# SOLIFIDIANISM AND POETIC VOCATION

POETIC WORKS:

SOLIFIDIANISM AND POETIC VOCATION

IN

SPENSER, HERBERT AND MILTON


By

RONALD WAYNE COOLEY, B.A.


A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts


McMaster University

September, 1985

MASTER OF ARTS (1985)                    McMASTER UNIVERSITY
(English)                                Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE:    Poetic Works: Solifidianism and Poetic Vocation in
          Spenser, Herbert and Milton

AUTHOR:   Ronald Wayne Cooley, B.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. T. H. Cain

NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 88

Abstract


        The central aim of this thesis is to suggest some of the
ways in which a tension between the Protestant doctrines of
vocation and justification by faith shape the poetry of Spenser,
Herbert and Milton. I argue that the Protestant poet displays a
fundamental ambivalence toward his own art, which he views as
simultaneously inspired and fallen. The Protestant theology of
vocation provides a sanction for divine poetry, while solifidian
dogma tends to repudiate human works, including poetry. The
Protestant poet is therefore engaged in a struggle to define a
stance that balances, reconciles or synthesizes these two
tendencies, and the poem is the scene of that struggle. He
expresses misgivings about the efficacy of language, thereby
casting doubt on the reliability of his own poetry, but also
claims (or aspires to) divine authority for his craft.

        In my treatment of Spenser I suggest that Book I of The
Faerie Queene constitutes a successful defence of poetic
vocation, while the self-doubting or self-accusatory stance
associated with solifidianism becomes more prevalent in Book VI.
Herbert's defence of poetic vocation consists , paradoxically,
in a gradual surrender of authorship to God. I take Milton's
prophetic claims, or at least aspirations, more or less for

granted, and focus on the strategies he employs to undercut his
own art and medium and suggest its, and his, fallen nature.

## Acknowledgements

Deepest thanks are due to my Supervisor, Dr. Thomas Cain, who has provided me with a unique blend of approbation and firm guidance, not merely in the preparation of this thesis, but since my first days as an undergraduate.

I must also thank my parents, my wife, Paula, and my friend and administrative colleague, Joan Morris, for support, encouragement and forbearance during my three years of part-time study.

# CONTENTS

Introduction: Poetic Inability and Poetic Inspiration


        The theological position of the Protestant poet, or any

Protestant artist for that matter, is a precarious one. Two of

the fundamental doctrines in reformed theology pull the poet in

opposite directions, generating tensions that come to be

controlling forces in his work. The first of these doctrines,

and the one that serves best to define the essence of

Protestantism, despite its many variations, is solifidianism:

the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This doctrine,

common to virtually all Protestant denominations, carries with

it an explicit denial of the efficacy of works in achieving

salvation, and an implicit diminution of the value of all human

activity. Such a belief clearly tends to call the value of

devotional art into serious question. The second doctrine, and

the one that provides a sanction for the Protestant poet, is

that of vocation or calling. Protestant theology places

particularly heavy emphasis on calling, and expands the concept

to apply not merely to clerical life, but to every Christian's

work in the world. Luther's concept of the "priesthood of all

believers" (To the Christian Nobility 44: 127-129) carried with

it the implication that every Christian profession is divinely

ordained, and is a form of divine service. The Protestant poet,

then, is led by his religious convictions to view his own art

1

with a peculiar ambivalence. On the one hand poetry, like any other respectable craft, is a task to which he has been called by God, while on the other hand his language and art are corrupted by the fall, and utterly unsuitable for the glorification of God.

This tension is particularly evident in Milton's Sonnet XIX. In The Calvinist Temper in English Poetry J.D. Boulger argues that "there is little in the poets, except for Milton's 'On his blindness,' directly on the subject of 'calling'", and that "vocation and justification are Puritan doctrines peripheral to the formation of literary sensibility" (87). Boulger is certainly correct in pointing out the centrality of vocation in this sonnet, but, as I will attempt to show later, I believe the tension between solifidianism and poetic vocation can be seen as a shaping force in Milton's major poetry, as well as that of his predecessors, Edmund Spenser and George Herbert. The popular title of Sonnet XIX, "On his blindness", which is not Milton's own, is at least partially misleading in its suggestion that the poem is one of personal crisis. As Gary A. Stringer has observed, "the sonnet is not essentially lyric, rather it reaches toward the narrative and dramatic, an esthetic object consciously and decisively separated from its creator" (141). While it would be unrealistic to divorce the poem completely from the poet's experience there is merit in Stringer's suggestion that the experience with which

the poem deals is generic. Stringer sees the poem as addressing

the problem of affliction, and on this basis draws a number of

interesting parallels between the poem and the Pauline epistles.

I would like to combine the insights of Stringer and Boulger,

and suggest that the issue is not so much affliction as

inability. The poet's agony is less a result of his own physical

pain, than of his sense of being unable to carry out the work

God has assigned him. This sense of inability to serve God

adequately is what Luther calls *anfechtung*, and in the larger

theological context the affliction in question is the fall.

Sonnet XIX functions as a dialogue between poetic

vocation and solifidianism. The lament that forms the octave of

the sonnet gives primacy to the poet's sense of calling:

> When I consider how my light is spent
>  Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
>  And that one Talent which is death to hide,
>  Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
> To serve therewith my Maker, and present
>  My true account, lest he returning chide;
>  "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied,"
>  I fondly ask . . . . (1-8)

The speaker bemoans his inability to heed the call to divine

service that he so obviously hears. In the first five lines of

the sestet "Patience" offers a characteristically Protestant

response to the speaker's frustration: " . . . God doth not need

/ Either man's work or his own gifts" (9-10). This would seem to

imply the triumph of solifidian dogma over the poet's sense of

vocation, but such a resolution would be far too simple. The

poet is not willing to relinquish either doctrine. Instead the

final line attempts a synthesis by positing a passive form of
service instead of an active one: "They also serve who only
stand and wait". In this way the spiritual passivity usually
implicit in solifidian theology is reconciled with the active
stance associated with the doctrine of vocation. Here Milton is
able to achieve the tranquillity that the Protestant temperament
constantly strives for, and finds so difficult to achieve. The
struggle to achieve this kind of repose is a recurrent theme in
Protestant poetics.

It would be unrealistic to suggest that these concerns,
and their characteristic expressions in poetry, are somehow the
unique property of the Reformation. In fact they have clear
antecedents in classical, medieval and renaissance sources,
though the Reformation tends to put a "sharper point" on them,
just as it does with orthodox Augustinian theology. The
solifidian tendency to denigrate poetry, and sometimes all
language, as products of man's corrupted nature has affinities
with the "inability topos" of classical rhetoric. (Cain 10;
Curtius 159-162, 409-412). The poet protests the inadequacy of
his own language in order to elevate his object of praise, and
at the same time, ironically, demonstrates his mastery over
language through the very act of denying it. It is easy to see
the attraction of this device to the Protestant poet. As we move
from Spenser, through Herbert to Milton, and the influence of
reformed theology becomes more pronounced, the second, ironic

function of the inability topos is gradually stripped away. This

happens in several ways. As Cain points out the traditional

location for inability topoi is at the beginning of an

encomiastic poem or oration (10), where the poet defines his

relationship to his own text and to the object of his praise

(whether Gloriana or God). When the poet employs the expressions

of inability in the body of a poem their traditional ironic,

formal and rhetorical purposes are subordinated to their

explicit message. Affected modesty begins to sound more and more

like genuine self-doubt. Use of the inability topos in the

presentation of speaking characters in the poem, rather than in

the poet's self-presentation, produces a similar effect--as when

the narrative voice comments on the inadequacies of a

character's speech. It can also be used *by* speakers other than

the narrator, with reference either to their fellow characters

(Raphael speaking to and about Adam in <u>Paradise Lost</u>), or to the

poet's persona (the voice of the "friend" addressing the poet's

persona in many of Herbert's poems). Such uses are often

accusatory, further emphasizing the sincerity of the

condemnation of language. Finally, additional force is added

when the poet places the topos, in its accusatory mode, in the

words of an authority figure such as Raphael or Christ. Since

the inability topos is *about* language, and since a poem is a

linguistic construct, the device is always, in some sense, a

comment on the poem and the poet. That is to say, the inability

topos is always self-referential, even (perhaps especially) when
the poet takes pains to remove himself from the context in which
it is employed. Of the three poets I plan to consider, Spenser's
use of the inability topos is clearly the closest to its
classical and renaissance antecedents. Yet in spite of this
there are signs of a more-than-rhetorical concern about the
failings of his own medium. Herbert's use of the inability topos
in lyric poetry further intensifies the sense of personal
inadequacy it conveys, and Milton's _Paradise Lost_ and _Paradise
Regained_ deploy it in an all-out assault on human language and
learning.

If the classical inability topos provides a convenient
rhetorical vehicle for the solifidian treatment of language, the
classical ideal of the poet as _vates_ provides a context for the
Christian concept of poetic vocation. Sidney writes in the
_Defense of Poesie_ that "among the Romans a poet was called
_vates_, which is as much as a diviner, forseer, or prophet", and
goes on to endorse the term and its connotations in his own
religious context: "And may I not presume a little further, to
show the reasonableness of this word _vates_, and say that the
holy David's Psalms are a divine poem" (410-411). Sidney saw
virtuous poets of his own day as "right poets", who were a step
removed from their divinely inspired predecessors, but whose art
and medium was sanctioned by the same divine authority (415).
Spenser, Herbert and Milton all attempt to go beyond the status

of "right poets" in search of a truly inspired voice.

In <u>The Freedom of a Christian</u> Luther summarizes his

theology of justification in the most impassioned terms:

> it is easy to see from what source faith derives such
> great power and why a good work or all good works
> together cannot equal it. No good work can rely upon the
> Word of God or live in the soul, for faith alone and the
> Word of God rule in the soul. Just as the heated iron
> glows like fire because of the union of fire with it, so
> the Word imparts its qualities to the soul. It is clear,
> then, that a Christian has all he needs in faith and
> needs no works to justify him.  (31: 349)

Calvin's position  on this subject is virtually identical, but

his vision of human corruption is even blacker, and his

condemnation of works more virulent:

> it is the doctrine of scripture . . . that our good
> works are constantly covered with numerous stains by
> which God is justly offended and made angry against us,
> so far are we from being able to conciliate him, and
> call forth his favour towards us . . . . Therefore ,
> every help of Salvation bestowed upon believers, and
> blessedness itself, are entirely the gift of God.
> (<u>Institutes</u> 2: 93)

It is easy to see from this how the rejection of good works as a

means to salvation can lead to a more general condemnation of

human activity. Such a position is the extreme against which the

Protestant poet reacts in attempting to define the place of his

own art. In the Protestant scheme, good works, when they are

evident at all, are God's gift to man, and not the reverse,

"since to manifest the greatness of his love to us he . . .

highly honours not ourselves only, but the gifts which he has

bestowed upon us" (<u>Institutes</u> 1: 93)

As I suggested earlier, though, this is by no means a

uniquely Protestant vision. Luther's theology of justification
is, in many ways, an extension of his Augustinian training.
Augustine writes in his "Admonition and Grace",

> this is the right understanding of the grace of God
> through Jesus Christ our Lord, by which alone men are
> freed from evil, and without which they do no good
> whatsoever, either in thought or in will and love, or in
> action; not only do men know by its showing what they
> are to do, but by its power they do with love what they
> know is to be done" (66)

In the same context Augustine quotes St. Paul in arguing that
salvation is a result of God's "gracious choice. and if out of
grace, then not in virtue of works; otherwise grace is no longer
grace'" (66). It is from these sources that the essential
elements of reformed soteriology are derived. A number of modern
critics, including William Halewood, Stanley Fish, Ira Clark and
Patrick Grant, have skirted debates over the precise theological
orientation of the poets they consider by referring to their
Augustinianism. Grant, for example, uses the expression "guilt
culture" to

> indicate, broadly, a spiritual and theological tradition
> deriving essentially from the influential thought of St.
> Augustine of Hippo, remaining most vital during the
> Middle Ages, and revived vigorously during the
> Reformation.   (X)

In this way he stresses continuity, and avoids the difficult
task of demonstrating that someone like Herbert was definitely a
Protestant. I want to share, at least partly, in this equivocal
position by arguing that it is not really necessary, and
probably not possible, to indicate with much certainty the

extent to which Spenser or Herbert should be described as

Protestants (with Milton there is, of course, no doubt). What is

certain is that it would have been impossible for either of them

to escape the influence of reformed theology, particularly in

connection with the Protestant vision of the personal drama of

salvation, however conservative their views about matters of

church ritual may have been.

The Protestant depiction of good works as the product of

divine grace, rather than as a means of earning God's favour,

gives rise to the reformed theology of vocation. Luther

developed his notion of calling in direct opposition to the

orthodox theology of his time. As he writes in his treatise <u>On</u>

<u>Monastic Vows</u>:

> all saints live by the same Spirit and the same faith,
> and are guided and governed by the same Spirit and the
> same faith, but they all do different external works.
> For God . . . provides each one with other works in
> other times and places, just as he did with other
> saints. And each one is compelled by the work, place,
> time, persons, and circumstances, previously unknown to
> him, to follow God as he rules and guides him.  (44:
> 269)

For Luther, any "worthy occupation" is both *of* God, since human

actions are corrupt, and *for* God. And if the concept of divine

calling is expanded to include all "worthy occupations" then

surely poetry is among them. There is no doubt that Milton, for

example, envisioned the role of Christian poet as a priestly

one. While he retained the Protestant conviction that calling is

not limited to the clerical hierarchy, he did argue for the

existence of a "special" vocation, which

> means that God, whenever he chooses; invites certain
> selected individuals, either from the so-called elect or
> from the reprobate, more clearly and insistently than is
> normal.  (De Doctrina Christiana 6: 455)

It is this call that Milton himself hears. As John Spencer Hill

points out in his study of Milton's concept of vocation,

> Perhaps Milton's firmest conviction was that he had been
> called to serve as the instrument of the divine will.
> Like the Nazarite Samson, into whose characterization he
> poured a good deal of his own spiritual and intellectual
> biography, Milton thought of himself as "a person
> separate to God / Designed for great exploits" (S.A.,
> 31-32) and his sense of special vocation provides a firm
> conceptual framework which unifies the whole of his
> literary production.  (15)

Perhaps the best illustration of Milton's sense of his own

special poetic vocation is contained in The Reason of Church

Government, where he claims vatic status by comparing himself to

the seer Tiresias and the Prophet Jeremiah (1: 802-803). His

vocation is a fusion of the political, the religious and the

artistic, and his confident image of the "poet, soaring in the

high region of his fancies, with his garland and singing robes

about him" (1: 808) is linked to his great personal aspiration,

> that what the greatest and choycest wits of Athens,
> Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for
> their country, I, in my proportion, with this over and
> above of being a Christian, might doe for mine.  (1:
> 812)

The strength of Milton's conviction is such that Russel Fraser

has beem prompted to describe him as a kind of linguistic

pelagian, utterly confident in the power and appropriateness of

his own language (The Language of Adam 33).

And yet this description is the very antithesis of what we would expect from the "Puritan" Milton. Although his theology, as set forth in De Doctrina Christiana, defies labels like "Calvinist", the repudiation of works that is the cornerstone of the Reformation remains intact. De Doctrina Christiana stresses the impossiblilty of earning salvation through works:

> The worthlessness of our merits becomes quickly apparent when we consider that even our good deeds are not really ours but God's, who works in us, and that even if they were certainly ours they would still be no more than our duty. Moreover, however well we perform our duty it cannot possibly bear comparison with the richness of the promised reward.  (6: 644-645)

Similarly, in Book XII of Paradise Lost, Michael offers Adam a synopsis of the reformed theology of justification:

>      . . . Doubt not but that sin
> Will reign among them, as of thee begot;
> And therefore was Law given them to evince
> Thir natural pravity, by stirring up
> Sin against Law to fight; That when they see
> Law can discover sin, but not remove,
> Save by those shadowy expiations weak,
> The blood of Bulls and Goats, they may conclude
> Some blood more precious must be paid for man,
> Just for unjust, that in such righteousness
> To them by Faith imputed, they may find
> Justification towards God, and peace
> Of Conscience, which the Law by Ceremonies
> Cannot appease, nor man the moral part
> Perform, and not performing cannot live.  (285-299)

It is clear then that for Milton, as for any good reformed theologian, works can never, in themselves, be a means to salvation. If Milton the theologian dwells less on the essential depravity of works than Calvin it is not because of any

disagreement on the fundamental theological issue. In order to defend Milton the poet against the anti-aestheticism implicit in his own theology, he must place greater stress on the value of those works that are products of divine grace, and as such form the core of his Christian vocation.

With Herbert and Spenser the situation is less straightforward. While Miltonists quibble about whether Milton's theology in De Doctrina Christiana tends toward Arianism (Kelley; Hunter), scholars of Spenser and Herbert are engaged with the more fundamental question of whether either poet can safely be called a Protestant. This is the case for two main reasons. First Milton left us a theological treatise in which he attempted to state his doctrine in a complete and coherent manner. With Spenser and Herbert, on the contrary, we have only the poetry, and Herbert's A Priest to the Temple, or, The Country Parson. The latter work deals with matters of practical ministry rather than fundamental theological issues, and attempts to make theological sense of the poetry have resulted in the current diversity of scholarly opinion. The second factor has to do with the character of the time in which Spenser and Herbert wrote. In both cases there was considerably more freedom in the area of private faith than immediately before or after. Spenser published The Faerie Queene in the decade immediately following the decline of Puritanism as an organized political force (Collinson 385). After 1588, as Anthea Hume acknowledges

in her book on Spenser's Protestantism, identifying Puritans

becomes a good deal more difficult. The situation was similar

when Herbert composed the poems of The Temple, as Joseph Summers

explains:

> The Anglican Church before 1633 was in one sense more
> truly 'catholic' than the Anglo-Catholics of the
> nineteenth century wished to believe. So long as an
> individual subscribed to the Articles, attended services
> a few times a year, and was not too singular in his
> actions, a wide latitude of belief and practice was
> allowed.   (53-54)

Herbert died in 1633, the year Laud became Archbishop of

Canterbury.

The critical controversy over Spenser's theological

position has been resurrected by the recent publication of

Anthea Hume's Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet, in which she

argues that "the religion to which he [Spenser] adhered

throughout his life was a fervent Protestantism which requires

the label 'Puritan' during a specific period [the late 1570s]"

(9). Supporting Hume's position is J.D. Boulger, who exhibits no

hesitation in placing Spenser among the poets of

"Calvinist-Puritan sensibility" in The Calvinist Temper in

English Poetry. Hume at least acknowledges that the weight of

recent Spenser scholarship is against her on this issue

(Weatherby is a recent example), and reviews the opinions of her

opponents, who would place Spenser among the conservative

defenders of the Elizabethan settlement. Such a position is

taken by Virgil K. Whittaker in his 1950 study of The Religious

Basis of Spenser's Thought. Whittaker concludes:

> though certainly not a Calvinist, on all but one or two
> crucial doctrinal issues between Anglicanism and Rome,
> he [Spenser] was as staunchly Protestant theologically
> as he was politically; but, where no battle line
> existed, his sympathies lay with medieval Catholic ways
> as opposed to the Reformed.  (8)

This is a complex position, and if it was indeed Spenser's, then

the confusion among scholars over the years is not surprising. I

believe Whittaker's summary does justice to the confusing array

of theological ideas in The Faerie Queene, and I also believe it

grants enough to Spenser's Protestantism to give him a place in

the development of a distinctly Protestant poetics, without

making claims that are too difficult to defend.

Spenser can be infuriatingly contradictory in his

allegorical presentation of religious ideas. The opening stanza

of Book I, canto x, for example, seems an unequivocal statement

of Calvinist doctrine:

> What man is he, that boasts of fleshly might,
>   And vaine assurance of mortality,
>   Which all so soone, as it doth come to fight,
>   Against Spirituall foes yeelds by and by,
>   Or from the field most cowardly doth fly?
>   Ne let the man ascribe it to his skill
>   That thorough grace hath gained victory.
>   If any strength we have it is to ill,
> But all the good is Gods, both power and eke will. [1]
>                                                       (I,x,1)

The issue is complicated, however,  by the unreliability of

---

[1] In quoting from The Faerie Queene I have modernized
the letters i, u, v, and j, and have abandoned the italicization
of names to permit my own italicizations for emphasis.

Spenser's narrator, and the increasing stress on good works as
the canto progresses, culminating in the appearance of Charissa.
There is little doubt that the experience of the Red Crosse
Knight, culminating in the House of Holiness episode, owes
something to the Puritan drama of salvation described by William
Haller in The Rise of Puritanism (election--vocation--
justification--sanctification--glorification), and the Knight's
encounter with Despair involves at least a touch of Lutheran
*anfechtung* or Calvinist "sin-consciousness". Spenser's
involvement with the "cult of Elizabeth" likewise required at
least nominal Protestantism, and the anti-Roman allegory of Book
I, drawing on the traditional Protestant characterization of the
Pope as Antichrist, has been treated at length by D. Douglas
Waters in Duessa as Theological Satire. At the same time
Spenser, still a humanist, is clearly willing to criticize
Protestant doctrines and policies. The characterization of Envy
in the House of Pride seems to be an undisguised attack on
Lutheran doctrine:

> He hated all good workes and vertuous deeds,
> And him no lesse, that any like did use,
> And who with gracious bread the hungry feeds,
> His almes for want of faith he doth accuse;
> So every good to bad he doth abuse:
> And eke the verse of famous Poets witt
> He does backebite, and spiteful poison spues
> From leprous mouth on all, that ever writt:
> Such one vile Envie was that fifte in row did sitt.
>
> (I,iv,32)

The robber Kirkrapine is clearly linked to the dissolution of
the monasteries under Henry VIII, and there is, of course, Ben

Jonson's observation that the Blatant Beast is a satire upon the
Puritans (Whittaker 7). Whittaker's description is capable of
accomodating these apparent contradictions. Spenser the
antiquarian, the conservative and the moralist would certainly
have disapproved of the destruction of monastic treasures and
libraries, and the seizure of monastic lands, and it must have
been clear to him that royal motivation was far from
theological. Even the description of Envy is not so much an
indictment of Protestant doctrine *per se*, as of the abuses to
which it is susceptible. The phrase "gracious bread" (3)
suggests, I think, Spenser's own moderate Protestantism. He
esteems good works as products of divine grace, and condemns
those Protestants too narrow-minded to see them as such. As
lines 5 and 6 show, he also sees in Envy's extreme solifidianism
a threat to his own poetic good works, and the defence against
this threat is an important feature of <u>The Faerie Queene</u>.

With Herbert the situation is much the same, except that
arguments for Herbert's Protestantism have gained somewhat
greater currency. The orthodox position is expressed By Joseph
Summers in <u>George Herbert: His Religion and Art</u>. Summers sees
Herbert in much the same light as Whittaker sees Spenser,
arguing that "Herbert believed as strongly in predestination and
the doctrine of the Covenant of Grace as he believed in the
significance and beauty of the ritual" (58). On the side of
Herbert the Catholic there is Rosemond Tuve, who stresses the

elements of continuity and Christian tradition in Herbert's
writing. A recent article by Stanley Stewart, documenting
Herbert's reliance on the 'Harmonies' of Little Gidding,
suggests that Ferrar and the Little Gidding community are as
close as we can come to identifying Herbert's intended audience,
and that the Catholic tendencies of this group should be taken
to indicate Herbert's own views. Stewart is writing in direct
response to Barbara K. Lewalski's <u>Protestant Poetics and the
Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric</u> and Richard Strier's <u>Love
Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry</u>.
Lewalski's ambitious book treats Herbert in the context of a
larger theory of Protestant poetics, while Strier argues that
the dominant theological concern in <u>The Temple</u> is Luther's
doctrine of justification by faith.

Again I am attracted to the middle position, as I think
Herbert himself would have been. There is no doubt that the
liturgical sources of <u>The Temple</u> reach back long before the
Reformation, or that Herbert was influenced by Counter-
reformation meditative practices (Martz). At the same time I
find it difficult to believe that Herbert could have escaped the
influence of a theological movement that was better than a
century old by the time he wrote, and had been the central
preoccupation of English theological writing and education for
most of that time. It is not necessary to make Herbert over into
a Calvinist in order to suggest that he has a place in the

development of a Protestant literary tradition.

If there is debate over the degree to which Spenser and
Herbert subscribed to Protestant doctrines such as
predestination and justification by faith, there is at least
relative unanimity concerning their sense of poetic vocation. In
a lengthy article on "Spenser and the Idea of a Literary Career"
Richard Helgerson describes Spenser's ambition:

> to reverse history and reincarnate in his own time the
> idea of the Poet, Spenser needed particularly the
> life-giving breath of inspiration, for it was in losing
> his divine inspiration that the ancient Poet [vates] had
> degenerated into the modern amorous 'maker'.   (899)

Even studies that stress Spenser's connections to classical and
renaissance models, rather than those of the Reformation, point
to the importance of the vatic ideal. If Spenser's project was,
as Helgerson suggests, to rescue the notion of poetic calling
from his utilitarian age, then the theology of the Reformation
was an ally. God no longer called men to the priesthood alone,
but to all professions.

In Herbert's case the roles of poet and priest were
literally convergent. Walton's apocryphal description of
Herbert's request upon sending the manuscript of The Temple to
Ferrar is suggestive:

> Sir I pray deliver this little book to my dear brother
> Ferrar, and tell him that he shall find in it a picture
> of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed 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 public; if not, let him burn

it; for I and it are less than the least of God's
mercies.   (286)

Whether or not Herbert actually uttered these words, they have

come to represent the central expression of his sense of

mission, aside from the poetry itself. Joseph Summers elaborates

on the point:

> It was impossible to distinguish the aims of specific
> actions, for all was done to the glory of God: the aid
> both spiritual and physical of one's neighbour was also
> an act of worship of the productive life; and any
> individual act of public or private worship, once
> communicated, could become an act of edification to
> one's neighbour. The ultimate method of reflecting God's
> glory was the creation of a work of decency and order, a
> work of beauty, whether a church, an ordered poem, or an
> ordered life. This was not confined to the artist, but
> was the privilege and duty of every Christian.   (83-84)

While the expressions of poetic vocation associated with Herbert

do not rely heavily on the classical conception of vatic

inspiration, there can be no question that divine sanction for,

and indeed divine participation in, his writing is a crucial

factor. And yet a great many of the poems deal explicitly with

the absence, real or imagined, of that divine force. Herbert's

sense of his own fallenness, heightened by the spirit of his age

(whether we call it Augustinian "guilt culture", Lutheran

*anfechtung* or Puritan "sin-consciousness" does not really

matter) acts not so much to frustrate the actual accomplishment

of his divinely-ordained work, as to frustrate his *sense* of its

accomplishment. Whatever our view of his poetry, Herbert was

always acutely aware if its inadequacy, and this awareness is a

central feature of the work itself.

What I have attempted in this chapter is to suggest a
rough consensus in the Protestant (and Augustinian) theology
prevalent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, on two
issues: the doctrine of justification by faith, and the related
tendency to denigrate human works, and the expansion of the
notion of calling or vocation to give "priestly" status to
activities other than clerical life.  I have also tried to show
that Spenser and Herbert, as well as Milton, participate in this
consensus to some degree, whether or not we are willing to
attach the slippery labels of Puritan or even Protestant. My
feeling is that the latter description, if not the former,
probably applies in all three cases, but at the same time I do
not think it necessary to push the issue very far. This is
partly because the issues I identify as characteristically
Protestant have classical and renaissance antecedents as well:
in the inability topos of classical rhetoric, and in the ideal
of the vatic poet. For a Protestant poet, however, an expression
of authorial inability is more than an ironically self-assertive
rhetorical device. As the poet's sense of the inadequacy of his
work becomes more genuine it comes into conflict with the vatic
ideal, and the poem becomes the scene of a struggle to
accommodate both concepts.

"Afflicted Stile": Spenser's Faerie Queene


In The Faerie Queene we can begin to see signs of the
tension between solifidianism and poetic vocation that was
identified in Milton's Sonnet XIX. In Book I, "The Legende Of
The Knight Of The Red Crosse, Or Of Holinesse," Spenser is
concerned, among other issues, to establish the appropriate
relationship between faith and good works in the Christian life.
At the same time he is concerned with announcing his own role as
poet in a more ambitious sense than was customary in Elizabethan
England (Helgerson). Spenser's depiction of Envy suggests a
tendency to link these two issues together: the proper place of
the poet's linguistic works, and that of good works as a whole.
Correct and incorrect use of language is also a central concern
(arguably *the* central concern) of Book VI, "The Legend Of S.
Calidore Or Of Courtesie". But where Book I may be described as
a defence of Spenser's poetic vocation, in which adversaries
like Envy are introduced in order to be dispatched, Book VI, and
also "The Mutabilitie Cantos," present more serious doubts about
that vocation. The two monsters that frame the poem, Errour with
her "vomit full of bookes and papers" (I,i,20), and the Blatant
Beast with its "vile tongue and venemous intent" (VI,i,8), are
both examples of what A. Leigh Deneef calls "wrong-speakers"

21

(3), offenders against the divine Word who attack not only
Spenser's heroes but also his poem. But while the Red Crosse
Knight defeats Errour with relative ease in Book I, Calidore's
triumph over the Blatant Beast in Book VI is temporary at best.

In _Spenser and the Motives of Metaphor_, Deneef argues
that

> any poet who would address our profit and delight, as
> well as move us to virtuous action, must be alert to the
> abuses of the poetic word to which both he and we might
> fall prey. Such vigilance is particularly evident in
> Spenser's poetry. Throughout his literary career he
> adopts a variety of defensive and self-defensive
> postures to protect his texts from potential misuse,
> from their being, in his words, either misconstrued or
> misconstructed.  (3)

This defensive posture implies a strong sense of the fallenness
and corruption of the poet's language and art, and hints at the
characteristic Protestant suspicion of linguistic artifice.
Spenser generally presents the threats to his poem as external
ones (misreading and slander), but perhaps he protests too much.
In one sense all of the wrong speakers in the poem must be
viewed as products of the poet's own imagination and
preoccupations. At the same time though, poetry for Spenser is
explicitly a form of vocation. Like the knights in each of his
six books, he has embarked on a quest in the service of his
Faery Queen, the "Mirrour of grace and Majestie divine" (I,
Proem, 4), a quest that is his divine calling. The Protestant
theology of vocation is the Reformation's acknowledgement that a
life devoted to sanctified works, works that are the products of

faith and divine grace, is possible in any area of endeavour--in poetry no less than in clerical life. The centrality of the theology of vocation in <u>The Faerie Queene</u> is evident in the insistence with which the poem cautions against sloth, the temptation to abandon the quest, to rest, to retreat from the active to the contemplative life before the appointed task can be completed. Further, the temptation to rest too soon is a sin to which the poet and his heroes are equally susceptible (Miller).

Both Spenser's apprehensiveness about the efficacy of his own language and art, and his sense of poetic vocation, are encapsulated in his use of topoi of authorial inability or inadequacy, which recur throughout the poem. In the proem to Book I the poet presents himself as "all too meane" (I,proem,1), and appeals to Elizabeth, as his muse, for aid: "O helpe thou my weake wit, and sharpen my dull tong" (I,proem,2). As Thomas Cain points out, such

> affectation of self disparagement not only serves to
> elevate the subject of praise: it also draws attention
> to the speaker himself. It is this paradox inherent in
> the topos of inability that Spenser particularly
> exploits.  (Cain 10)

This reading suggests that Spenser's use of the inability topos is predominantly ironic, and serves as an expression of the poet's sense of vocation. This is particularly true in Book I, but as Cain himself points out, "the poet's final posture, in the two stanzas of the eighth canto [of Mutabilitie] . . . acts

out his own helplessness", and the poem's "final topos of
inability . . . [is] devoid of any sense of covert
self-assertion" (183). Spenser's declining confidence in his own
ability to sustain poetic vocation against the threat of false
speaking is also evident in Book VI.  Spenser's use of the
inability topos is, on the whole, more self-assertive than
either Milton's or Herbert's. Nevertheless the appearance of the
device in the context of declining self-confidence begins its
transformation into an expression of the poet's fundamental
ambivalence toward his own art, which is at once inspired and
fallen. At the end of the poem (or at least of the poem we have)
Spenser prays for the rest he has been so reluctant to grant his
heroes: "O that great Sabbaoth God, grant me that Sabaoth's
sight" (VII,viii,2), and in doing so, reaches for the same
balance between activity and passivity found in the closing
lines of Milton's Sonnet XIX:

> the last humble line cannot pass without the poet's
> punning on the Hebrew *Sabaoth*, armies or hosts, and
> *Sabbaoth*, rest. In the pun resides a definition of
> eternity and repose where the dichotomies the poem has
> engaged--quest and rest, epic and pastoral, vision and
> experience, art and reality, encomium and
> truth--resolve.  (Cain 183)

This view accords well with David L. Miller's insight that

> Spenser's career and his poetry represent a sustained
> effort to hold a wide array of potentially conflicting
> values together in a single thought, and so to preserve
> a generous illusion about the social utility of
> beautiful untrue things.  (176)

Miller is here referring to the debate over the social utility

of poetry in which Sidney's <u>Defense</u> participates, but for
Spenser the question of the value of poetry goes beyond that of
mere "social utility."

   The treatment of language in Book I of <u>The Faerie</u>
<u>Queene</u> develops along lines that follow closely the spiritual
development of the Red Crosse Knight. In fact, a reading of the
passages where language, speech and words are specifically
treated leads to the suggestion that Book I depicts a process
that might be described as the sanctification of language. There
is a movement from an emphasis on the ineffectuality of language
as a fallen human attribute, and its darker potential as an
instrument of deception and damnation, to a more optimistic
position governed by the reformed doctrine of vocation. This
movement represents a rebuttal to the uncharitably solifidian
position represented by Envy. The presentation of language in
the cantos leading up to the House of Holiness episode is
predominantly negative, and casts doubt upon the reliability of
the poem itself. This process of undercutting the validity and
authority of the poetic utterance begins very early, with the
portrait of the Red Crosse Knight in the opening stanzas of
canto i: "Right faithfull true he was in deede and word"
(I,i,2). This is the first of many appearances of the expression
"deede and word", which Spenser uses to stress the link between
speech and action, and implicitly, between poem and quest, poet
and knight. As events show, the words and deeds of the knight we

meet in canto i are anything but faithful. Thus the words of the narrative voice in praising the unproven Knight are called into question. Later, in the House of Pride, Redcrosse sets up a false dichotomy between speech and action, which illustrates his diversion from the quest: "He never meant with words, but swords to plead his right" (I,iv,42).

The figure of Archimago serves as a warning against the deceptive and malicious power of eloquence: "For that old man of pleasing wordes had store, / And well could file his tongue as smooth as glas" (I,i,35). Two stanzas later, this power is associated with poetry, in terms that reveal the true nature of Archimago's language:

> Then choosing out few wordes most horrible,
>   (Let none them read) thereof did verses frame,
> With which and other spelles like terrible,
> He bad awake blacke Plutoes griesly Dame,
> And cursed heaven, and spake reprochfull shame
> Of highest God, the Lord of life and light;
> A bold bad man, that dar'd to call by name
> Great Gorgon, Prince of darknesse and dead night,
> At which Cocytus quakes, and Styx is put to flight.
>                                           (I,i,37)

Here Spenser presents the conventional analogy of poet and wizard, perhaps drawing specifically on the medieval tradition depicting Vergil, his own model, as a magician (Comparetti). Nohrnberg points out that the poet--magician analogy "offers to equate Archimago's activity with the imagination currently shaping the poem [Spenser's]" (105), while Deneef carries the association a step further by suggesting that Archimago's "duplicitous creations threaten constantly to contaminate the

poet's" (95). This is evident when Archimago, in the guise of the Red Crosse Knight, meets Una. Not only do "His lovely words" seem "due recompence" (I,iii,30) to her, but the narrator himself seems to be taken in by the illusion, judging from his unqualified assertion at the end of the stanza: "Before her stands her knight, for whom she toyld so sore" (I,iii,30). It must be acknowledged that this naive posture is only one of the narrator's many roles. Nevertheless the fluctuations in the authority and reliability of the narrative voice heighten the sense of a certain ambivalence toward his creation on the part of the poet.

The power of language to *move*, lauded in Sidney's Defense of Poesie (426), appears in The Faerie Queene as particularly problematic. Duessa employs "speeches seeming fit" to "amove" Sans joy against the Red Cross Knight (I,iv,45), and "Her feeling speeches some compassion moved" even in the dark heart of mother Night (I,v,24). Whatever the corruption of the speaker the latter of these speeches seems to contain an element of genuine filial affection. The effect of Despair's vicious speech to the Red Cross Knight, "The Knight was much enmoved with his speech" (I,ix,48), is exactly the same as the effect of Una's virtuous speech to her father: "The King was greatly moved at her speach" (I,xii,35). This echo suggests that Spenser, unlike Sidney, has a strong sense of the power of language to move men for ill as easily as for good.

In fact, much in the early cantos of Book I testifies to
the ineffectuality and potential misguidedness of even the
best-intentioned uses of language. Una's "piteous words"
(I,iii,38) in defence of the false Red Crosse Knight are morally
impeccable, but utterly misdirected. Similarly when Satyrane
assails Sansloy "With fowle reprochfull words" (I,vi,40) he is
acting virtuously, but on the basis of false information
provided by Archimago. Perhaps the most striking example,
however, is Fradubio's speech in canto ii. Fradubio's story
should provide all the information Redcrosse needs to recognize
his own situation, but despite their truth "these speeches rare"
(I,ii,32) have no effect on his corrupted powers of
comprehension.

A notable exception to this pattern is the conversation
between Una and Arthur in canto vii, which serves to maintain a
sense of the possibility of a sanctified language. Arthur's
attempt to ease the lady's suffering with "Faire feeling words"
(I,vii,38) is initially rejected with an accusatory inability
topos:

> What worlds delight or joy of living speach
> Can heart, so plung'd in sea of sorrowes deepe,
> And heaped with so huge misfortunes, reach?
> (I,vii,39)

Una's doubts about the efficacy of Arthur's speech are wholly
consistent with the poem's portrayal of language so far. In this
instance, however, "His goodly reason and well guided speach"
(I,vii,42) are successful: "His chearefull words reviv'd her

chearelesse spright" (I,vii,52). It is important to note that
Arthur is not merely a model of humanist virtues, but is also a
questing knight, inspired by a dream-vision of the Faery Queen.
Thus while "goodly reason" guides his speech, he represents the
poet's ideal of visionary inspiration as well. In this sense he
anticipates the movement of cantos x to xii, in which language
is reformed along with the Red Crosse Knight, and the grim view
of language in the early cantos is counterbalanced by a more
optimistic vision of poetic vocation.

   The House of Holinesse episode of canto x serves to
remake not only the Red Crosse Knight, but also the poem's
portrayal of language. Earlier episodes have demonstrated that
both have the potential for salvation, but their fallen natures
have dominated. The knight's resumption and eventual completion
of his quest depends on his acquisition of the Christian virtues
represented by Charissa, and the knowledge represented by
Contemplation, and the Canto builds towards this point.
Nevertheless, Fidelia, because she is the first to instruct
Redcrosse, seems to play an important enabling role. Hume argues
that

> a single vision propels the poem forward, a vision of
> how to live well, or in Spenser's own words, a vision of
> the "XII Morall vertues". The structure of the work
> informs us that the acquisition of these virtues depends
> first and foremost on a divine act of grace, and then
> consists of a lengthy process of individual development
> in which the mind increases in comprehension, the heart
> in self mastery. (67-68)

While this position does not deny the tremendous emphasis on

good works that is evident in <u>The Faerie Queene</u> as a heroic
poem, it may still be too strong. Whether or not we accept
Hume's interpretation it is fair to say that Spenser is working
to break down the opposition between faith and works by
depicting them as sisters. At the same time the chronological
priority of Fidelia's teaching in Redcrosse's spiritual renewal
keeps Spenser within the bounds of the conservative
Protestantism described by Whittaker.

In opposition to Archimago Fidelia represents the
virtuous deployment of language, of which scripture is the
supreme example. Her "booke that was both signd and seald with
blood, / Wherein darke things were writ, hard to be understood"
(I,x,13) is a positive analogue to the poet's own "continued
Allegory or darke conceit . . . clowdily enwrapped in
Allegoricall devices" (Letter to Raleigh). Deneef argues that

> by setting Archimago loose in the fiction, Spenser
> creates the necessity for a counterforce. His fictional
> strategies are so close to his antagonist's that he must
> derive a positive source for his own transforming
> powers, both to reveal what is dark and hidden and to
> 'raise againe' what is low and fallen. Fidelia provides,
> in short, a divinely sanctioned authority for Spenser's
> narrative presumptions.   (99)

Language, which was the instrument of Redcrosse's unmaking at
the hands of the false speakers--Archimago, Duessa and
Despair--becomes the instrument of his redemption through faith:

> And that her sacred Booke, with blood ywrit,
>    That none could read, except she did them teach,
>    She unto him disclosed every whit,
>    And heavenly documents thereout did preach,
>    That weaker wit of man could never reach,

> Of God, of grace, of justice, of free will,
> That wonder was to heare her goodly speach:
> For she was able with her words to kill,
> And raise againe to life the hart, that she did thrill.
>                                                    (I,x,19)

Some ambiguity should be noted here. It can be argued that the emphasis on Fidelia's *teaching* in line 2 of the stanza is an attack on Luther's stress on individual interpretation of scripture. It seems to me that this reading places too little weight on Fidelia's allegorical significance. Luther would certainly not have suggested that one could read scripture without the guidance of faith. Rather, redemption becomes possible through the action of Fidelia, and knowledge "of God, of grace, of justice, of free will" proceeds from her teaching.

Spenser praises the language of the minor as well as the major figures in the House of Holiness, creating a sense of a total transformation in its nature and role. The depiction of the Mount of Contemplation explicitly connects Christian mission with poetic vocation, as Zion and the Mount of Olives, representative of the divine Word, are associated with Parnassus, and the poet's divine inspiration. Contemplation leads the Red Crosse Knight

> . . . to the highest Mount;
> Such one, as that same mighty man of God,
> That bloud-red billowes like a walled front
> On either side disparted with his rod,
> Till that his army dry-foot through them yod,
> Dwelt fortie days upon; where writ in stone
> With bloudy letters by the hand of God,
> The bitter doome of death and baleful mone
> He did receive, whiles flashing fire about him shone.

> Or like that sacred hill, whose head full hie,
>   Adornd with friuitfull Olives all arownd,
>   Is, as it were for endlesse memory
>   Of that deare Lord, who oft thereon was fownd,
>   For ever with a flowring girlond crownd:
>   Or like that pleasaunt Mount, that is for ay
>   Through famous Poets verse each where renownd,
>   On which the thrise three learned Ladies play
> Their heavenly notes, and make full many a lovely lay.
>                                             (I,x,53-54)

Immediately following this pronouncement of the divine status of
poetry, including, presumably, Spenser's own poem, the inability
topos reappears in the description of Jerusalem :

> Whose wals and towres were builded high and strong
> Of perle and precious stone, that earthly tong
> Cannot describe, nor wit of man can tell;
> Too high a ditty for my simple song.
>                                             (I,x,55.4-7)

This passage undoubtedly fulfils the conventional purposes of
the inability topos, to elevate the subject of description by
claiming that it is beyond description, and to draw attention to
the artistry of the poet employing the device. Yet it may also
present a genuine caution against pride and backsliding on the
part of the poet and his newly reformed language. This sense is
heightened by the echo in line 6 of the earlier line connected
with Fidelia's heavenly teaching, "That weaker wit of man could
never reach" (I,x,19). The cautionary function of the inability
topos is reinforced by the reappearance of Archimago in canto
xii. Man remains corrupted by the fall, and the sanctification
of poetic language is no permanent guarantee against false
speaking. The poet must be constantly on his guard against the
potential for duplicity that is inherent in his own art.

Book I of <u>The Faerie Queene</u> clearly cannot be called a solifidian poem. Rather, it incorporates a solifidian critique of poetry, in order to respond to it by suggesting that virtuous words and deeds are inseparable from faith. The quest upon which the Red Crosse Knight embarks is, like the poem, a work in which Spenser puts great stock. Book I constitutes a successful defence of the poet's vocation which, in the final sense, is seen as inseparable from his faith. In such a context the Protestant formulation of "faith alone" does not arise, since faith, for Spenser, never exists alone, but only in conjunction with its outward manifestations in virtuous speech and action.

Spenser's attitude toward language in Book VI is more complex, and, I think, more typical of a Reformation poet's ambivalence about his art. Numerous critics have pointed out the heightened self-consciousness and diminished self-confidence of the Book. Cain suggests that "in one sense the poet becomes the hero of Book VI", in a way that involves "a reassessment of his role, particularly with respect to Orpheus, the humanist's favourite archetype of the successful poet" (156). Nohrnberg claims that "the [Blatant] Beast threatens the poet with the 'snowballing redundancy' that was a danger in his project from the beginning . . . the monstrosity that might overtake a poet who did not know when to stop" (683), while Angus Fletcher observes that Spenser "cannot vaccinate his poem against the disease carried by the Blatant Beast; language itself is the

primary medium of error and betrayal" (294). The decline of

Spenser's sense of poetic vocation is evident in the crumbling

of the ideals of Book I: the opposition between true speaking

and false speaking and the linking of virtuous speech and

virtuous action. While the first Book of the poem presents

misuse of language as a constant danger there is, in fact, very

little confusion between true and false speaking. The Book

revolves around a conflict between two clearly defined modes of

using language, and the process I have described as the

"sanctification of language" represents a clear triumph of the

divine Word over fallen human words. In Book VI the situation is

far less clear. With whom does the poet identify, and with whom

does he ask us to identify? The Book contains false speakers

analogous to those in Book I--Blandina, Turpine, and of course

the Blatant Beast--but the models of true speech turn out to be

flawed or ambiguous. Nowhere can we find a confident expression

of poetic vocation to balance the sense that language is

corrupt, inadequate or unreliable. Every attempt in Book VI to

establish some assurance of poetic vocation turns back upon

itself either through irony or simple failure of language.

In the proem the poet's invocation to the Muse and his

plea for the "goodly fury" of divine inspiration (VI,proem,2) is

followed by a solifidian-sounding caution against the "fayned

showes" (VI,proem,4) that pass for courtesy in his own age:

But in the triall of true courtesie,
Its now so farre from that, which then it was,

>             That it indeed is nought but forgerie,
>             Fashion'd to please the eies of them, that pas,
>             Which see not perfect things but in a glas:
>             Yet is that glasse so gay, that it can blynd
>             The wisest sight, to think gold that is bras.
>             But vertues seat is deepe within the mynd,
>       And not in outward shows, but inward thoughts defyned.
>                                               (VI,proem,5)

While its subject matter may be derived from antiquity,

Spenser's poem is inescapably tied to his own age. In the

dichotomy between "outward showes" and "inward thoughts", a

poem, especially one of the scope and magnitude of The Faerie

Queene, must fall into the former category. Even more strikingly

ironic is the relationship between this and the following

stanza. Here Spenser subverts his own attempt to establish

Elizabeth as mediatrix between the vanity of his age and the

virtue of antiquity by using the previous stanza's language and

imagery of condemnation to sing her praises:

>             But where shall I in all Antiquity
>               So faire a patterne finde, where may be *seene*
>               The goodly praise of Princely curtesie
>               As in your selfe, O sovereign Lady Queene,
>               In whose pure minde, *as in a mirrour sheene,*
>               *It showes, and with her brightness doth inflame*
>               *The eyes of all,* which thereon fixed beene;
>               But meriteth indeede an higher name:
>             Yet so from low to high uplifted is your name.
>             (VI,proem,6. Emphasis mine.)

The proem explains what has happened to the dichotomy of true

versus false speaking. It has been replaced by one of "outward

showes", which would seem to include all forms of speaking,

versus "inward thoughts".

        Since Calidore is the knight of courtesy, an essentially

verbal virtue, we might expect him to serve as a model of poetic

vocation, or failing that, to progress toward perfection of the

virtue he represents, as the Red Crosse Knight does. Sincere

efforts continue to be made by critics to see him in this light.

In his massive 1976 study, Nohrnberg suggests that

> the hero of the legend of courtesie is short of
> weaponry, but he makes up the deficiency with his fair
> words. The uses of speech in this legend perhaps require
> no detailed enumeration. It is possible that the
> overlapping narrative in the opening cantos is largely
> contrived to get Calidore into as many conversations as
> possible. On the side of the heroic persona we find
> salutation, welcome, invitation, sympathetic enquiry,
> counsel, commiseration, thanks, apology, appeasement,
> suasion and entreaty. (681)

With few exceptions, however, Calidore's use of these verbal

forms is self-serving. He quickly transforms his salutation to

Artegal in the fourth stanza into an occasion to describe his

own quest, interrupting just as Artegal "gan to expresse / His

whole exploite" (VI,i,5). His welcomes and invitations seem to

consist chiefly in the knight's inviting himself to impose on

the hospitality of others, first Calepine, then Melibee, and

then Colin. His sympathetic enquiries into the affairs of others

are so frequent that they begin to smack of busybodying, and his

apology to Colin for interrupting the dance of the Graces, by

far the knight's crudest blunder, suggests that he is forgiving

himself, rather than asking forgiveness: "Thus did the courteous

knight excuse his blame" (VI,x,29). The standard expression of

facile praise, "courteous knight", reinforces this

interpretation. These offenses might all be excused if they fell

into a pattern of degeneration and restoration of the Knight's
virtue, as is the case with Redcrosse. As Richard Neuse points
out, the vision of the dance of the Graces, analogous to
Redcrosse's vision of "the new Hierusalem" (I,x,57) from the
Mount of Contemplation, "should be Calidore's moment of truth.
But neither the instant disappearance of the dancers, nor
Colin's breaking of his pipe in anger at the intrusion has any
real effect on Calidore" (Neuse 384). Like the linking of the
Mount of Contemplation with Parnassus in Book I, the dance of
the Graces is associated with poetic vocation and divine
inspiration, "For being gone, none can them bring in place, /
But whom they of themselves so list to grace" (VI,x,20). "The
*poeta*'s exercise of his verbal gifts, both natural and
cultivated, brings on the *vates*' transcendent vision only when
the Graces or divine grace vouchsafe their own mysterious gifts"
(Cain 177). Here though, the vision of one of the poet's
personas is fractured by the apparently incurable awkwardness of
another. The poet is not aligned with true speaking against
false speaking, as in Book I, but rather divided between the
two.

The figures of Arthur and the Salvage Man also provide
insight into the poet's changing attitude towards language and
vocation. In Book I, Arthur appears prior to the House of
Holiness episode to comfort Una, to rescue Redcrosse from
Despair, and through "well guided speech" (I,viii,42) to serve

as an image of the potential for sanctification of language. In

Book VI, however, it appears that the efficacy of even Arthur's

language is in doubt. The inarticulate Salvage Man seems rather

more successful, though this is an area of some scholarly

debate. Neuse's observation that "the Savage turns out to be a

model of instinctive courtesy" (375), associated with the kind

of virtue whose "seat is deepe within the mynd" (VI,proem,5) has

been contested by Wells, who argues the rather Victorian case

that "the inarticulate Salvage acts in a dangerously impulsive

manner and must twice be restrained by Prince Arthur from

committing the acts of savage violence which earn him his name"

(135). Yet the second of these incidents, in which Arthur

prevents the Salvage from slaying Turpine, may be taken as a

sign of the inefficacy of the Prince's language and the

deceptive power of Blandina's. David L. Miller points out that

> Arthur spares Turpine - a mistake he almost doesn't
> survive - because he is disarmed, so to speak, by fair
> shows of courtesy. He *seems* to be reenacting Calidore's
> merciful treatment of Crudor. The outcome is not the
> same, of course--crudity can be refined and turpitude
> cannot--but the difference between them lies deep within
> the mind . . . . It is a further irony in this episode
> that the Salvage Man isn't fooled for a minute. Being
> completely ignorant of social forms, he is also
> invulnerable to their abuse.  (180)

This situation is another example of the breakdown of the simple

dichotomy of true speaking versus false speaking. Both Arthur's

"sharpe words" aimed at reforming Turpine (Vi,vi,33-36) and the

Salvage man's non-speech are seriously flawed. The link between

word and deed, established in Book I, has been broken. Arthur

seems to be reduced to good words without good works, the

Salvage Man the reverse.

Melibee provides a further example of this kind of

ambiguity. Though far from a villain like Turpine, he is equally

far from serving as a model of poetic vocation, despite the

suggestiveness of his name. If anything he serves as a model for

the retreat from one's calling that is always suspect in The

Faerie Queene. While Melibee argues that his pastoral lifestyle

is antithetical to "the worlds gay showes" (VI,ix,22), its

seductive effect on Calidore is actually the same as that of the

court, and his language in particular is bewitching:

> Whylest thus he talkt, the knight with greedy eare
>   Hong still upon his melting mouth attent;
> Whose sensefull words empierst his hart so neare,
>   That he was rapt with double ravishment,
>   Both of his speech that wrought him great content,
>   And also of the object of his vew,
>   On which his hungry eye was alwayes bent;
>   That twixt his pleasing tongue, and her faire hew,
> He lost himself, and like one halfe entraunced grew.
> <div align="right">(VI,ix,26)</div>

Calidore is not the only one who loses "himself" in Melibee's

speech. Faced with a stanza containing eleven masculine pronouns

the reader has a difficult time separating speaker from hearer.

This confusion points to the narcissistic quality of Calidore's

attraction to Melibee. The character of Melibee's speech and its

placement in the Book also suggest that, in some ways, "Melibee

is like Despair a sinister Orpheus" (Cain 173). At best he

represents the poet's potential to delight, while only appearing

to teach, and at worst, the darker power to deceive and destroy.

All this is not to suggest that Spenser has entirely
given up on the notion of a vocation consisting of sanctified
works and words. Tristram and the Hermit provide models of the
virtuous uses to which language can be put. The link between
words and works that was the ideal of Book I is expressed in
Calidore's judgement of Tristram:

> Much did Sir Calidore admire his speach
>   Tempred so well, but more admyr'd the stroke
>   That through the mayles had made so strong a breach
>   Into his heart . . . . (VI,ii,13)

The Hermit, similarly, represents the fusion of virtuous speech
and action, "As he the art of wordes knew wondrous well, / And
eke could doe, as well as say the same, (VI,vi,6). The Hermit
explains that the cure for the bite of the Blatant Beast is as
linguistic as the affliction, yet even his counsel is corrupted
by a certain ambiguity. What sounds at first like an injunction
to silence, or at least reticence,--"your tongue, your talke
restraine" (VI,vi,7)--becomes a charge to "Shun secresie, and
talke in open sight" (VI,vi,14). Significantly, these figures do
not have the effect of redeeming language, as did Arthur,
Fidelia and the residents of the House of Holiness in Book I.
Rather their effectiveness and influence is severely limited.
They provide aid in time of need and illuminate other characters
by contrast--Tristram to Calidore and the Hermit to Melibee
(Cain 173)--but they disappear from the poem without affecting
the outcome of Calidore's quest.

The achievement of the quest, as Neuse observes, "occurs

almost as an afterthought in the latter part of canto 12 rather
than as the climax of a spiritual struggle" (386). The
subsequent escape of the Blatant Beast seems to be of greater
import than his temporary capture. The identification of the
Beast with the poem and the poet, or at least with the darker
side of poetic potential, has been remarked upon with greater or
lesser insistence by several critics. The Beast's triumph, along
with Calidore's disruption of the dance of the Graces, is
usually taken as an indication of Spenser's "decay of might / .
. . [and] dulled spright" (VI,proem,1), the disintegration of
his sense of poetic vocation. Richard Helgerson has described
"Spenser's idea of the poet . . . [as] an unstable but necessary
union of two ideas, embodied in two roles: shepherd and knight,
Colin and Calidore - neither of which could be renounced in
favour of the other" (907). I do not think it is forcing the
issue unduly to see in this an analogy to the union of active
and passive stances in Milton's Sonnet XIX. The poet must
somehow "serve" as a questing knight, and yet "stand and wait"
like a patient shepherd for divine inspiration. By the end of
The Faerie Queene, such a union is no longer possible.

Herbert's Temple of "Guilded Clay"


When we encounter the poetry of George Herbert we move
closer to a uniquely Protestant poetics, characterized by the
tension between a solifidian repudiation of linguistic artifice
(and sometimes all language), and a desire to perform divine
service through that same medium. The two sides of this tension
have been admirably documented by Stanley Fish (Self-Consuming
Artifacts), and Barbara K. Lewalski (Protestant Poetics)
respectively, though there has yet to be a satisfactory
synthesis of their views. Fish's central point is that

> the insight that God's word is all is *self*-destructive,
> since acquiring it involves abandoning the perceptual
> and conceptual categories within which the self moves
> and by means of which it separately exists. To stop
> saying amiss is not only to stop distinguishing "this"
> from "that", but to stop distinguishing oneself from
> God, and finally to stop, to cease to be.
> (Self-Consuming Artifacts 156-157)

His argument is based on Platonic and Augustinian aesthetics, or
perhaps more properly anti-aesthetics (3), which, as Lewalski
notes, "must finally depress the significance of poetry along
with all the arts of human discourse" (Protestant Poetics 6). In
her own introduction, Lewalski responds that

> we should . . . approach Augustinian aesthetics not in
> medieval but in Reformation terms, taking account of the
> important new factor introduced by the Reformation--an
> overwhelming emphasis on the written word as the
> embodiment of divine truth. In this milieu the Christian
> poet is led to relate his work not to ineffable and
> intuited divine revelation, but rather to its written

42

> formulation in scripture. The Bible affords him a
> literary model which he can imitate in such literary
> matters as genre, language and symbolism, confident that
> in this model at least, the difficult problems of art
> and truth are perfectly resolved. (6-7)

Yet Lewalski's book fails to do what the first sentence of this
passage advocates. Rather than re-interpreting Augustinian
anti-aesthetics in light of the new sanction for poetry provided
by the Reformation's emphasis on the written word, she ignores
the former to focus exclusively on the latter. It is important
to remember that the spirit of the Reformation was
overwhelmingly Augustinian, and that in many respects the
Reformation represents a continuation or even an intensification
of medieval theological ideas. It was, after all, viewed from
within as a re-formation of the pure doctrines of the early
church. To do justice to Herbert's poetry we must acknowledge
the simultaneous presence of anti-aesthetic impulses and a sense
that the work of poetry had divine sanction.

Barbara Leah Harman's <u>Costly Monuments: Representations</u>
<u>of Self in the Poetry of George Herbert</u> attempts to establish a
territory between the positions of Fish and Lewalski, and does
so with some success. But Harman's discussion, conducted in the
language of contemporary critical theory, is limited by its
modern and secular flavour. In response to Lewalski she points
out that "if the Bible is a sponsor and ally it is also . . . an
opponent over against which, around and through which, poetic
speakers are forced to move" (26). In response to Fish she

argues that his reading "cannot . . . account for the way in which the self as an independent entity not only *dissolves* but *persists*" (33). Harman's own thesis is captured in her comments on "Jordan (I)" and "Jordan (II)":

> It seems that we need to read them in order to know that we need not read them. So while the poems send us back to a reduced or minimal sort of speech . . . their very presence stands as a contradiction of these instructions, suggesting that the representation of experience has virtues that cannot be ignored. (45)

Harman makes the crucial recognition that Herbert's poems neither simply undercut nor celebrate themselves, and the poetic self behind them, but do both simultaneously. She fails, however, to provide a theological context for what is clearly a theological issue: the place, if any, of poetry in Christian life and faith. For the theology of the seventeenth century at once sanctions poetry, as Lewalski suggests, and warns against its capacity for prideful self-indulgence and falsehood.

This ambivalence about the nature and value of poetry is captured in the double sense of the word "prevent", as in Herbert's "The Thanksgiving" : "Oh King of wounds! how shall I grieve for thee, / Who in all grief preventest me?" [1] (3-4). "Prevent" functions here and elsewhere in Herbert with both its contemporary meaning of forestalling, and its archaic meaning of anticipating and sanctioning. As C.A. Patrides observes, the

---

[1] In quotatations from Herbert's poetry, unless otherwise noted, italics are as in the original.

"liturgical stanzas [of "The Sacrifice"] 'prevent' (anticipate)
the complaints to be heard in later poems by placing them in
advance of their articulation within the context of Christ's
Passion" (19). And if Christ's sacrifice "prevents" the poet's
complaints (verbal sins), it equally "prevents" the praise
(verbal good works) that The Temple contains. In fact Christ,
the divine Word, "prevents" in both senses, all of the poet's
words. These two senses of the word "prevent" correspond
respectively to the Protestant doctrines of vocation, which
asserts that all forms of honest human labour are divinely
ordained, and justification by faith, which asserts that human
works are superfluous where salvation is concerned. The
Temple represents a sustained effort to resolve the tension
between these two doctrines, sustained both in the sense that it
occurs on several levels, and in the sense that the effort is
never completely successful. Fish's description of Herbert's
poetry as dialectical is apt in this context (Self-Consuming
Artifacts). The doctrines of vocation and justification by faith
speak to each other across the divisions between the three
sections of the book, and across the spaces between poems in the
book's central section, "The Church", as well as within
individual poems. What looks like a perfectly balanced
resolution of this tension in one poem is subsequently
undermined, and the poet sets out to establish a new balance.

One conventional way of seeking an accommodation between

these two doctrines is to point out that the doctrine of
justification by faith refers to the Christian's inner spiritual
life, and to the question of personal salvation, while the
doctrine of Christian vocation pertains to the externals of the
Christian's life in the world, and to his obligations to his
fellow man. Herbert seems to exploit this type of distinction
quite consciously in the three-part structure of The
Temple where, as Barbara Lewalski points out, "'The Church
Porch' . . . sets forth a series of dry, didactic prescriptions
regarding the externals of the Christian life, and the behaviour
fitting a Christian profession" (Protestant Poetics 288), "The
Church" dramatizes the spiritual struggles of the individual
Christian, and "'The Church Militant' shifts from a spatial to a
temporal scheme to present a third dimension of the Christian
Church on earth--its public, visible form" (289).

As one might expect, the first and third sections of the
book are devoid of inability topoi, which in "The Church"
signals the poet's radical doubts about his standing before God.
Rather, "The Church Porch" and "The Church Militant" represent
confident expressions of Christian mission that stand in sharp
contrast to the poet's tortured inner struggles. "The Church
Porch" opens with an ambitious humanistic expression of poetic
vocation, a Christian adaptation of Horace's *dulce et
utile* dictum:

> Thou whose sweet youth and early hopes inhance
> Thy rate and price, and mark thee for a treasure;

> Hearken unto a Verser, who may chance
> Rhyme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure.
> A verse may find him, who a sermon flies,
> And turn delight into a sacrifice.   (1-5)

For all its ambition (the poet's desire to use his art to turn
souls toward God suggests an apostolic role) the vision of
poetic vocation here is entirely conventional. Herbert aspires
to be a Sidneyan "right poet"; the divine poet is still some
distance off. He proceeds to deploy this poetic vocation in an
extended attempt to outline the nature of Christian vocation in
general, though the content and context is, again, distinctly
worldly. In "The Church Militant", which deals with the history
and mission of the visible Church in the world, a powerful sense
of vocation is conveyed by the poem's unrelenting pace. Though
"Sinne and Darknesse follow still" (272) throughout the Church's
history, and its falterings and backslidings are carefully
documented, there is an overwhelming sense of inevitable
movement. This sense is captured in the central metaphor that
equates the Church with the sun making its day's journey from
the eastern to the western sky. There is no time to pause and
agonize over the trials and sufferings of the Church, or over
its inadequacies. The goal that is the poem's final line (save
for the refrain), the "time and place where judgement shall
appeare" (277) is constantly in sight on the horizon, and its
arrival is never in doubt.

In contrast doubt and the attempt to resolve that doubt
are central features of "The Church". One of the primary objects

of doubt is the status of the poems themselves--the poet's
works--in the eyes of God. By my count, roughly one third of the
poems in the "The Church" address this issue in one way or
another. Herbert employs two basic strategies, both dialectical,
in the attempt to establish a proper balance between the danger
of claiming too much for his poems, and that of doing too little
to serve his God. The first strategy is to incorporate some
poems that risk erring in each of the two directions, setting up
a dialectical interaction in which one poem corrects and
modifies another. Thus a number of poems in "The Church" seem to
be supremely confident expressions of poetic vocation, while
others, in isolation, seem virtually to demolish the poet and
his art. Herbert's lyrics demand to be read in light of one
another in this way. His often-quoted assertion in "The H.
Scriptures (II)" that "This verse marks that, and both do make a
motion / Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie" (5-6) is,
as critics have noted, as much a set of instructions for reading
The Temple as for Scripture. Herbert's second strategy is to
incorporate the clash between these two tendencies in a single
poem, as for example in "The Collar", where the poetic
consciousness and self-confidence runs amok--"my lines and life
are free" (4)--and must be silenced by divine intervention:

> But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
> At every word,
> Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*
> And I reply'd, *My Lord.* (33-36)

The first group of poems I want to examine, those that

seem to constitute an unqualified expression of poetic vocation,

perform the same kind of function in "The Church" as "The Church

Porch" and "The Church Militant" perform in "The Temple" as a

whole. That is to say they express Herbert's strong sense that

the Christian poet has divinely-ordained work to do, and that

this work can be accomplished with God's help. Perhaps the poem

that expresses this thought most clearly is "Lent", in which the

poet examines the large issue of Christian duty, albeit in a

stanza that has little of the grace of Herbert's best lines:

> It's true, we cannot reach Christs forti'th day;
> Yet to go part of that religious way,
>                 Is better then to rest:
> We cannot reach our Saviours puritie;
> Yet we are bid, *Be holy ev'n as he.*
>                 In both let's do our best.   (31-36)

In focussing on the importance of virtue in the Christian life,

and urging against the tendency to rest from striving to please

God, Herbert cautions against the extreme (and perverse)

solifidian position that would repudiate good works altogether.

Numerous poems extend this positive view of human

ability to the language of prayer and of poetic praise. In

"Prayer (I)", for example, Herbert suggests the fullness and

richness of the language of prayer by describing it as "the

Churches banquet" (1). The words of prayer are sanctified and

effectual because they are "God's breath in man returning to his

birth, / The soul in paraphrase" (2-3). Prayer is "a kind of

tune, which all things heare and fear" (8), and most important,

it is "something understood" (14). Herbert claims for the

language of prayer some of the power and perfection of Adam's
pre-lapsarian language. And yet the poem that describes the
sufficiency of language also enacts its failure. The long
succession of ambitious metaphors for prayer suggests that each
is somehow inadequate. In the final phrase Herbert abandons
metaphor altogether and shifts to the passive voice, revealing
that the source of prayer's efficacy is not the speaker but the
hearer.

Ambitious claims are also made in "Love (II)", in which
the poet prays to be visited by the "greater flame" which seems
to represent both the pentecostal tongues of fire, and the
consuming apocalyptic fire. In return he promises,

> Then shall our hearts pant thee; then shall our brain
> All her invention on thine Altar lay
> And there in hymnes send back thy fire again.   (6-8)

Again the tone is supremely confident, and the poem lacks even
the slightest suggestion of poetic inability. This confidence
is, in fact, at once presumptuous and absurd: presumptuous
because the poet is engaged in bargaining with God over the
price of divine inspiration, and absurd because the payment the
poet offers is God's in the first place. This calls attention to
the dialectical nature of the poems in "The Church". The one-
sidedness of a poem like this is such that it implies its
opposite and demands correction.

Other poems that fall into this category of unqualified
expressions of poetic vocation employ the inability topos in the

traditional manner. This represents a desire to magnify the

object of praise, and an ironic attempt to call attention to the

poetic speaker, rather than a sincere attempt to cast doubt on

the efficacy of the speech. "Providence", for example, opens

with two stanzas in praise of divine poetic inspiration:

> 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
> Only to Man thou hast made known thy wayes,
> And put the pen alone into his hand,
> And made him Secretarie of thy praise.   (1-8)

What begins here as praise of God very quickly moves toward

praise of the poet, his divinely-ordained status, and his

divinely-guided script. This suspicion of poetic presumption is

confirmed a few stanzas later where the poet, employing

Herbert's characteristic metaphor of God as landlord, comments,

"And just it is that I should pay the rent", as if man had the

capacity to "pay" for God's blessings. The poem proceeds to

catalogue those blessings, continuing to waver on the brink of

praising the recipient of the gift (himself) instead of the

giver. It then concludes with an inability topos asserting the

impossibility of listing the bounty of Providence:

> 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.   (141-144)

By this time it is clear that the speaker's perception of who

exactly "owes" (owns) God's gifts is suspect. By asserting the

inexhaustibility of the list he implicitly makes very large
claims for his own knowledge and understanding of God. This is a
wholly traditional use of the inability topos in which the poet
elevates himself by asserting the unmasterability of his
subject, while deploying all his resources in an effort to
master it.

In this case, however, it should be clear that the
inability topos is in a sense doubly ironic, in that it is
sowing the seeds of genuine doubt that will appear in other
poems. It is also important to note that these confident (or
over-confident) poems do not appear in a group, but are
distributed throughout "The Church", interspersed with others
expressing the opposite view. Their assertions about poetic
vocation are constantly challenged by other poems that oppose
them by deploying the inability topos in a wholly sincere
manner, suggesting that human language is hopelessly fallen, and
that man truly cannot even begin to praise God.

Poems of this sort are immediately recognizable by their
titles: "Frailtie", "Decay", "Miserie", "Conscience", "Vanitie",
"Dulnesse", "Grief". These poems explicitly or implicitly
condemn poetry as part of the "guilded clay" ("Frailtie" 5) that
on earth "Is styled *honour, riches,* or *fair eyes*" ("Frailtie"
3), and offer "silence" ("Frailtie" 1) as an alternative. They
also employ increasingly complex variations on the inability
topos, variations that serve to undercut the self-assertive

aspects of the topos, leaving its self-deprecatory qualities
intact. Eventually this too goes overboard as the poet seems to
deprive himself of a place to stand in the sight of God.

The first step in this process of transforming the
inability topos into a medium of genuine self-criticism takes
place in the famous "Miserie". Somewhat paradoxically, in order
to remove the element of self-assertion, the poet must first
remove himself from the issue altogether, and so the inability
topos becomes accusatory, directed at man in general:

> My God, Man cannot praise thy name:
> Thou art all brightnesse, perfect puritie;
>     The sunne holds down his head for shame,
> Dead with eclipses, when we speak of thee:
>                 How shall infection
>             Presume on thy perfection?
>
>     As dirtie hands foul all they touch,
> And those things most, which are most pure and fine:
>     So our clay hearts, ev'n when we crouch
> To sing thy praises, make them less divine.   (31-40)

In spite of the "we" and the "our" here (34; 39) the role of
accuser seems, as Fish has noted (Self-Consuming Artifacts 181),
to exempt the speaker from the indictment. This exemption is
crucial for it permits the speaker to make the accusation as
forcefully as possible, and it is this in turn that gives the
poem's final line much of its power: "My God, I mean myself"
(77). The inability topos suddenly regains its self-referential
quality after the shift to an accusatory mode has intensified
its condemnation of humanity.

"Conscience" involves an even more complex use of the

inability topos, in which the device is, in a sense, turned

against itself. On the one hand the injunction to silence

repeated throughout the poem, "Peace pratler" (1), is a

reiteration of the solifidian attack on language found in

"Miserie". The speaker insists that speech is no aid, is in fact

a hindrance, to his spiritual progress:

> My thoughts must work, but like a noiselesse sphere;
> Harmonious peace must rock them all the day:
> No room for pratlers there.   (8-10)

On the other hand, however, the "pratler" seems to represent

that very same anti-aesthetic and anti-poetic sensibility:

> Not a fair look but thou dost call it foul:
> Not a sweet dish but thou dost call it sowre:
> Musick to thee dost howl.   (2-4)

The speaker's stance is at once aesthetic and anti-aesthetic.

The "Conscience" of the poem's title seems to refer both to the

"pratler" and the speaker, the first of whom attacks the

pleasures of the senses--sight, taste and sound ("Musick" in

line 4 should, I think, be taken to refer to all harmonious

sound including poetry and speech)--and the second of whom

attacks the other's speech. Of course the "pratler" is really

the poet's own anti-aesthetic impulse, found in poems like

"Frailtie", and his pratling speech is Herbert's own poetry. So

the attack on the anti-aesthetic impulse turns out to be little

more than another manifestation of that same impulse. The

aggressive, accusatory, anti-linguistic version of the inability

topos turns against itself. Herbert condemns the speech that

condemns speech. If the speakers in Herbert's vocation poems

claim too much for their language, then this speaker/"pratler"

seems equally to condemn too much.

In "Grief", similarly, the anti-poetic impulse goes too

far, virtually unmaking the poem in the end. This poem seems to

be a direct response to several of Herbert's vocation poems, in

which a somehow incomplete poem is completed by divine

inspiration ("Deniall"), by the words of scripture ("Jordan

(I)"), or by God's actual voice ("A true Hymne"). In this case,

instead of being completed by a power outside the poet, the poem

is fractured by the enormity of the emotion that occasions it.

"Grief" would be a sonnet were it not for the insertion of a

fourth quatrain, and, of course, for the agonized final line

"Alas My God!" (19). Significantly the quatrain consists of an

inability topos that wrenches the final couplet away from the

poem's ostensible theme--the magnitude of the poet's grief--and

attaches it to the theme of the quatrain--the inadequacy of the

poet's craft:

> Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise
> For my rough sorrows: cease, be dumbe and mute,
> Give up your feet and running to mine eyes,
> And keep your measures for some lovers lute,
> Whose grief allows him music and a rhyme:
> For mine excludes both measure tune and time.
>                          Alas, my God!  (13-19)

The limits of the poetic form are such that it cannot, even

extended by four lines, contain all the poet's grief. His grief

will not "allow" the sonnet's strictly regulated rhyme scheme

and meter, and he deliberately fractures it by the addition of the short, unrhymed final line. In fact the poem, as Helen Vendler suggests, seems to look forward to "a time of no more poetry at all" (269). It should be noted, though, that if "Grief" is a dialectical response to vocation poems like "Deniall", Jordan I" and "A true Hymne", its own response is provided in advance in "The Sacrifice" and "The Thanksgiving". Christ's agonized refrain in "The Sacrifice", "Was ever grief like mine", "prevents" the anti-poetry of Herbert's "Grief", just as "The Thanksgiving" predicts: "How shall I grieve for thee, / Who in all grief preventest me?"(3-4).

The most famous of Herbert's poems, with some notable exceptions, are those in which a dialectical exchange occurs within the poem. In many cases the two sides of the dialectical tension operating in these poems can be associated with the anti-aesthetic tendencies of the doctrine of justification by faith, and the pro-aesthetic impulses associated with poetic vocation. This tension is present, if rather muted, in the opening "emblem poem", "The Altar". "The Altar" can be described in terms of the distinction between solifidian doctrine as a guide in man's inner life, and vocation as an expression of man's role in the world. The poem also has inner and outer parts, in this case the supporting pedestal, and the top and bottom platforms. The poem's outer lines, the first two and the last two, are expressions of poetic vocation in which the poet

first describes the gift he has made for God -- "A broken ALTAR,
Lord, thy servant reares, / Made of a heart, and cemented with
teares"(1-2) -- and then begs God to accept the gift in exchange
for Christ's sacrifice -- "O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
/ And sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine"(15-16). If one reads
only these lines it is clear that the poet views himself as an
active agent, raising an admittedly flawed ("broken") altar to
his God. The very admission that the altar is "broken" argues
against seeing it as God's creation, and in the final lines the
speaker implicitly claims responsibility for the altar's
creation when he asks God to adopt it. The inner part of the
poem, however, the central pedestal, presents a very different
view of the construction of the altar:

> A     HEART    alone
> Is    such    a    stone,
> As    nothing    but
> Thy  pow'r  doth  cut.
> Wherefore each part
> Of   my   hard  heart
> Meets in this frame,
> To praise thy name.
> (5-12)

The tone here is strongly solifidian: man does not have the
power to transform his own heart. Only God can turn a heart into
an altar. The construction of the poem may serve as a metaphor
for Herbert's faith (as well as for "The Temple" as a whole), in
which the quintessential Protestant doctrine of justification by
faith provides the supporting pillar, while man's obligation to
serve God forms the outer surface. "The Altar" juxtaposes these

two potentially conflicting doctrines in such a way as to posit

a reconciliation. The resolution is perfect in that neither

doctrine "wins" or "loses" in this exchange, but flawed in its

excessive simplicity. A man of Herbert's convictions could not

sustain such a separation of inner and outer life, and so the

dilemma recurs throughout "The Church" as the poet tries

repeatedly to achieve a satisfactory resolution.

"Praise (I)" and "The Quidditie" are both poems that

bring expressions of poetic ability and inability into direct

conflict. In the former poem each stanza moves from

self-reproach, as the poet enumerates his shortcomings, to the

promise to deliver "more" if only God will come to his aid. In

spite of protestations that "Man is all weaknesse" (9), the poet

seems confident in his ability to "do more". His sense of

vocation triumphs over his feelings of inadequacy with little

difficulty. In The "Quidditie" the inability topos is sustained

through ten of the poem's twelve lines. The poet lists the

inadaquacies of poetry for the purposes of a courtier's service

and praise of his monarch:

> My God, a verse is not a crown,
> No point of honour, or gay suit,
> No hawk, or banquet, or renown,
> Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute:
>
> It cannot vault, or dance, or play;
> It never was in *France* or *Spain*;
> Nor can it entertain the day
> With a great stable or demain:
>
> It is no office, art, or news,
> Nor the Exchange, or busie Hall.   (1-10)

Up to this point the poem implies that poetry is utterly useless as a devotional medium. The final two lines, however, bring about a radical transformation of this view: "But it is that which while I use / I am with thee, and *Most take all*" (11-12). The nature of the Lord in whose service poetry is employed is completely different than that suggested by the first ten lines. What seemed at first to be an inability topos suddenly appears as a means of expressing the special nature of poetry. It is precisely because "a verse *is not* a crown" (emphasis mine), or any other earthly treasure, that it is a suitable medium for divine service. This runs directly counter to "Frailtie"'s view of poetry as partaking of the shallow sensuality and illusory beauty of the fallen world.

In "Jordan (II)" Herbert returns to a tone of contempt for the sensual and metaphorical excesses of poetic language, only to posit, in Harman's words, "the *possibility* of a new kind of writing (duplicating or copying) in which the self would not be entangled" (48): "*There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd: / Copie out only that, and save expense*" (17-18). Harman sides with Barbara Lewalski in rejecting Fish's suggestion that this represents a poetics of silence. Nevertheless it does seem to involve a renunciation of the poet's role as giver of gifts and author of praise. The confidence and ambition of the poet who promised to "do more" is replaced by the hope of one who would serve passively, by transmitting God's own divine Word.

The poet is still able to describe a special, divinely sanctioned place for his art, but that place is becoming progressively smaller.

This process of reduction of the space in which the poet is able to speak and act is dramatized in "The Holdfast". Here the poet's expression of vocation, his resolve to follow the moral precepts laid out in "The Church Porch", is presented as an act of rebellion: "I threatned to observe the strict decree / Of my deare God with all my power and might" (1-2). Compare this with "Lent"'s counsel that we "do our best" to *Be holy ev'n as he* [Christ]". The will to serve is the same, but the presentation of that will is very different. "The Holdfast"'s wiser, though rather perverse, second voice thwarts the vocational impulse at every turn. In the final stanza speech itself is the activity that is denied to the speaker: "But to have nought is ours, not to confesse / That we have nought" (9-10). As Harman points out "the speaker's difficulties are not a function of the mistaken positions he holds but the fact that, with every line, he asserts his independent agency as a speaker" (54). If we had not arrived at a poetics of silence in "Jordan II", there seems little doubt that we are very close by the time we reach "The Holdfast". To be sure the poem ends on the reassuring note "That all things were more ours by being his. / What Adam had, and forfeited for all, / Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall" (13-14). But the essential point remains

unequivocally solifidian: man can do nothing of his own accord.

There is, then, a kind of loose progression taking place through the dialectical interaction of solifidianism and poetic vocation in Herbert's poems. The goal is always to defend the poet's territory, his sense of his own special role or place, but the successful defence turns out to be surrender: the admission that the territory is not his at all. Herbert manages to retain the possibility of poetic vocation by claiming less and less for this role with each poem. In many poems near the beginning of the volume the poet is, or believes he is, the originator of his own art. In "Easter Wings", for example, he is merely imitating and drawing strength from God: "if I imp my wing on thine" (19). In "Jordan (I)" the poet "who plainly say[s] *My God My King*" (15) draws his words from scripture, but still wants to take credit for them himself. In "Jordan II" the pretence of authorship is relinquished as the poet realizes it is better merely to "copie" the divine Word. In "A true Hymne", toward the end of the collection, even the role of inspired plagiarist is no longer necessary, as God steps in to write the final word of the poem himself. Paradoxically, this last stage in which the poet is most diminished, is also the one in which he is most elevated, for if he has lost all claim to independent authorship, he has gained a kind of co-creator status alongside God. In this way poetic vocation is salvaged through the process of giving it up.

Milton's "Partial" Song


I wish to begin my discussion of Paradise Lost precisely where

Stanley Fish begins his in Surprised By Sin:

> I would like to suggest something about Paradise
> Lost that is not new except for the literalness with
> which the point will be made: (1) the poem's centre of
> reference is its reader, who is also its subject; (2)
> Milton's purpose is to educate the reader to an
> awareness of his position and responsibilities as a
> fallen man, and to a sense of the distance which
> separates him from the innocence once his; (3) Milton's
> method is to re-create in the mind of the reader (which
> is finally the poem's scene) the drama of the Fall, to
> make him fall again exactly as Adam did and with Adam's
> troubled clarity, that is to say 'not deceived'.   (1)

What Fish says about the reader in Paradise Lost applies with

equal force to the poet. Milton, as a fallen man, is as much the

subject of his poem as anyone else, his mind has at least as

much right to claim to be the "scene" of the poem, and, most

important, Milton is "not deceived" about any of this. This

apparently simple extension of Fish's reader-response position,

which consists only in making the poet a reader of his own poem,

actually works a significant transformation on Fish's thesis.

His argument that the poem re-creates the fall in the mind of

his reader demands that we assume the poet's success in

re-creating Adam's *un*fallen speech, along with the speech of

angels and even the speech of God. I would like to assert

precisely the reverse, that Milton, as a fallen man, had to fall

short in his project, that he knew it, and that this knowledge

is manifest both in Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained.

Arnold Stein's position in The Art of Presence is much

the same as Fish's. Stein asserts that "though he does not

register the claim explicitly the author of Paradise Lost is

convinced that poetry has an inspired power to recreate the

original state of human perfection" (16). Stein also recognizes

the magnitude of the task, and the fact that Milton's attempt to

accomplish it is a trial before the judgement seat of God:

> In the largest sense the poet's trial is continuous
> throughout the poem; the evidence ranges from the
> minutiae of consonants and syllables to the choices of
> greatest consequence to his design, which test the truth
> and the merit of his action.  (31)

The implication that is evident throughout Stein's book is that

Milton is equal to the task. But perhaps it is best to recall

Milton's own words on the subject of merit:

> The worthlessness of our merits becomes quickly apparent
> when we consider that even our good deeds are not really
> ours, but God's who works in us, and that even if they
> were certainly ours they would still be no more than our
> duty. Moreover however well we perform our duty it
> cannot possibly bear comparison to the richness of the
> promised reward.  (De Doctrina Christiana 6: 644-645)

The man who wrote this could never have believed, without

reservation, that a poem could adequately "justify the ways of

God to men", but at the same time he must, as Stein suggests,

have believed that he and his poetry were instruments for the

revelation of divine truth.

Boyd M. Berry recognizes this paradox:

> a Puritan epic is . . . a sort of oxymoron. The values
> of a poet or singer who deals by trade in words, clash

> with the values of the advanced or radical Protestant.
> This fact has made some students of Milton ill at ease.
> Milton seems immensely confident about his words and his
> ability securely to use them.  (3)

Berry attempts to resolve the paradox by suggesting that

Milton's "verbal dexterity was, at least in part, the aesthetic

counterpart and expression of a newly emergent, radical

optimism, a poetic parallel to the pragmatic acts of a Puritan

making a revolution" (4). But this does not really answer the

question. Where has the characteristic Puritan anti-aestheticism

and mistrust of linguistic artifice gone? The answer, as Book IV

of Paradise Regained shows very clearly, is that it has not gone

anywhere at all. Milton's doubts about the efficacy of the

poet's work are contained in both poems, in variations on the

topos of authorial inability, and in the use of language by the

poems' several characters. In Milton's poetry, however, the

mistrust of eloquence goes a step further than in either Spenser

or Herbert. Language is more often depicted as an instrument of

evil, deception and destruction. It is not merely the poet's

craft, his mastery of his medium, that is called into question.

Rather it is the moral status of the medium itself. Expressions

of confidence in the poet's art, linking language with apostolic

or priestly vocation, are present throughout both poems, but

these are constantly juxtaposed with the darker possibilities of

that same art. What is perhaps most noteworthy in Paradise

Lost and Paradise Regained is that Milton makes little attempt

to synthesize these conflicting impulses and establish the kind

of balanced resolution found in <u>Sonnet</u> XIX. This suggests, I
think, that the dynamic clash of these ideas, rather than their
resolution, is the central issue. To borrow some terms from
Catherine Belsey's <u>Critical Practice</u> (85-102), the text that
purports to be "declarative" in its intent to "justify the ways
of God to man" turns out to be "interrogative", in raising
questions to which it does not posit any answer.

Milton's use of the terms "Word" (singular), and "words"
(plural) highlights the fundamental distinction between language
as a positive and as a negative force. "Word" in the singular is
almost always capitalized when it appears in <u>Paradise Lost</u>,
signifying the Logos of John 1:1 with its symbolic and
theological associations. These associations are so important in
Milton's poems that J.H. Adamson describes him as a "poet of the
Logos" (<u>Bright Essence</u> 81). The divine Word is not subject to
the limitations of language, which seem to preoccupy Milton
throughout the poem, because it signifies God's power to create
reality by his mere utterance. For God to express a thing is for
that thing to be so. The plural form, "words", however, applies
to language in the conventional sense, and whether words are
employed by men, angels or devils they are subject to
limitations. The multiplicity of words corresponds to the
potential for multiplicity in their meanings, and duplicity in
their use. While the "Word" is purely good, "words" have
tremendous potential for evil use. This is suggested, in

particular, by the first two books of <u>Paradise Lost</u>, in which

Milton unleashes a torrent of demonic words upon the reader.

Confronted with the devils' eloquence the reader is pressed at

the outset to adopt a Puritanical stance. Either he mistrusts

language, or he risks aligning himself with Satan and his "high

words, that bore / Semblance of worth, not substance" (I, 528).

In contrast to the plurality of speeches and opinions in Hell,

the conversation between God the Father and God the Son in Book

III is the expression of a single will:

> Son of my bosom, Son who art alone
> My word, my wisdom, and effectual might,
> All hast thou spok'n as my thoughts are, all
> As my Eternal purpose hath decreed.   (III, 169-172)

The distinction between the "Word" and "words" appears again in

Book VII, where Raphael attempts to explain to Adam the nature

of God's power:

> So spake th'Almighty, and to what he spake,
> His Word, the Filial Godhead, gave effect.
> Immediate are the Acts of God, more swift
> Than time or motion, but to human ears
> Cannot without process of speech be told,
> So told as earthly notions can receive.   (VII, 174-179)

Here Raphael draws a sharp distinction between the immediacy and

perfection of the divine "Word" and the human "process of

speech", which is bound by time and motion.

This is not to say that Milton views human language as

utterly corrupt, in a rigidly Calvinistic sense. There are at

least two instances in <u>Paradise Lost</u> where human language evokes

the poet's explicit praise. The first occurs in Book VIII where

Raphael and Adam discuss the latter's creation. First the angel

compliments Adam on his speech:

> Nor are thy lips ungraceful, Sire of men,
> Nor tongue ineloquent; for God on thee
> Abundantly his gifts hath also pour'd
> Inward and outward both, his image fair:
> Speaking or mute all comeliness and grace
> Attends thee, and each word, each motion forms.
>
> (VIII, 218-230)

Then Adam, a few lines later, describes his first words:

> . . . to speak I tri'd, and forthwith spake,
> My tongue obeyed and readily could name
> Whate'r I saw. (VIII, 271-273)

Adam's unfallen language appears, in these passages, to be

Godlike in its accuracy, if not in its immediacy. This, as

Raphael points out, is a function of his creation in God's

image. All this takes place in spite of the fact that Raphael

has just commented on the inadaquacy of the human "process of

speech" a few lines earlier (174-179). The argument that Adam

can describe perfectly his earthly surroundings, while still

falling short of the ability to relate heavenly events, comes

readily enough. It does not, however, obscure the evidence of

Milton's fundamental ambivalence about language itself. If

Raphael's praise of Adam's unfallen language constitutes an

expression of poetic vocation, an image of the linguistic

perfection that Milton is striving to recover, it also includes

a warning that this language can only be God's gift, and not

man's accomplishment. Another passage in Paradise Lost that

treats human language in a strongly positive tone is the

reference to the Apostles in Book XII. Here again language is a divine gift, intimately connected with the concept of calling:

> . . . for the Spirit
> Pour'd first on his Apostles, whom he sends
> To evangelize the Nations, then on all
> Baptiz'd, shall them with wondrous gifts endue
> To speak all Tongues, and do all Miracles,
> As did their Lord before them.  (XII, 497-502)

It is particularly important to note that this is a gift given to fallen men, and therefore it provides a sanction for Milton's own poetic ambition.

Many of the references to language in _Paradise Lost_, however, deal with its negative attributes. These range from its ineffectuality in expressing matters of a spiritual nature to its potential for use as an instrument of evil. In this context we can recall that the first, and some of the most impressive speeches in the poem are found in the debates in Hell, where eloquence is intimately connected with faulty reasoning and wicked designs. Even after the debates are concluded the fallen angels entertain themselves with the linguistic arts of song and intellectual discourse:

> Thir song was partial, but the harmony
> (What could it less when Spirits immortal sing?)
> Suspended Hell, and took with ravishment
> The thronging audience. In discourse more sweet
> (For Eloquence the Soul, Song charms the Sense,)
> Others apart sat on a hill retir'd,
> In thoughts more elevate, and reason'd high
> Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will and Fate . . .
>
> Vain wisdom all, and false Philosophy:
> Yet with a pleasing sorcery could charm
> Pain for a while or anguish, and excite
> Fallacious hope, or arm th'obdured breast.
> (II, 552-568)

This characteristically Puritan vision of song and speech
demonstrates just how much Milton is risking in writing Paradise
Lost, which, if it should turn out to have been written without
divine guidance, would be nothing but a  human version of the
devils' "pleasing sorcery". Even granted divine inspiration
Milton's is a "partial" song, though less so than that of the
fallen angels. Milton's poem can do nothing to relieve fallen
man's burden of sin, but can only provide comfort with the
promise of redemption through God's grace.

Fish uses Raphael's praise of Adam's speech to argue
that "the loss of the perfect language is more than anything
else the sign of the Fall, since in Eden speech is the outward
manifestation of the inner Paradise" (Surprised by Sin, 118).
Yet the weaknesses of language extend even to Adam's unfallen
language, despite this praise. The first passage that comes to
mind in this context is Raphael's speech in Book VII, which has
already been mentioned in connection with the distinction
between the "Word" and "words":

> Immediate are the acts of God, more swift
> Than time or motion, but to human ears
> Cannot without process of speech be told,
> So told as earthly notions can receive.  (VII, 176-179)

Here Milton deploys the topos of inability through Raphael, in
order to magnify its force. If the poet makes ambitious claims
in attempting to relate the speech of angels, he is careful to
stress the inadequacies of the medium in which the feat is
attempted. This is so even though Milton purports to be

writing--and Raphael speaking--in the language of unfallen Adam,
the language that was sufficient to name all creation. Another
similar occurrence of the inability topos emphasizes the point,
suggesting the degree of Milton's concern over this issue. In
Book V, before beginning the main body of his narrative, Raphael
comments at length on the shortcomings of human language for
such a task:

> . . . how shall I relate
> To human sense th'invisible exploits
> Of warring spirits;[?] . . .
>
> . . .what surmounts the reach
> Of human sense, I shall delineate so
> By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms,
> As may express them best . . . . (V, 563-574)

Raphael's problem is precisely Milton's problem, and his
solution, clearly a "partial" one, is to employ metaphor, doing
his best with the crude tools he has at hand. But metaphor and
"process of speech" avoid,,rather than capture the immateriality
and atemporality of heavenly beings and heavenly events. Human
powers of expression and comprehension are simply inadequate.
Here we see Milton faced with the central dilemma of the
Protestant Poet. What his divine calling demands can never be
satisfactorily accomplished.

When Satan speaks, language is not merely untrustworthy,
but an actual agent of evil and deception. In these passages
Milton comes very close to the stereotype of the seventeenth-
century Puritan, with his avowed mistrust of verbal facility.
This movement, from a concern over the inadequacies of language,

to a sense of its awesome adequacy for evil purposes, marks the shift from a mildly Protestant poetics to a Puritan one. As I have been suggesting, the risks of the poet's endeavour, and his causes for anxiety, are magnified in this process. From being an ordinary sinner whose verses contain the spiritual struggles of every Christian, the Protestant poet becomes either a Puritan saint, or an agent of the powers of darkness in the apocalyptic struggle that the Puritan mind saw in the contemporary world. There is little doubt that Milton saw himself in the first category, but like most sincere Puritans he could never completely rule out the latter.

Milton's depiction of Eve's temptation reveals these tendencies. Satan's "words replete with guile" (IV, 733) are what prompt Eve to taste the forbidden fruit, but this much is evident in the Judeo-Christian tradition in any case. Milton's embellishment of the traditional story gives away his Puritan tendencies, and the degree of his insecurity about the status of his own linguistic artifice. In the Miltonic version of the fall the fruit is intimately tied to the power of speech. Eve is first attracted to the Serpent because she is amazed at his ability to speak. Yet there is no suggestion in the Genesis account of the Fall that a talking serpent should be in the least surprising. Milton's Serpent, however, claims to have gained this miraculous ability from eating the forbidden fruit:

> Sated at length, ere long I might perceive
> Strange alteration in me, to degree

> Of reason in my inward Powers, and Speech
> Wanted not long, though to this shape retain'd.  (IX,
> 598-601)

When Satan finishes, Eve's little hymn of praise to the

forbidden fruit reveals what has tempted her most:

> Great are thy Virtues, doubtless, best of Fruits,
> Though kept from Man and worthy to be admir'd,
> Whose taste, too long forborne, at first assay,
> Gave elocution to the mute, and taught
> The Tongue not made for Speech to speak thy praise.
> (IX, 745-749)

It is not merely Eve's weakness in allowing herself to be

persuaded by the devil's speech that brings about her downfall;

it is her fascination with language itself. In this sense

language is as much the tempter as Satan.

It is not surprising, therefore, that language is the

Devil's chosen tool for frustrating the divine will. In the

debates in Hell he suggests a choice between two options:

"Whether of open War or covert guile, / We now debate" (II, 41).

While the suggestion of possible violent conflict is always

present, and Satan threatens violence in his encounter with Sin

and Death, the only devices he ever really employs are verbal

ones. As Berry points out, Satan continually collapses the false

dichotomy of force versus deceit through "a series of stagy

(sic) verbal magic tricks" (211), demonstrating that deceit is

really his only weapon, and it is a linguistic one. God's praise

of Abdiel, when the latter returns after defecting from the

rebel angels, also serves to illustrate Milton's sense of the

power of language as an instrument of evil. Raising once again

the dichotomy of language versus force, God testifies to the
potency of language in praising Abdiel for having "borne /
Universal reproach, far worse to bear / Than violence" (VI,
33-35).

The irony of the fact that language, the medium of the
poet's divinely ordained vocation, has such potential for evil
is inescapable. If the fact of having written Paradise
Lost stands as testimony to Milton's conviction that he was "a
person separate to God" (Samson Agonistes 31), these passages,
which challenge the reliability of language and therefore of the
epic itself, demonstrate that the divine poet's role was not an
easy one. If Milton undercuts the authority of his own poem, I
would suggest that he does so precisely because he recognizes it
as a work, in the theological sense. It is at once a work he has
been commanded by God to undertake, and one that he can never
accomplish. The opening lines of the poem's final paragraph
capture the poet's ambivalence. Eve, who was first tempted by
Satan's language, greets Adam with "words not sad" (XII, 609),
telling of her dream and the "Promis'd Seed", the redeemer of
mankind. Adam, who earlier conversed with Angels, does not
respond: "So spake our mother Eve, and Adam heard / Well
pleas'd, but answered not" (XII, 624-625). Adam is "well
pleas'd" with Eve's words, and yet he recognizes that *any* words
are somehow inappropriate. Eve's speech may be taken as an
expression of the poet's sense of vocation, of fallen man's need

to "serve", to rejoice aloud over God's grace; Adam's silence of the need only to "stand and wait".

This same ambivalence is manifested in <u>Paradise Regained</u>. The preoccupation with language is still evident, as is the association of eloquence with deceit and corruption. Satan is, after all, the great talker in the poem. He speaks in a "traine of words" (III, 266), using "fair speech" (II, 301) and "persuasive rhetoric" (IV, 4). The poem is a dialectical exchange, not merely between vice and virtue, but between vicious and virtuous deployment of language, in which the poet's status as servant of God is at stake. In this context Christ's victory in the dispute--never really in doubt--should be an indication that language too is saved from corruption, but the issue is not that clear. Milton is clearly in search of a kind of "elect" language, and asserts in his invocation that silence is, for him, the only acceptable alternative to divinely guided speech: "Thou Spirit . . . inspire / As thou art wont, my prompted Song else mute" (I, 8-12). Only a "prompted song", a poem not generated by human artifice, will do. The tone of the poem is thus overwhelmingly solifidian. In a passage worthy of Calvin himself, Milton has Christ ask,

> But why should man seek glory? who of his own
> Hath nothing, and to whom nothing belongs
> But condemnation, ignominy and shame? (III, 134-136)

The solifidian tone is also suggested by the nature of the temptation itself. In the counsels in Hell Satan rejects

Belial's suggestion to "Set women in his eye and in his walk"
(II, 153). Better estimating the nature of the foe, he argues
that

> . . . with manlier objects we must try
> His constancy, with such as have more show
> Of worth, of honour, glory, and popular praise;
> Rocks whereon greatest men have oftest wreck'd.  (II,
> 225-228)

What Satan proposes is actually not a temptation of *"objects"* at
all, but one of *works*. The desires he hopes to capitalize upon
are "lawful" (II, 230) ones (or those that seem so). The sense
of this passage is "desires permitted by law", but in the larger
context of the poem it perhaps suggests the distinctly
Protestant interpretation of "works commanded by law", and the
Protestants' favourite passage of scripture: "therefore by the
deeds of the law there shall be no flesh justified in his sight"
(Rom.3:20). Satan appeals to Christ's sense of "zeal and duty"
(III, 172): "Zeal of thy Father's house, Duty to free / Thy
Country from her Heathen servitude" (III, 175-176). To tempt
Jesus to be a great and just ruler, or a philosopher or scholar,
is to tempt him to rely on the merit of his own works. As with
the temptation of Eve, Milton's invention and embellishment on
the foundation of a Biblical story is the surest indication of
his own position. In depicting a Christ faced with the
temptation of pelagianism Milton reveals the strength of his
solifidian convictions.

These two aspects of the poem, the central place of

language and the repudiation of human works, of which language
is one, point to the same ambivalence about the poet's station
that is found in _Paradise Lost_. Indeed this ambivalence is
stunningly evident in Book IV where Milton turns violently on
his own renaissance-humanist antecedents, and his ambition to do
for England "what the greatest and choicest wits of Athens,
Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for their
country" (_The Reason of Church Government_ I: 812). In _Paradise
Regained_ only the ancient Hebrews remain as exemplars, and
Satan's description of Athens, "native to famous wits" (IV,
241), seems a parodic attack on the poet's earlier enthusiasm.
The bewilderment of the reader at this intellectual flagellation
is understandable, yet the attack on humanism, art and learning
in _Paradise Regained_ is a logical extension of the undercutting
of language and eloquence in _Paradise Lost_. In comparing the two
poems Barbara Lewalski points out that in _Paradise Regained_
  Milton's "claims and aims are not accompanied, as they are in
the opening lines of _Paradise Lost_, by an insistence in image
and statement on the difficulty of the task, and on his own
inner darkness and chaos" (_Milton's Brief Epic_ 326). It is quite
clear from reading Book IV of the poem, however, that these
issues still plague Milton. Indeed he is concerned not so much
with his own personal inadequacies (expressed in the inability
topos in the invocation of _Paradise Lost_), as with the
inadequacies of scholarship and poetry as forms of human

endeavour, or perhaps with human endeavour itself. Lewalski

makes this connection as well when she examines Christ's

response to the temptation of Athens:

> the concepts . . . implicit in the poem--that spiritual
> truth comes only from above, that human learning is
> wholly irrelevant in the spiritual order, that the
> minister must not commingle the doctrines of human
> learning with the divine revelation--are central to
> reformed Protestantism.  (Milton's Brief Epic 286)

Mitlon is not, as a cynical reader might suggest, simply

succumbing to the narrow anti-intellectualism and

anti-aestheticism of his Puritan contemporaries. Rather he is

feeling the agonizing self-doubt that is characteristic of the

Protestant mind (Luther's *anfechtung*), and incorporating that

self-doubt into the poem. Paradise Regained is a Protestant poem

because it doubts itself, just as Milton doubts himself.

As in Paradise Lost, the details of Milton's treatment

of language in the poem support this view. The Satan we meet in

both poems is a grand orator, or to be more precise, grand

oratory is presented as an attribute of the devil in both poems.

Satan's words have a hypnotic effect even upon his fellow

devils: "his words impression left / Of much amazement to

th'infernal crew" (I, 106-107). Jesus, of course, recognizes

that Satan is "compos'd of lies / From the beginning, and in

lies wilt end" (I, 407-408), and rejects his "weak arguing and

fallacious drift" (III, 4). Even so, Christ does not

underestimate the persuasive power of the language that

successfully tempted Eve:

> Yet thou pretend'st to truth; All Oracles
> By thee are giv'n, and what confest more true
> Among the Nations? That hath been thy craft,
> By mixing somewhat true to vent more lies.
> But what have been thy answers, what but dark,
> Ambiguous, and with double-sense deluding,
> Which they who ask'd have seldom understood,
> And not well understood, as good not known.   (I,
> 430-437)

In fact, just as Eve finds Satan's language his most tempting

attribute, a more perceptive Jesus finds it among his most

offensive, and the directness of his response provides a sharp

contrast: "I never lik'd thy talk, thy offers less" (IV, 171).

In both cases Satan's language is as much a part of the

temptation as the offers he makes.

In the temptation of Athens in Book IV language is

closely associated with deceit and false knowledge. The wisdom

Satan offers is dependent upon the powers of speech and the arts

of persuasion:

> The Gentiles also know, and *write*, and teach
> To admiration, led by Nature's light;
> And with the Gentiles much must thou *converse*
> Ruling them by *persuasion* as thou mean'st.   (IV,
> 227-230, emphasis mine)

Satan portrays Greece as the "Mother of Arts / And Eloquence"

(IV, 240-241), and urges Christ to devote himself to their

study, as a means of fulfilling his mission, arguing that "Error

by his own arms is best evinc't" (IV, 234). As Satan's

temptation offers language, Christ's rejection denounces it,

whether in art or persuasion. The Stoic philosopher is dismissed

as bogus, "For all his tedious talk is but vain boast / Or

subtle shifts conviction to evade" (IV, 307-308). Christ's

rejection of Greek learning, including a denunciation (albeit

mild) of both Socrates and Plato implies a rejection not merely

of Satanic sophistry, but of the entire dialectical method,

which, ironically, is a shaping force behind Paradise Regained.

While Luke's Gospel provides scriptural authority for

the temptation of the kingdoms as a whole, the temptation of

Athens, with its non-material riches, is Milton's creation

alone. The intangible things Satan offers Christ here are things

to which Milton the renaissance poet is powerfully drawn, and

yet he feels compelled to reject them. These are the human works

that bring man closest to divinity, and yet they fall far short

of divinity because they are still human works. They are the

materials of the poet's divine calling, and yet he feels

compelled to acknowledge their worthlessness. As we know,

however, this is not Milton's last word on the subject. The very

existence of Paradise Regained, and especially of Samson

Agonistes with its tremendous debt to Greek tragedy, indicates

that, as in Sonnet XIX, Milton is not willing to surrender his

poetic vocation to the solifidian anti-aesthetic impulse.

Rather, he employs his art to give voice to ironies and tensions

that engender it. The almost magical resolution of the tension

between solifidianism and poetic vocation, that occurs in the

final line of Sonnet XIX, is, however, nowhere to be found

either in Paradise Lost or Paradise Regained. I take this as a

struggle, rather than the resolution, may be the central feature

of Protestant poetics.

Closing Speculations


It is tempting, and it would certainly be fitting, to

close with an inability topos proclaiming the unmasterability of

my subject, and apologising for the feebleness of my treatment.

Except to suggest the possibility (as I have just done), I will

resist the temptation and move off in a completely different

direction. My initial suggestion was that Protestant poetics

involves a simultaneous elevation and diminution of the poetic

enterprise. If this point is granted for a moment some

provocative possibilities arise for discussion of more recent

works in the Protestant tradition, and even for literary theory.

Perhaps, for example, the ineffectuality of Nathaniel

Hawthorne's articulate intellectual male heroes is another kind

of inability topos, and the power of his silent female

characters a version of the Protestant/Augustinian poetics of

silence. An even more powerful figure of this type is Faulkner's

Addie Bundren, who asserts from the silence of the grave that

"words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (As I

Lay Dying 163).

Representing the Protestant preoccupation with vocation

there is John Updike. Updike is a meticulous literary craftsman

himself, and for his characters, life and work are absolutely

inseparable. "Rabbit" Angstrom's Bunyanesque flight from job and

family (<u>Rabbit, Run</u>) perhaps constitutes an abortive attempt to
live, in Luther's words, by "faith alone". Pressed to defend the
runaway husband, Reverend Eccles describes him as "a good man".
Pressed still further he muses, "Must you be good *for* something?
. . . Yes, I suppose you must" (<u>Rabbit, Run</u> 142). The central
feature in all three Rabbit novels, as in much of Updike's other
fiction, is the world of work, and the struggle to have not just
a job but a purpose.

In the area of literary theory this insight might be
used to account for some of the different kinds of textual
self-reflexiveness. Linda Hutcheon writes of two distinct kinds
of "metafictional texts: those that thematize . . . the
inadequacy of language in communicating feeling, in
communicating thought or even fact . . . [and those that]
thematize the overwhelming power and potency of words, their
ability to create a world more real than the empirical one"
(<u>Narcissistic Narrative</u> 29). It may be that this broad
distinction corresponds, roughly, to a distinction between
Protestant--Germanic and Catholic--Latin cultural influences.
The "Catholic" metafiction of a Calvino or a Borges seems to me
to be fundamentally different from the "Protestant" metafiction
of a Pynchon (there is some evidence that Pynchon's upbringing
was Catholic, but his New-England cultural tradition is
undeniably Protestant). In the first case a few carefully chosen
words suffice to erect entire cities or intricate labyrinths; in

the second, seemingly endless pages of words, stories, lists,
songs, formulas, and poems fail to generate the tiniest germ of
"truth" or "knowledge". Instead, Pynchon's ultimate vision of
order and harmony is the deaf-mute's dance in <u>The Crying of Lot
49</u>. In the context of this kind of schema the work of writers
who change cultural and religious idioms--Eliot,
James,Hopkins--becomes particularly interesting. What aspects of
Protestant poetics are they fleeing, and what features of
Catholic literary sensibility are they reaching out for?

Bibliography


Primary Sources

Augustine, Saint. "Admonition and Grace". Trans. John
        Courtney Murray. <u>Readings in Christian Thought</u>. Ed.
        Hugh T. Kerr. Nashville: Abingdon, 1966. 65-67.

Calvin, John. <u>Institutes of the Christian Religion</u>. Trans.
        Henry M. Beveridge. 2 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
        1981.

Faulkner, William. <u>As I Lay Dying</u>. 1930. New York:
        Vintage-Random House, 1964.

Herbert, George. <u>The Works of George Herbert</u>. Ed. F.E.
        Hutchinson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941.

Luther, Martin. <u>The Freedom of a Christian</u> . Trans. W. A.
        Lambert. Ed. Harold J. Grimm. <u>Luther's Works</u>. Gen. ed.
        Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman. 56 vols.
        Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-.

---. <u>The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows</u>. Trans.
        and Ed. James Atkinson. <u>Luther's Works</u>. Gen. ed.
        Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman. 56 vols.
        Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-.

---. <u>To the Christian Nobility of The German Nation</u>. Trans.
        Charles M. Jacobs. Ed. James Atkinson. <u>Luther's Works</u>.
        Gen. Ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman. 56
        vols. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-.

Milton, John. <u>Complete Poems and Major Prose</u>. Ed. Merrit Y.
        Hughes. Indianapolis: Oddyssey, 1957.

---. <u>De Doctrina Christiana</u>. Trans. John Carey. Ed. Maurice
        Kelley. <u>The Complete Prose Works of John Milton</u>. Ed.
        Douglas Bush et al. 8 vols. New Haven: Yale UP,
        1953-1982.

---. <u>The Reason of Church Government</u>. Ed. Don M. Wolfe.
        <u>The Complete Prose Works of John Milton</u>. Ed. Douglas
        Bush et al. 8 vols. New Haven: Yale UP, 1953-1982.

Sidney, Sir Philip.  The Defense of Poesie.  Literary
        Criticism: Plato to Dryden.  Ed. Allan H. Gilbert.
        Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1940.  404-461.

Spenser, Edmund.  The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser.
        Ed. J. C. Smith and Ernest de Selincourt.  3 vols.
        Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909-10.

Updike, John.  Rabbit, Run.  New York: Fawcett-Ballantine, 1960.

Walton, Isaak.  The Life of Mr. George Herbert.  Seventeenth-
        Century Prose and Poetry. Ed. Alexander M. Witherspoon
        and Frank J. Warnke.  New York: Harcourt, 1963.
        271-288.



                        Secondary Sources


Bell, Ilona.  "'Setting Foot into Divinity': George Herbert
        and the English Reformation."  Modern Language
        Quarterly 38 (1977): 219-241.

Belsey, Catherine.  Critical Practice.  London: Methuen, 1980.

Benet, Diana.  Secretary of Praise: The Poetic Vocation of
        George Herbert.  Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1984.

Berry, Boyd M.  Process of Speech: Puritan Religious
        Writing and Paradise Lost.  Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP,
        1976.

Boulger, James D.  The Calvinist Temper in English
        Poetry.  The Hague: Mouton, 1980.

Cain, Thomas H.  Praise in The Faerie Queene.  Lincoln:
        U of Nebraska P, 1978.

Clark, Ira.  Christ Revealed: The History of the Neotypological
        Lyric in the English Renaissance.  University of Florida
        Monographs, Humanities 51.  Gainesville: University
        Presses of Florida, 1982.

Collinson, Patrick.  The Elizabethan Puritan Movement.
        Berkeley: U of California P, 1967.

Comparetti, Domenico. _Vergil in the Middle Ages_. Transl.
        E. F. M. Benecke. 2nd ed. 1908. Hamden: Archon, 1966.

Curtius, Ernst Robert. _European Literature and the Latin Middle
        Ages_. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Bollingen Series 36.
        Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953.

Deneef, A. Leigh. _Spenser and the Motives of Metaphor_.
        Durham: Duke UP, 1982.

Durling, Robert M. _The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic_.
        Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965.

Fish, Stanley. _Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of
        Seventeenth Century Literature_. Berkeley: U of
        California P, 1972.

---. _Surprised By Sin: The Reader In Paradise Lost_.
        California Paperback Edition. Berkeley: U of
        California P, 1971.

Fletcher, Angus. _The Prophetic Moment_. Chicago: U of
        Chicago P, 1971

Fraser, Russell. _The Language of Adam: On the Limits and
        Systems of Discourse_. New York: Columbia UP, 1977.

George, Charles H. and Catherine. _The Protestant Mind of The
        English Reformation_. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961.

Grant, Patrick. _The Transformation of Sin: Studies in Donne,
        Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne_. Montreal: McGill-Queens
        UP, 1974

Halewood, William H. _The Poetry of Grace: Reformation Themes
        and Structures in English Seventeenth-Century Poetry_.
        New Haven: Yale UP, 1970.

Haller, William. _The Rise of Puritanism, or, The Way to the New
        Jerusalem As Set Forth in Pulpit and Press from Thomas
        Cartwright to John Lilburne and John Milton_. New York:
        Columbia UP, 1938.

Harman, Barbara Leah. _Costly Monuments: Representations of Self
        in George Herbert's Poetry_. Cambridge: Harvard UP,
        1982.

Helgerson, Richard. "The New Poet Presents Himself: Spenser and
        the Idea of a Literary Career." _PMLA_ 93 (1978):
        893-911.

Hill, John Spencer.   John Milton: Poet Priest and Prophet.
        London: MacMillan, 1977.

Hume, Anthea.   Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet.   Cambridge:
        Cambridge UP, 1984.

Hunter, W. B., C. A. Patrides and J. A. Adamson.   Bright
        Essence. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1971.

Hutcheon, Linda.   Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional
        Paradox.   Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier UP, 1980

Kelley, Maurice.   This Great Argument.   Princeton: Princeton UP,
        1941.

Lewalski, Barbara K.   Milton's Brief Epic.   Providence: Brown
        UP, 1966.

---.   Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious
        Lyric.   Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979.

Martz, Louis L.   The Poetry of Meditation: A Study of
        English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century.
        New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.

Miller, David L.   "Abandoning the Quest".   English Literary
        History 46 (1979): 173-192.

Neuse, Richard.   "Book VI as Conclusion to The Faerie
        Queene."   Essential Articles: Edmund Spenser.   Ed.
        Arthur C. Hamilton.   Hamden: Archon, 1972.

Nohrnberg, James.   The Analogy of The Faerie Queene.
        Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976.

Patrides, C. A.   "A Crown of Praise: The Poetry of
        Herbert."   Introduction.   The English Poems of George
        Herbert.   Ed. C. A. Patrides.   London: Everyman's-Dent,
        1974.   6-25.

Stein, Arnold.   The Art of Presence: The Poet and Paradise
        Lost.   Berkeley: U of California P, 1977.

Stewart, Stanley.   "Herbert and the 'Harmonies' of Little
        Gidding".   Cithara 24 (1984): 3-26.

Strier, Richard.   Love Known: Theology and Experience in
        George Herbert's Poetry.   Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.

Stringer, Gary A.   "Milton's 'Thorn in the Flesh': Pauline
        Didacticism in Sonnet XIX".   Milton Studies 10 (1977):
        141-154.

Summers, Joseph H.   George Herbert: His Religion and Art.
        Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1954.

Tuve, Rosemond.   A Reading of George Herbert.   Chicago:
        U of Chicago P, 1952.

Vendler, Helen.   The Poetry of George Herbert.   Cambridge:
        Harvard UP, 1975.

Waters, D. Douglas. Duessa as Theological Satire.   Columbia:
        U of Missouri P, 1970.

Weatherby, Harold C. "Una's Betrothal and The Easter Vigil"
        Spenser at Kalamazoo.   Proc. at a Special Session of the
        19th International Congress on Medieval Studies.
        Kalamazoo: Western Michigan U, 11-12 May, 1984.   Clarion
        P.A.: Clarion University, 1985

Wells, Robin Headlam.   Spenser's Faerie Queene and the Cult
        of Elizabeth.   London: Croom Helm, 1983.

Wittreich, Joseph Anthony Jr.   Visionary Poetics: Milton's
        Tradition and His Legacy.   San Marino: Huntington
        Library, 1979.

Whittaker, Virgil K.   The Religious Basis of Spenser's
        Thought. Stanford University Publications  in Language
        and Literature Vol. VII  3.  1950.  New York: Gordian,
        1966.