I Miscellaneous English Poems

1, 2 *'New Year Sonnets' (I) and (II)*

Texts. The only text of these two early sonnets is Walton, *Life* (1670) 19–21. Walton prints them (in italics) as part of a letter sent to H.'s 'dear Mother for a New-years gift' in 1610, his first year in Cambridge, when H. was 'in the Seventeenth year of his Age'. The young H.'s aim was '*to reprove the vanity of those many Love-poems, that are daily writ and consecrated to* Venus' and '*to bewail that so few are writ, that look towards* God *and* Heaven'. He informed his mother that, by means of the sonnets, he intended '*to declare my resolution to be that my poor Abilities in* Poetry, *shall be all, and ever consecrated to Gods glory*'.

Sources. H.'s youthful sonnets inevitably borrow from the very tradition of love poetry that they attack, which originated with Petrarch's sonnets and continued into the work of H.'s contemporaries. H.'s New Year sonnets have been termed 'knotted' and 'Donnean' (Freer 133), and they also echo sonnets by Sidney and Shakespeare (see notes). Malcolmson 56–9 argues that H. was writing in the tradition of upper-class poetic interchange; she sets the sonnets firmly in the context of coterie poetry within the extended Herbert family, and suggests that the question under poetic dispute is not only the virtue of sacred (rather than secular) love poetry, but also the common debating point, 'should a man marry, or, is there any virtue in women?' (58).

Modern criticism. The contrast between these sonnets (probably H.'s earliest poems) and the lyrics of *The Temple* forms the focus of much criticism. Ottenhoff (1979) 5 sees the sonnets as 'experimental almost without constraint', and distinguishes their 'excessively interrupted, enjambed, and inverted syntax and meter' from the 'control and balance' of H.'s mature sonnets. Tuve 191–2 sets the 'self-righteous' tone of the New Year sonnets against the 'complete absence of self-deceit' in their 'redoing' in the later sonnets 40 *Love I* and 41 *Love II*. Fish (1972) 192 describes their tone as 'self-congratulatory', and Tuve (1970) 216 imagines that H. must have turned 'an eye of mirth upon these fiery and arrogant compositions as he rejected them for his *Temple*'.

A number of critics speculate on the context in which the sonnets were written. Malcolmson 56–9, for example, sees them as coterie poetry, participating in the rhetorical disputes of the Herbert family (see *Sources*), while others place them in the context of H.'s relationship with his mother, particularly (in the case of Pearlman) as that psychological bond is revealed in his Latin poems, *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*. Duncan-Jones 70–1 suggests that the sonnets were 'a shocked response' to the publication of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in 1609, which was

'possibly . . . one of the factors that provoked H. to embark on the programme of reclamation of secular poetic rhetoric that was to emerge as *The Temple*'.

Critics are undecided on the actual subject of the sonnets: do they reject secular love in itself, or simply as the object of poetry? Malcolmson allows for both possibilities (see *Sources*), while Lull 35 insists that they 'do not reject sexuality; they only reject writing that extols the external beauty of the body'. Pahlka 10 suggests that H.'s concern was to find the proper subject for verse; as Christensen 170 puts it in his reading of what he identifies as incarnational sonnets, H. implies that 'only the "Sonne" is a figure suitable to the making of a *Sonnet*'. However, Colie 202 sees in the sonnets a more comprehensive rejection of the conventions of Renaissance love poetry as unsatisfactory for sacred subjects.

My God, where is that ancient heat towards thee,
Wherewith whole showls of *Martyrs* once did burn,
Besides their other flames. Doth Poetry
Wear *Venus* Livery? only serve her turn?
Why are not *Sonnets* made of thee? and layes
Upon thine Altar burnt? Cannot thy love
Heighten a spirit to sound out thy praise
As well as any she? Cannot thy *Dove*
Out-strip their *Cupid* easily in flight?
Or, since thy wayes are deep, and still the same,
Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name!
Why doth that fire, which by thy power and might
Each breast does feel, no braver fuel choose
Than that, which one day, Worms, may chance refuse.

Title. The sonnets are untitled in Walton, which indirectly draws attention to H.'s consistent and inventive use of titles in all his verse from *W* onward. Tuve 192 suggests that an appropriate title for this sonnet would have been 'Of Myself'.

¶1. *1. ancient heat towards thee*: Passionate devotion to God shown by early Christians.
2. showls: Large crowds (*OED* 'shoal' [2] 3, citing this instance); a collective noun more commonly used for fish swimming together. H.'s vocabulary here echoes the gospel description of the disciples as 'fishers of men' (*Matthew* iv 19) but is difficult to reconcile with the surrounding metaphors of fire ('heat', 'burn', 'flames').
3. their other flames: The fires by which they were put to death (as opposed to the flames of love for God with which they 'did burn', line 2).

4. Venus Livery: The uniform of a servant of Venus, the classical goddess of love. *serve her turn*: Satisfy sexual desire (*OED* 'turn' 30b). Schoenfeldt 319 points out a parallel with 'serving' the mistress in Shakespeare, *Sonnets* cxli.

5. Sonnets: In 1610, the popularity of the sonnet for English love poetry was at its height; in addition, 'sonnet' came to be a term for any short love poem (*OED* 2), as in Donne, *Songs and Sonets. layes*: 'Short lyric or narrative poems intended to be sung' (*OED* 'lay' [4] 1).

6. Altar: See 19 *The Altar*, the first poem of *The Church*, upon which H. symbolically offers his subsequent love lyrics to God.

7. spirit: 1. Soul (*OED* 2a); 2. Person (*OED* 9); 3. Musical melody (*OED* 15d, citing Weelkes, *Ayeres or Phantasticke Spirites for three voices* (1608), published less than two years before H. sent this poem to his mother); 4. Vital energy (*OED* 16b), with sexual overtones as noted by Booth 442 and Schoenfeldt 237. *sound out*: Resound, proclaim (*OED* 'sound' 1b) as in songs or poems of praise; also, probe or investigate (*OED* 'sound' [2] 6b).

8. any she: That [the love] of any woman [to 'sound out' *her* 'praise', line 7]. *Dove*: Symbol of the Holy Spirit, as at the baptism of Jesus when 'he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove' (*Matthew* iii 16). Tobin 423 notes the irony that Venus was attended by doves.

9. out-strip: Surpass (*OED* 2), arrive first (*OED* 1), as in a race. Compare 49 *Grace* 10: 'And shall the dew out-strip thy dove?' *Cupid*: In Roman mythology, Venus' son, equipped with wings (as well as a bow and arrow) and able to cause humans to fall in love; identified with the Greek god Eros.

10. thy wayes are deep: This phrase merges two OT sayings: 'the ways of the Lord are right' (*Hosea* xiv 9), and 'O Lord . . . thy thoughts are very deep' (*Psalms* xcii 5). It also evokes the words of Christ in the NT, 'I am the way' (*John* xiv 6). *still the same*: See *Hebrews* xiii 8: 'Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever'.

11. verse run smooth: The conceit likens the movement of polished and metrically skilful verse to the smooth running of water in a stream with a 'deep' and straight course; see Shakespeare, 2 *Henry VI* III i 53: 'Smooth runs the water, where the brook is deep.' But, as Fish (1972) 192 points out, in his later verse (such as 155 *A true Hymne*), H. is more concerned with a 'much harder question: *does it matter* whether or not a verse that bears thy name runs smooth?'

12–14. These lines highlight the irony that, whereas men are given passions by God, they choose to inflame them with desire for women – such lowly and mortal objects of passion, in H.'s view, that even the worms may refuse to devour them in the grave.

12. that fire: The fire of passionate devotion; see lines 1–3, 6.

13. breast: Heart. *braver*: Better, more worthy.

14. Worms . . . refuse: There is one fate worse than physical death, and that is to be rejected by the worms; compare 61 *Content* 26: 'Better by worms be all once spent.'

I Miscellaneous English Poems

Sure Lord, there is enough in thee to dry
Oceans of *Ink*; for, as the Deluge did
Cover the Earth, so doth thy Majesty:
Each Cloud distills thy praise, and doth forbid
Poets to turn it to another use.
Roses and *Lillies* speak thee; and to make
A pair of Cheeks of them, is thy abuse.
Why should I *Womens eyes* for Chrystal take?
Such poor invention burns in their low mind
Whose fire is wild, and doth not upward go
To praise and on thee Lord, some *Ink* bestow.
Open the bones, and you shall nothing find
In the best *face* but *filth*, when Lord, in thee
The *beauty* lies, in the *discovery*.

Title. See 1 'New Year Sonnets' (I)

¶2. *1*. *enough*: Sufficient matter (to inspire and to write about).

2–3: *as the . . . Majesty*: See *Isaiah* xi 9: 'for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea'.

2. *Deluge*: Noah's flood (*Genesis* vii–viii).

4. *distills*: Literally, lets fall in drops, or in vapour, which becomes liquid, as when rain falls from a cloud (*OED* 2); metaphorically, expresses, and purifies (*OED* 4f). Compare Shakespeare, *Sonnets* v 9–10: 'Then were not summer's distillation left / A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass'.

4–5. *forbid . . . another use*: The clouds, belonging in the heavens, command praise for God; in the Bible, the 'glory of the Lord' appears in clouds (*Exodus* xvi 10), and the voice of God is often heard in a cloud (*Exodus* xxiv 16, *Matthew* xvii 5), while the Second Coming is predicted as 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' (*Luke* xxi 27).

6. *Roses and Lillies*: At first, these flowers seem to belong in poems praising a mistress's red lips and fair skin, as in Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella* c: 'rain from beauty's skies, / Making those lilies and those roses grow'. However, H. is alluding to the *Song of Songs* ii 1: 'I am the rose of Sharon, and the Lily of the valleys', and thus the flowers 'speak' of Christ. See 108 *Dulnesse* 11–12: 'Thy bloudy death and undeserv'd, makes thee / Pure red and white'.

7. *pair of Cheeks*: A woman's face; see line 8. *is thy abuse*: Is to abuse the Lord, who made the flowers and for whose praise they were intended.

8. *eyes . . . Chrystal*: Likening a woman's eyes to this pure and transparent substance was a commonplace of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition; see Shakespeare, *Sonnets* xlvi 6: 'A closet never pierc'd with crystal eyes'.

9. *invention*: Imaginative creation, poetic skill (*OED* 3b); see 95 *Jordan* (II), originally entitled 'Invention', in which the poet seeks 'quaint words, and trim invention' (3). The lack

of this gift makes writing poetry impossible, as in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* i: 'But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay', and Shakespeare's apology for 'blunt invention' (*Sonnets* ciii 7). Also, discovery (*OED* 1); see l. 14.

10. upward: Towards heaven, the opposite direction from that of the '*low mind*' (line 9). Compare 78 *Coloss. 3. 3* 5–8, which contrasts the life of the 'flesh' that 'tends to earth' with the spiritual life that 'aims on high'.

12–13. Open . . . filth: See *Outlandish Proverbs* 495: 'The filth under the white snow, the sunne discovers.' The shocking *memento mori* in these lines was an early modern commonplace, as T. S. Eliot knew when he commented that H.'s contemporary Webster 'saw the skull beneath the skin' ('Whispers of Immortality'). The '*best face*' here is female (see line 8), and Malcolmson 58 suggests that 'hostility against the female body' was 'quite conventional' in the Herbert family's debates about love, citing H.'s brother Edward's poem 'To his Mistress for her True Picture': the 'nut brown' skin of a woman, though lovely, is 'like a Nut – a fair outside, / Within which worms and rottenness abide.' The connection between H.'s discovery of 'filth' and the inner 'rottenness' brought about by 'worms' links the conclusion of (II) with the closing line of (I).

14. discovery: Finding what is sought (*OED* 3); more significantly here, uncovering or revelation of what is already present (*OED* 2). Compare 28 *Easter* 23–6 in the early (*W*) version (*Texts*): 'The Sunn arising in the East . . . / Can not make up so brave a feast / As thy discovery presents.' As Stein 4 comments, 'H.'s ideas are seldom so tied to a single word for their release'; the word suggests the result of a personal search for God, and represents 'ultimate reality'.

3–8 *Poems from the Williams Manuscript, not included in* The Temple

Texts. These six poems from *W* do not appear in *B* or *1633*. Two were replaced by new poems with the same title (*The H. Communion* (ff. 30v–31v), *Euen-song* (f. 44r)); two were considered less worthy of inclusion than other poems sharing their title (*Love* (ff. 38v–39r), *Trinity Sunday* (f. 40r)), and two were simply omitted (*The Knell* (f. 75v), *Perseverance* (f. 76r)).

Modern criticism. Critical discussion of these early poems focuses almost invariably on what they reveal of H.'s poetic methods and development. Lull refers to them as 'shadow texts' (101), pointing out that they have in common a marked public mode and a striking focus on the devil (102–3), which perhaps explains why H. felt it wise to drop them from *The Temple*. She does not agree with Vendler 138 that they were omitted on aesthetic grounds – in other words, that some of them were 'hopeless' poems. Gaston 151, however, believes that H. 'knew best', noting that these rejected texts betray an excess of 'abstraction' and 'ingenuity' (159–60).

3 *The H. Communion* (*W*) receives the greatest individual attention, no doubt because of both its interest in doctrinal controversies of the post-Reformation period, and the illuminating contrast in style and doctrine between this and the similarly named poem in *The Temple* (38). The earlier poem is characterised as 'sophistic' (Vendler 141) and 'theological wit-writing' (Freer 169), as opposed to the 'glimpse of the experience of Holy Communion as it feels to Everyman' afforded by the later poem (Lull 104). Gaston 163 usefully highlights the tension within the early poem between its 'explicit intention' – to disarm doctrinal debate – and 'its implicit motivation, a deep fascination with technical sacramental issues'. Many critics share this fascination, and argue a range of positions: Miller 156–62, for example, considers that the poem assumes some kind of 'Real Presence' of Christ in the Communion bread; Veith 211–4 finds the emphasis on the whole more Calvinist, concerned with the recipient's participation, while Booty 75–90 sees the poem as expressing an 'Anglican' position, concerned with the transformation of the person, not of the elements.

3 The H. Communion (*W*)

O gratious Lord how shall I know
Whether in these gifts thou bee so
As thou art evry-where;
Or rather so, as thou alone
Tak'st all y^{e} Lodging, leaving none
ffor thy poore creature there

ffirst I am sure, whether bread stay
Or whether Bread doe fly away
Concerneth bread not mee.
But y^{t} both thou, and all thy traine
Bee there, to thy truth, & my gaine
Concerneth mee & Thee.

And if in comming to thy foes
Thou dost come first to them, y^{t} showes
The hast of thy good will.
Or if that thou two stations makest
In Bread & mee, the way thou takest
Is more, but for mee still.

Then of this also I am sure
That thou didst all those pains endure
To' abolish Sinn, not Wheat.
Creatures are good, & have their place;
Sinn onely, w^{ch} did all deface
Thou drivest from his seat.

I could beleeue an Impanation
At the rate of an Incarnation
If thou hadst dyde for Bread.
But that w^{ch} made my soule to dye
My flesh, & fleshly villany,
That allso made thee dead.

That fflesh is there, mine eyes deny:
And what shold flesh but flesh discry,
The noblest sence of five.
If glorious bodies pass the sight
Shall they be food & strength, & might
Euen there, where they deceiue?

Into my soule this cannot pass
fflesh (though exalted) keeps his grass
And cannot turn to soule.
Bodyes & Minds are different Spheres
Nor can they change their bounds & meres,
But keep a constant Pole.

This gift of all gifts is the best,
Thy flesh the least y^{t} I request.
Thou took'st that pledg from mee:
Give me not that I had before,
Or give mee that, so I have more
My God, give mee all Thee.

Title. The sacrament of the Eucharist, as celebrated according to the Church of England liturgy; the service centres on the consecration and sharing of bread and wine as at Jesus' Last Supper (*Luke* xxii 19–20). (See fuller headnote to 38 *The H. Communion*.)

¶3. *1–42*. A series of alternative explanations for the mystery of the sacrament. Though clearly aware of the range of theological positions, H. attempts an Anglican indifference to the technical matters of Christ's presence. Compare Hooker, *Lawes* (1593) lxvii 12: 'What these elements are in themselves it skilleth not, it is enough that to me which take them they are the body and blood of Christ.' No further 'cogitation' should 'possess the mind of the faithful communicant'.

1–6. The central question of the poem – and of most post-Reformation Christians: how can a believer know what happens when the bread and wine are consecrated?

2–3. A reference to the Lutheran doctrine of 'ubiquity', which holds that Christ is omnipresent equally in all things.

2. *these gifts*: The bread and wine, the elements of the Communion.

4–6. The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which claims that Christ's 'real presence' in the consecrated elements displaces their natural substance. (See also line 8.)

6. *creature*: Created or earthly substance; that is, the bread and wine, referred to as 'these thy creatures' in the service of Holy Communion (*BCP* 263).

7–12. Compare Donne, *Sermons* vii 290–1: 'But for the manner, how the Body and Blood of Christ is there, wait his leisure, if he have not yet manifested that to thee: Grieve not at that, wonder not at that, press not for that; for he hath not manifested that, not the way, not the manner of his presence in the Sacrament, to the Church.'

9. A defiantly anti-controversial tone concerning one of the key doctrinal debates of the Reformation. This stance, in its avoidance of debate, is itself controversial.

10. *traine*: Followers; in this case, the 'grace which with these elements comes' (38 *The H. Communion* 19).

13–15. A reference to the Calvinist view that Christ comes directly to individual Christians, and does not depend on the bread and wine.

13. *thy foes*: The enemies of God; that is, sinful human beings; see lines 23–4.

14. *come first to them*: That is, without first having to enter the bread; see line 17.

15. *hast*: Haste, determination to proceed.

16–17. The Lutheran (and Catholic) argument that Christ first enters the bread and then the communicant, thereby coming in two stages.

16. *stations*: Stopping places, stages. The word also appropriately recalls the acts of a mystery play (*OED* 4), and the stages of Christ's passion together with their associated devotions: the 'Stations of the Cross' (*OED* 23).

18. *more*: Longer.

20. *all those pains*: A reference to the passion of Christ on the cross.

21. A witty reminder that what really matters is the power of Christ to conquer sin, not whether the 'Wheat' of the bread is banished by transubstantiation. The line leads Vender 140–1 to wish that 'we had more instances of H.'s tart satire'.

22. *Creatures are good*: See *Genesis* i 31: 'And God saw everything that he had made and, behold, it was very good.'

23–4. Sin is to be driven out, not the 'creatures' of bread and wine – a rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation.

24. *seat*: Sin's residence within the human heart; see 25 *Good Friday* 27–9.

25. *Impanation*: A doctrine asserting that the body of Christ is included in the bread after consecration.