotions, come to confession, self-reflection and self-analysis, and finally turn to peace and eulogize God, is the dramatic character constructed by the meditator Herbert in the poems; and the conflicting feelings of the dramatic persona are in fact the portrayal of self-exploration and the religious feelings of Herbert, which can be confirmed by Herbert's words before death:

Sir, I pray deliver this little Book to my dear brother Farrer, and tell him, he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master: in whose service I have now found perfect freedom; desire him to read it: and then, if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor Soul, let it be made publick: if not, let him burn it: for I and it, are less than the least of God's mercies. (Walton, 1857, p.340)

This often cited statement shows that *The Temple* can be understood as the biographical work of Herbert, which shows the inner struggles of a Christian, and also shows Herbert's focus on the exploration of inner feelings and experience, leading to his emphasis on self-consciousness, demonstrating his individualism and showing his pious devotion as well.

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