

## RENAISSANCE POETRY AND THE PSALMS: INFLUENCES AND PROBLEMS

Anne Lear

The influence of the Psalms on sixteenth and seventeenth century religious poetry was profound. Indeed, the study of this influence has been a key feature of the work of modern literary scholars who have noted the impact of the Psalms on the poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, Francis Quarles, John Donne, and George Herbert among many other Renaissance poets.<sup>1</sup>

This influence was acknowledged and embraced by Renaissance literary critics themselves. Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Apology for Poetry*, cited biblical poesy as the key reference point for the usefulness and, indeed, the beauty and excellence of all poetry<sup>2</sup>; and other Protestant poets of a pronounced theoretical bent, such as George Wither, recognized the Psalms in particular as a storehouse both of spiritual comfort, and of poetic variety.<sup>3</sup>

The Psalms had long been appreciated as a repertory of 'proper' human responses to God. Here patience and fortitude could be encouraged and celebrated, while intemperance and disloyalty could at least be given the respectability of belonging to the communal outpourings of the chosen people.<sup>4</sup>

The Protestant reformers were no less enthusiastic than the poets themselves about the significance of the Psalms as the epitome of the human experience in its relationship to God. Luther emphasized the role of the Psalms as both guide and comfort,<sup>5</sup> and Calvin stressed the emotional nature of the psalmist's responses whilst setting them firmly in their context of common human feeling:

... the holy Ghost hath heere lyvely set out before our eyes, all the greefes, sorrowes, feares, doutes, hopes, cares, anguishes, and finally all the trubblesome motions wherewith mennes mindes are woont to be turmoyled.<sup>6</sup>

Undoubtedly the personal nature of the very vividly expressed emotional relationship which the Psalms can be said to embody was

responsible for the enthusiasm of the reformers. The growing tendency towards seeing the relationship between God and man as an intensely emotional experience would have caught at the similar intimacy of the Psalms.

This dual authority of the Psalms, as spiritual guide and as a model for poesy, was most important in encouraging not only the several translations and adaptations of these Old Testament hymns,<sup>7</sup> but also the vast range of personal religious lyric written during the Renaissance period. However, the desire to incorporate the Psalmist's method and content into English poetry of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was not always easily accommodated. For the purposes of this paper I have chosen to look at the effects of just one attempt to mesh cultures as different as the Hebraic of the eighth century B.C. and that of English poets of the Reformation period.

In Western cultural history the dominant view of the relationship between the body and the soul has been to see it as a dichotomy. It is a very strong tradition, largely initiated by Platonic theory, and fuelled by what has been the common reading of the Pauline statements on Spirit and Flesh. What happened, then, when that dominant view was challenged by an attempt to incorporate material founded on an entirely opposite concept of human nature?

My soul has a desire and longing to enter into the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God (Ps.84.2. Book of Common Prayer).<sup>8</sup>

This verse exemplifies the unity of response to the Creator which is a feature of the Hebraic tradition. Despite the use of different terms such as 'soul', 'heart', 'flesh', 'body', and 'bones', the psalmist had no notion of man as divided into conflicting parts.

Moreover, Biblical commentators and theologians point out that the word 'nephesh' translated commonly as 'soul', did in fact suggest not a separate spiritual entity, but the presence of a created living being:

It is what is alive ... and it signifies that which is vital in man in the broadest sense - the nephesh feels hunger, it loathes, it hates, it feels anger, loves, weeps, and, most important of all, can die ...<sup>9</sup>

This is the opinion of the eminent Old Testament theologian, Gerhard Von Rad and such suggestions to be cautious about the translation of

nephesh as 'soul' were 'followed' as recently as the publication of the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible in 1978. Here, the translators have frequently used the terms "me" or "my life" in place of what Coverdale, for instance, rendered as "soul".<sup>10</sup> As an example of the difference this can make, we might look at two translations of Psalm 11, Verse 1:

In the Lord put I my trust: how say ye then to my soul, that she should flee as a bird unto the hill? (Book of Common Prayer).

In the Lord I take refuge. How then can you say to me: "Flee like a bird to your mountain". (NIV)

The first translation picks up all the traditional Western associations of 'soul' with imprisoned creatures such as birds which may flee from cages to a freer and more natural existence - or, in the case of the soul, from the prison of its earthly existence, the flesh. The second translation merely gives the sense of the trust in God of the psalmist who repels the warnings of those who wish him to protect his person by escaping from his enemies. There is no suggestion that it is his soul only which is under attack as is the case with the Coverdale translation, but rather that the word nephesh has been used to indicate that the psalmist's Life was literally at stake.

An understanding of this is most important, for what we do not have here is a separate soul whose rightful place and destiny is outside the realm of the earthly. The Hebrew conception of soul is an earthbound one which operates in conjunction with heart and body, and bones, flesh and blood, to suffer or rejoice according to God's pleasure.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, in Hebrew tradition it was the heart which took over many of the functions of the Western concept of 'soul'. God's laws were housed there and the heart was the active centre of wisdom and belief, or foolishness and lack of faith.<sup>12</sup> The lack of any notion in Hebrew thought of a dichotomy between soul and body can be most readily observed in the equally impressive, though less frequent, range of responses of those more obviously physical elements: the flesh, bones, mouth, tongue, eyes and even the feet.<sup>13</sup> In one way, use of the term 'nephesh' had always contained all of these parts, as it were, but the psalmist showed no hesitation in including those individual physical reactions to his apparent ill-treatment by his Creator. No doubt

because of their very proneness to actual and easily visualized injury and destruction, the physical aspects of man allowed for a compelling description of the psalmist's suffering:

My bones are smitten asunder as with a sword ... (Ps.42.12)

For the voice of my groaning: my bones will scarce cleave to my flesh (Ps.102.5).

So too, as was the case with the soul, the body and the other physical elements of man can be confident of God's protection and can hope for deliverance; the general Hebrew belief that the effects of God's pleasure or displeasure would be felt on this earth naturally led to an expectation that actual physical suffering would be alleviated by God's intervention on behalf of His people:

... the Lord delivereth him out of all. He keepeth all his bones: so that not one of them is broken (Ps.34.19-20).

It is the whole psalmist, whether spoken of in terms of his soul, heart, or body, whose fundamentally unified reaction is one of celebration, praise, or despair, depending upon his experience at any one time. The psalmist was not trying to convince anyone of the unity of human nature; he merely assumed such a unity as the foundation of a human being's response to his Creator.

English poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, on the other hand, had as their dominant mind set, a view of the human being as essentially divided into an innocent soul and a guilty body. Sir Philip Sidney has fallen victim to a fundamental misreading because of this clash of cultural attitudes. Here, for example, is the Coverdale translation of Psalm 14, 1-2:

The fool hath said in his heart: There is no God.

Sidney's version of this is:

The foolish man by flesh and fancy led  
His guiltie heart with this bond thought hath fed,  
There is no God that raigneth  
(Psalm 14, ll.1-3).<sup>14</sup>

The implication here is that the innocent essence of the man is somehow being pulled by the conflicting impulses of the flesh; moreover, it is the "flesh" and the "fancy" which lead him to the sinful denial of the existence of God, a serious consequence, indeed, and one indicative of an extremely negative view of the flesh. There is no warrant for this in the original where it is the foolish man as a 'whole' who must take responsibility for sin. The use of the word "flesh" makes it probable that it is ultimately the Pauline influence which has caused this inappropriate interposition.

A similar instance occurs in Sidney's paraphrase of Psalm 17, verse 4, where the Coverdale version reads:

Because of men's works, that are done against the words of  
thy lips: I have kept me from the ways of the destroyer.

Sidney once again includes a disparaging reference to the flesh in his paraphrase:

Not weighing ought how fleshly fancys run,  
Led by Thy Word the Rav'ner's stepps I shun  
(Psalm 17, ll.13-14).<sup>15</sup>

What is interesting about this is the 'off-hand' manner in which the unified view of human nature portrayed in the Psalms can be destroyed. So habitual were the dominant negative associations of the concept 'flesh' that the use of such a phrase as "fleshly fancys" just did not seem like a misreading of the psalmist's original meaning.

However, it is not in those psalm imitations which keep closest to their models that we can see the clearest evidence of misreading. The range allowed to imitators was wide and the poet could deviate substantially from the original while still ostensibly using it as a model for his verse.<sup>16</sup> The poet Thomas Wyatt based the narrative structure of his penitential psalm imitations on the prose version of Pietro Aretino, a work which emphasized the traditional associations of these psalms with the story of David and Bathsheba.<sup>17</sup>

Each psalm is preceded by a prologue describing the narrative context of David's thoughts of repentance over his sensual feelings for Bathsheba; after each prologue we see the actual psalm occasioned by these thoughts. As a consequence of this method the psalms themselves are extensively affected by their narrative context and again the flesh is the 'culprit' in a way never envisaged by the psalmist himself. In his

imitation of Psalm 6, Wyatt writes:

My flesh is troubled, my heart doth fear the spear  
 That dread of death, of death that ever lasts, Threateth of  
 night and draweth near and near.  
 Much more my soul is troubled by the blasts  
 Of these assaults, that come as thick as hail,  
 Of worldly vanity, that temptation casts  
 Against the weak bulwark of the flesh frail,  
 Wherein the soul in great perplexity  
 Feeleth the senses with them that assail  
 Conspire, corrupt by use and vanity,  
 Whereby the wretch doth to the shade resort  
 Of hope in thee, in this extremity  
 (Psalm 6, ll.100-111).<sup>18</sup>

The original Psalm 6 involves the lament of the whole person. Bones are "vexed" and the soul also is "sore troubled". Wyatt, too presents both body and soul as "troubled". However, his 'psalmist' places the blame for the soul's despair on the "flesh frail" which cannot stand up to the assaults of worldly "vanity". The soul's main sin is to be in "great perplexity" and its only hope is to flee the scene and resort "to the shade" to await rescue.

Wyatt's acceptance of a division between soul and body is even clearer later in this poem as the 'psalmist' calls upon God to:

Reduce, revive my soul: be thou the leech,  
 And reconcile the great hatred and strife  
 That it hath ta'en against the flesh, the  
 wretch  
 That stirred hath thy wrath by filthy life.  
 See how my soul doth fret it to the bones:  
 Inward remorse so sharpth it like a knife  
 That but thou help the caitiff that bemoans  
 His great offence, it turns anon to dust  
 (ll.118-125).<sup>19</sup>

Here, even though both flesh and soul are "wretch" and "caitiff" respectively, it is the soul whose welfare really concerns the 'psalmist'. The flesh has been the one to stir God's "wrath"; it has been responsible for the "filthy life" and now it is punished by the "inward

remorse" of the soul which "fret[s] it to the bones". In this predicament the 'psalmist' needs God to act as a "leech" and to give life back to the soul by purging the "great hatred and strife" between it and the flesh, a hatred that wears them both down no matter how just the cause of that hatred on the soul's part might be. Throughout the poem the soul remains intrinsically innocent even though its fate may be tied to the body's behaviour.

As another instance of a basic misreading of the body and soul language of the Psalms it is instructive to move to the Emblems of Francis Quarles.<sup>20</sup> Although the emblem poems comment on particular biblical verses rather than acting as specific imitations of whole psalms, it is clear that Quarles found his impetus for the poems in his own reading of the biblical passage.

Quarles' most instructive misreading is of the psalm verse:

Bring my soul out of prison that I may praise thy name  
(Authorised Version, Ps.142.9).

The psalmist had used this image to indicate his feeling of confinement as his enemies surrounded him and God did not appear to be coming to his aid. Quarles, on the other hand, boldly proclaims his view of the human predicament:

My soul is like a bird, my flesh the cage,  
Wherein she wears her weary pilgrimage  
(On Ps.142.7, ll.1-2).<sup>21</sup>

It is a world view informed not by the Psalms' portrayal of human nature but by the classical tradition of dichotomy. In Quarles' poem the soul must spend its time hopping back and forth in its cage between the "perches" of sense and reason. It eventually has to call upon the "glorious martyrs", the "illustrious stoops" who like him were also shut in "fleshly coops", that they might plead its cause to God for:

Thus am I coop'd; within this fleshly cage  
I wear my youth, and waste my weary age; Spending that  
breath, which was ordain'd to chant  
Heav'n's praises forth, in sighs and sad complaint (ll.19-22).

This highly dramatic and pervasive image of the human soul as a bird imprisoned in its fleshly cage is a long way from the psalmist's

portrayal of an undivided man singing his songs of lament or praise.

As final instances of the complexities engendered by the clash of the Hebraic and Western views, I would like to look briefly at two poems by George Herbert which are clearly influenced in method and content by the Psalms. The first poem is "Complaining".<sup>22</sup>

Do not beguile my heart,  
Because thou art  
My power and wisdom. Put me not to shame  
Because I am  
Thy clay that weeps, thy dust that calls.

Thou art the Lord of glorie;  
The deed and storic  
Are both thy due: but I a silly flie,  
That live or die  
According as the weather falls.

Art thou all justice, Lord?  
Shows not thy word  
More attributes? Am I all throat or eye,  
To weep or cry?  
Have I no parts but those of grief?

Let not thy wrathfull power  
Afflict my houre,  
My inch of life: or let thy gracious power  
Contract my houre,  
That I may climbe and finde relief.

The most striking thing about this quietly lyrical poem is that it is a poem of lament at all. Although entitled "Complaining" the harshness usually associated with complaint is absent. However, the speaker is aware of the great power of God, an Old Testament God of justice and wrath, just as he continually acknowledges his own littleness throughout the poem.

Throughout the poem, the metrical structure of the stanza form used has mirrored the psalmist's two-part verse. In each stanza the contrasts are presented on either side of a caesura which falls in the middle of the third line. However, the series of contrasts between God and man seen in the first three stanzas which has led us to expect in



the fourth yet another focus upon the lamenting and pleading man, is ironically overturned. God's power is now seen as "gracious", no doubt in the literal sense of incorporating the attribute of mercy, and God is asked to contract even further the speaker's already minute span of time so that he may "climbe and finde relief".

It is not too much to say that the final lines suggest a very un-psalm-like movement away from earth and towards heaven. "Relief" is here associated with a New Covenant gift of grace which will take the speaker away from the earthly source of affliction, a source which can only be eliminated in death. The plea to "contract" the speaker's "houre of life" can be seen not merely as an escape, then, but as the culmination of the very process of affliction leading in turn to a rise towards salvation. The implication is that the "I" of the final line will leave behind the earthly matter of "dust", "clay", "throat" and "eye". Nevertheless these material and physical elements do have a part to play if only in that they feel the affliction and make some attempt to remedy it.

In the poem "Repentance" a similar ending is handled in a much more sophisticated way. To my mind, this is a poem in which Herbert comes very close to resolving some of the tensions inherent in the clash of these two cultural attitudes towards human nature. In "Repentance", as in "Complaining", suffering is seen as affecting the whole man, and this poem too moves towards a position in which an ultimate joy is confidently expected. But here it is Christ who is finally accepted as the one who shoulders the suffering and guilt of the sinner:

But thou wilt sinne and grief destroy;  
 That so the broken bones may joy,  
 And tune together in a well-set song,  
 Full of his praises,  
 Who dead men raises.  
 Fractures well cur'd make us more strong (11.31-36).<sup>23</sup>

The image of the broken bones rejoicing is a direct borrowing from Psalm 51:

Thou shalt make me hear of joy and gladness: that the bones  
 which thou hast broken may rejoice (v.8).

However, Herbert's re-working of these lines is particularly revealing; for here, not only do we have the image of "broken bones" rejoicing in

their newly found relief on earth, but the reference to Christ as the one "who dead men raises" indicates that the joy also pertains to the resurrection of the body after death, a secondary meaning not envisaged by the psalmist. The recurring reference to the harmony of bodily existence in its proper, Christ-centred, action is linked to the image of broken bones as shattered instruments reset by Christ so that their groans may be transformed into song. That the cure comes from without, from Christ, is indicative of Herbert's debt to orthodox Protestant theology; yet the fact that even man's physical suffering can be turned to such ends is evidence not only of Herbert's admiration for the Psalms but of what appears to be an equally strong desire to portray unity in experience in spite of an opposing tendency towards accepting a clear division between the earthly and the spiritual.

What the Psalms offered Reformation poets was a form in which their complaints could be structured and a language which allowed them to voice the total range, physical and spiritual, of those complaints. They gave a touchstone of biblical validity for common Christian experience. However, individual aspects of the Psalms, culturally fixed as they were in the Hebrew tradition, could not easily be torn out of that tradition; yet, when they were adapted by a poet of great theological and poetic skill, like Herbert, the result can demonstrate the realisation of the New Covenant as he saw it.

*University of Wollongong*

## REFERENCES

1. See especially B.K. Lewalski, Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp.39-53, 240-245; R. Zim, English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer, 1535-1601 (Cambridge: CUP, 1987); and C. Bloch, Spelling the word: George Herbert and the Bible (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), Ch.5.
2. Sir Philip Sidney, An Apology for Poetry (ed) G. Shepherd (Manchester: MUP, 1973), pp.101-102.  
Following Aristotle's definition of poetry as an 'art of imitation' of nature, Sidney refers to the biblical writers as:  
The chief [kind], both in antiquity and excellency ... [in] that they did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God. Such were David in his Psalms; Solomon in his Song of Songs, in his Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs; Moses and Deborah in their Hymns; and the writer of Job; ... Against these none will speak that hath the Holy Ghost in due holy reverence.
3. Bloch p.239. A shop wherein the holy Ghost polisheth and maketh us fit to adorn the cittie and House of God; Lewalski, p.47. Wither prefaces his own version of the Psalms with a justification for his metrical diversity: "I have used some varieties of Verse; Because, Prayers, Praises, Lamentations, Tryumphs, and subjects which are Pastoral, Heroical, Elegiacall, and mixt (all which are found in the Psalmes) are not properly exprest in one sort of measure."
4. Lewalski cites the Church father, Basil, on this point: "Now as for the matter and content of the Psalmes, what is there, but that a man maye learn it there? Is not there to be learned the valiauntness of fortitude? The rightousness of justice? The sobernes of temperance? The perfection of prudence? The forme of penance? The measure of patience? Yea and whatsoever soundeth to vertue or perfection is it not there taught?" p.41.
5. Lewalski, p.42-43. "You have therein, not only the works and acts of the saints, but their very words and expressions, nay, their sighs and groans to God, and the utterance in which they conversed with him during their temptations; ... the very hidden treasure of their hearts' feelings - the very inmost sensations and motions of their soul."
6. Lewalski p.43.
7. Lewalski, pp.39-40. "By 1640 there were well over three hundred editions (in several versions) of the complete psalter in English verse. Robert Crowley's, the first complete metrical psalter in English (1549); the Sternhold-Hopkins Old Version (1562) - standard for congregational singing, simple common meter, well over 200 editions by 1640; versions by Archbishop Parker, King James I, Thomas Ravenscroft, George Sandys, George Wither, Henry King; the French Marot-Beze psalter (1562) impressive for its metrical diversity and adaptation of contemporary love tunes to the Psalm texts; and the Sir Philip-Sidney Countess of Pembroke psalter (written and widely circulated between 1589-1599) which was particularly striking for its stanzaic and metrical variety ..."
8. The edition of the Psalms used in this paper is that found in the Book of Common Prayer. This is the translation Miles Coverdale first prepared for what has come to be known as the Coverdale Bible of 1535 and which was retained, with slight changes, in the 1539 Great Bible. This rendering was used in the 1549 and 1552 versions of the Prayer Book and has remained in general use with certain modifications to spelling

throughout the long history of the Book of Common Prayer.

9. Gerhard Von Rad. *Old Testament Theology Vol. One. The theology of Israel's historical traditions.* trans. D.M.G. Stalker, London: SCM Press, 1975, p.153.

For the sake of convenience I have used the Anglicized Hebrew term 'nephesh' instead of Von Rad's Hebraic script.

10. The NIV Study Bible. General Editor: Kenneth Barker; Associate Editors: Donald Burdick, John Stek, Walter Wessel, Ronald Youngblood. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985.

John Stek is primarily responsible for the commentary on the Psalms. Even when they do use the term 'soul', the NIV translators are careful to point out the Hebrew notion. In reference to Ps.6.2-3: "Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am faint: O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?" the commentary reads: "Soul: not a spiritual aspect in distinction from the physical, nor the psalmist's 'inner' being in distinction from his 'outer' being, but his very self as a living, conscious, personal being. Its use in conjunction with "bones" did not for the Hebrew writer involve reference to two distinct entities but constituted for him two ways of referring to himself, as is the case also in the combination "soul" and "body"."

11. The diversity of the responses of the soul is, indeed, staggering. Ranging from the much lamented extreme of destruction, the soul can be troubled, vexed or feel "heaviness" (Psalms 6; 31; 35; 42; 43; 88; 163); it can be humbled and brought low (Psalms 35; 44); it can simply wait in patience for the Lord (Psalms 33; 62); it can seek counsel (Psalm 13); be strengthened and healed (Psalms 41; 138), and be comforted and refreshed (Psalms 86; 94); it can be converted (Psalms 19; 23), and can keep

the laws (Psalm 119); it can thirst for the Lord (Psalms 42; 63, 84, 119, 143); and finally, it can boast of its safety and praise the Lord who made this possible (Psalms 34; 35; 57; 66, 103; 104; 130; 145).

12. Von Rad, Volume One, p.153. The NIV note on Ps 4.7: "You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound" reads: "heart: In Biblical language the center of the human spirit, from which spring emotions, thought, motivations, courage and action."

13. The body and its attributes can simply be in disarray (Psalms 38; 102); can be healthy or unhealthy, depending on God's pleasure (Psalm 38); can, in the case of hands, for example, be tools of wickedness (Psalm 58), or pure and clean (Psalm 24). The mouth, too, can be either deceitful (Psalm 120), or it can be physically satisfied (Psalms 103; 119); it can speak wisdom (Psalm 49), and it can praise God (Psalms 39; 63; 66; 70, 145).

14. Sir Philip Sidney, *Poems* (ed) W.A. Ringler Jr (Oxford: OUP, 1962), p.286.

15. *Ibid.* p.289.

16. *Zim* pp.12-23.

17. *Ibid.* pp.43-74.

18. Sir Thomas Wyatt, *Collected Poems* (ed) J. Daalder (London: OUP, 1975), p.117.

19. *Ibid.*

20. F. Quarles, *Emblems* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1845), pp.297-299.

21. *Ibid.* pp.285-287.

22. G. Herbert, *The Works of George Herbert* (ed) F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p.143.

23. *Ibid.* p.49.