

# George Herbert's Eyes

Joel Swann

Hang Seng Management College (Hong Kong)  
Department of English  
E-mail: joelswann@hsmc.edu.hk

## Abstract

George Herbert's writing of the body often involved attention to its specific parts, in common with many Renaissance writers, and the eyes receive special attention in his verse. His second 1610 New Year's Sonnet, "Frailtie", and "Vanitie (II)" all respond to the conventional approaches to the eyes conventional from early modern love poetry, portraying the "fair eyes" as prime method of deception. Meanwhile, "Conscience" and "Miserie" both portray the failure of the eyes as an organ of perception in especially graphic terms, as a physical object that can be frustratingly "lost". Attention to these moments demonstrates how Herbert is a significant poet of the body.

**Keywords:** *Herbert, body, eyes, vision, parts*

Readings of early modern culture have shown how texts of the period had a peculiar tendency to understand and represent the body with an emphatic interest in its isolated constituent parts. Each part had "individuated functions, locations, and differentiated relations to the body as a whole",<sup>1</sup> a point playfully demonstrated by Lollo in *The Changeling*:

we wake at six and look about us, that's eye-hour; at seven we should pray, that's knee-hour; at eight walk, that's leg-hour; at nine gather flowers and pluck a rose, that's nose-hour; at ten we drink, that's mouth-hour; at eleven lay about us for victuals, that's hand-hour; at twelve go to dinner, that's belly-hour. (1.2.71-77)<sup>2</sup>

The body's parts, in addition to a wide range of conventional allegorical associations, could go beyond Middleton's example to take on a symbolic life of their own. As David Hillman and Carla Mazzio write, parts

can become concentrated sites where meaning is invested and often apparently stabilized. But while the invocation of a specific body part may generate the illusion of a narrowed sphere of reference, it is in fact precisely this specificity that creates, in the corporeal fragment, a remarkable density of implication.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, "Introduction: Individual Parts," in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Hillman and Mazzio (New York: Routledge, 1997), xii.

<sup>2</sup> In Thomas Middleton, *The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor, John Lavagnino et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Hillman and Mazzio, "Introduction," xii.

They go on to endorse the view that “nowhere in this period is the status of the part simply a given,” showing that any use of a body part, whether in an ostensibly representative or allegorical mode, deserves significant critical attention.<sup>4</sup>

The tantalizing snippets referring to the body in George Herbert's poetry offer a vivid (but under-examined) illustration of this tendency in early modern thought. The poems written in his collection *The Temple* (1633) and elsewhere almost constantly evoke somatic imagery, and very often in ways that make the significance of specific parts appear startling and strange. Notable examples include the appearance of bones,<sup>5</sup> arms,<sup>6</sup> the tongue,<sup>7</sup> and knees,<sup>8</sup> and only seldom can such parts be understood as conventional allegories and metaphors. Yet among the many parts that feature in Herbert's writing, the eyes deserve to be treated as a special case. Often in renaissance writing, they are highly conventional symbols of sight and mourning, in which functions they are stripped of any sense of their physical existence and materiality; and indeed, some instances in Herbert embrace these conventional images. But in a number of significant cases the eyes are introduced to unique and surprising figurative situations. This “organ most Artificiall and *Geometricall*”, as John Dee described the eye, does not disappear into a backdrop of references, but compel our attention as both an object and a symbol.<sup>9</sup>

The eyes, not just by virtue of sight alone, had a kind of centrality in the early modern body – for Jacques Guillemeau, author of a work documenting the diseases effecting the eyes, wrote, they were given a unique prominence: “by good right they haue such rule and soueraigntie amongst al the senses, and all other partes of the bodye”. Guillemeau goes on to name them “guiders, and leaders to the whole bodye”.<sup>10</sup> Their importance corresponds to a perception of the eyes as surprisingly resilient, in spite of what we may think to be their inherent (and universal) vulnerability. In *A Women Killed with Kindness*, Thomas Heywood described them subject to considerable violence:

I will forget her; I will arm myself  
Not to entertain a thought of love to her;  
And when I come by chance into her presence,

<sup>4</sup> Hillman and Mazzio, “Introduction,” xviii, also citing Peter Stallybrass, “Dismemberments and Re-Memberments: Rewriting the *Decameron*, 4.1, in the English Renaissance,” *Studi dul Boccaccio* 21 (1991): 318.

<sup>5</sup> “Repentance”.

<sup>6</sup> “Faith”.

<sup>7</sup> “Denial”.

<sup>8</sup> “Love (II)”. The body in Herbert's writing has been underexplored, though a number of studies illustrate the potential of the topic: Michael Schoenfeldt, ““Storms Are the Triumph of His Art”: The Politics of Affliction,” in *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 117-153 and “Devotion and Digestion: George Herbert's consuming subject” in *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 96-130; Sarah E. Skwire, “George Herbert, Sin, and the Ague,” *George Herbert Journal* 28 (2004): 1-27; A. E. Watkins, “Typology and the Self in George Herbert's “Affliction” Poems,” *George Herbert Journal* 31 (2007/8): 62-82.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), ix.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Guillemeau, *A Worthy Treatise of the Eyes; Contayning the knowledge and cure of one hundreth and thirtene diseases, incident vnto them*, trans. A. H (London: Robert Waldegrau for Thomas Man and William Brome, [1587?]), chapter 1. See also George Hakewill, *The Vanitie of the Eye: First beganne for the Comfort of a Gentlewoman bereaved of her sight, and since vpon occasion enlarged & published for the Common good...* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1608), 2.

I'll hale these balls until my eye-strings crack. (5.12-15) <sup>11</sup>

In spite of the harrowing attack intended on the eyes, it is notably the eye-strings, and not the eyes themselves, that will be broken. Another remarkable description of the eye makes it as “a member, round, whole, and hard, as the ball of a foote, or as the scowred new bason full of cleare water.”<sup>12</sup> Robert Southwell would make much of the spatial capacities of Christ’s eyes in an extended emblematic from *Saint Peter’s Complaynt*: there, they are written variously as “volumes stoard with learning” (l. 337), a “laborinth of blisse” (l. 341), and “cabinets of grace” (l. 359).<sup>13</sup> Internally, the special demands of sight demanded stronger connections to the brain than other senses, taking up two (especially thick) of the seven pairs running around the head and the body.<sup>14</sup> Externally, Guillemeau delights in enumerating the “rampires and defenses of the eies”, which include the nose, ethmoid and jugal bones, the eyelids (with their cilia), and the eyebrows.<sup>15</sup> By mentioning the necessity of defending the eyes “against litle flies, against the dust, against little chips or shiuers, and such like thinges, which entring into them [the eyes] might hurt them”, he admits them to be vulnerable; but that aspect is not explored at any length. He also takes pains to describe how “the fashion of it is round, which more easily resisteth outwarde iniuries”.<sup>16</sup>

Although the eyes had a central role in the body, their physical and intellectual status was as a border or limit between the interior and exterior. The point is underscored in commonplaces concerning their role for the mind: Hakewill remarks on their two-sidedness in his comment that “although nature haue seated the eie in the inner chamber of the face, yet are they prying alwaies into other mens business”.<sup>17</sup> Donne wrote of the eyes as “windows”, “entrances, & inlets of our soule”,<sup>18</sup> which threatened entrance from outside; the modern cliché that “the eye is the window of the heart”, or mind, was also current in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>19</sup> They appear to have performed an active role, as Beatrice describes in *The Changeling*, that “Our eyes are sentinels unto our judgments, / And should give certain judgment what they see” (1.1.72), however unreliable they may often turn out to be. The aspect is, however, also supported in writing of a more physical kind, such as in medical and

<sup>11</sup> In Martin Wiggins, ed., *A Woman Killed with Kindness and Other Domestic Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Philip Barrough, *The Method of Physicke, Containing the Causes, Signes, and Cures of Inward Diseases...* (London: Richard Field, 1590), 49, quoted in Sergei Lobanov-Rotovskiy, “Taming the Basilisk,” in *The Body in Parts*, 197.

<sup>13</sup> *St Robert Southwell: Collected Poems*, ed. by Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney (Carcanet: Manchester, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> L. R. Lind, *Studies in Pre-Vesalian Anatomy: Biography, Translations, Documents* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1975), 59, 117, 241, 289. Massa noted that “the eyes have stronger nerves since sight is a power more necessary for distinguishing between different things. Thus similarly the nerves of vision are greatly fatigued and the nerves of hearing suffer from the blows of beaten air and its concussion as these come to the ears” (241).

<sup>15</sup> Guillemeau, *A Worthy Treatise*, chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> Guillemeau, *A Worthy Treatise*, chapters 4 and 8.

<sup>17</sup> George Hakewill, *The Vanitie of the Eye: First beganne for the Comfort of a Gentlewoman bereaved of her sight, and since vpon occasion enlarged & published for the Common good...* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1608), 27.

<sup>18</sup> John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 53.

<sup>19</sup> F. P. Wilson, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 235.

anatomical discussion of their crystalline humour “which in more hardie wise then *Hercules*, dares to encounter two at once, namely, the outward and the inward light”.<sup>20</sup> As Lobanov-Rotovskiy remarks on this passage, “the eye becomes, in effect, a third realm, from both world and soul”. The threat of ingress in the eyes was not simply figurative, either, since alongside the nose, ears, and pores, the eyes could well allow the entrance of disease to the body.<sup>21</sup> Clearly, the renaissance body need not have been an out-and-out grotesque to manifest some of the key qualities of the Rabelasian body as identified by Bakhtin: renaissance writers thought of the eyes as one of the “apertures and convexities” that made the body open to the outside world.<sup>22</sup>

The eye, then, is imagined with several qualities: sturdy, yet vulnerable; a guide and gateway; providing some access to the inside, but preventing much of the outside from coming in. Whereas the heart, so typically the site of the soul, would have to be violently removed – Anne Lock writes of how

My cruel conscience with sharpened knife  
Doth splat my ripped heart and lays abroad  
The loathsome secrets of my filthy life  
And spreads them forth before the face of God.<sup>23</sup>

The eyes are *already* transparent, already open, already concealing nothing. While the eyes can be anatomised and inspected more closely, their position at the limit of the body excludes them from an overriding sensibility of inwardness. The eye is seldom penetrated, at most blinded with dust, and very often appears to perform well its function as a gateway.

With this eye, a limit or gateway between the outside and the inside, tangible and intangible, Herbert takes a good deal of freedom in his writing. There are nonetheless main instances in which Herbert joins his contemporaries in exploiting the eyes as symbolic of the things they normally do – for example, representing sight,<sup>24</sup> or mourning,<sup>25</sup> or waking (in contrast to sleeping).<sup>26</sup> Their centrality among the other sensory organs, as highlighted by Guillemieu and Hakewill, is marked in “The Sacrifice”, where Christ declares he “took eyes” to find man. The power of God’s sight is not limited to seeking and finding, though, as a simple glance of Christ can be enough to fill the beholder with spiritual delight.<sup>27</sup> They are also used as a marker of character,<sup>28</sup> and express a kind of aggressive parochial individualism.<sup>29</sup> In all these uses,

<sup>20</sup> Lobanov-Rotovskiy, “Taming the Basilisk”, 201.

<sup>21</sup> Daniela Bohde, “Skin and the Search for the Interior: The Representation of Flaying in the Art and Anatomy of the Cinquecento,” in *Bodily Extremities: Preoccupations with the Human Body in Early Modern European Culture*, ed. Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 31.

<sup>22</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 26.

<sup>23</sup> Anne Lock, “A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner Upon the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm,” in Betty S. Travitsky and Anne Lake Prescott, eds., *Female and Male Voices in Early Modern England: An Anthology of Renaissance writing* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2000), 119.

<sup>24</sup> For example, in “Content,” “Love-Joy,” “The Discharge,” “Longing”; and in a more oblique way, “The Pearl”.

<sup>25</sup> “Vertue,” “Church-rents and schismes,” “Complaining,” “Praise,” “Grief”.

<sup>26</sup> “Mattens”.

<sup>27</sup> “The Glance”.

<sup>28</sup> “Love Unknown”.

<sup>29</sup> “Mortification”.

the eyes remain intact and in the body: in accordance with the real normal workings of eyes, albeit with new symbolic layers.

The use of the eyes in Herbert's verse is distinguished by a consciousness of the symbolic possibilities to which their concrete material reality can be put. Often this approaches what D. J. Enright described a "breakdown in the relation between thought and metaphor".<sup>30</sup> Enright illustrated this aspect of Herbert's work with an enduringly infamous example of Herbert's eyes from "The Dawning", which ends with the gentle but preposterous injunction:

Arise, arise;  
And with his buriall-linen drie thine eyes:  
Christ left his grave-clothes, that we might, when grief  
Draws tears, or bloud, not want an handkerchief.<sup>31</sup>

To see this as a "serious" lapse of artistic craft, as did Enright, relies on a Johnsonian reading of metaphysical poetry, with the "heterogeneous ideas" of Christ's shroud and a handkerchief "yoked by violence together" in a conceit conveying the consolations offered Christ's death.<sup>32</sup> But this method of expressing the eternal in terms of the everyday makes those familiar objects become unusually visible, an important lesson in the way that Herbert approaches the writing of the eyes. A proverb collected by Herbert advised "Jest not with the eyes or with Religion",<sup>33</sup> but his writing of the eyes often comes strangely close to doing just that, in a manner of speaking.

The example of "The Dawning" is unusual, but less exaggerated examples of a similarly creative application of the eyes can be found in many poems by Herbert. God can be thanked for the gift of the eyes, a material token that can be appreciated instead of the more elusive faculty of sight itself; but by so doing, the faculty itself can be expressed all the more fully in terms of God's ownership and control.<sup>34</sup> There are other examples of fear and rejoicing that metaphorical dust (representing the world, or death) might blow into the eyes.<sup>35</sup> Some go much further, extended in ways that verge on the humorous: an early draft of "H. Baptisme" describes the moment of self-inspection by declaring that "backward on my sins I turne mine eyes", the balls swivelling wildly in their sockets to follow their targets. A similar flexibility of movement is used in "Coloss. 3.3.", with the happy recognition that the Son's incarnation helps him to ensure that "one eye / Should aim and shoot at that which *Is* on high".<sup>36</sup> The eyes can look different ways, one aspiring higher while the other remains fixated on earth. Such moments seem deliberately playful - they take the conceit of the eyes too seriously, giving free rein to the line of metaphorical thought.

<sup>30</sup> D. J. Enright, "George Herbert and the Devotional Poets", in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature 3: From Donne to Marvell* ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 145.

<sup>31</sup> "The Dawning," in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). All subsequent references to Herbert's poetry will be to this edition.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1:200.

<sup>33</sup> *Outlandish Proverbs*, in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941), no. 157. All subsequent references to the *Outlandish Proverbs* (1640) and *Jacula Prudentum* (1652) will be to this edition.

<sup>34</sup> "Even-Song," "Submission".

<sup>35</sup> "Ungratefulness," "Conscience".

<sup>36</sup> "Coloss. 3.3. *Our Life is hid with Christ in God*".

Part of the complexity of the eyes in literature lies in their “status as both perceiving subject and object of study”, two opposing sides that are clearly distinguished in Herbert’s writing.<sup>37</sup> The remainder of this article will give detailed attention to the ways in which Herbert deals with both sides. These include the tradition of ocular writing received from renaissance love poetry, to which to which he addresses in a number of poems; and, more exceptionally, the metaphor of losing of eyes, which creates problems for a subject’s ability to perceive and order their experience, even beyond blindness itself. In these examples, Herbert contemplates and challenges (and makes challenging) the relationship between his bodily tropes and the real experience – whether spiritual or physical – of having a body.

Herbert’s treatment of the eyes is often part of a religious response to the traditions of Elizabethan love poetry, whose “follies and feynings” his predecessor, Robert Southwell, had likewise railed against.<sup>38</sup> Those traditions gave the eyes a particular importance, those “Diamondes, or Saphires at the least” which were very much the ornament of the blazoned women.<sup>39</sup> Just as some medical and theological writers saw them as the most central sense, Sidney’s *Astrophil* speaks of them as the most central object of his desire, that “the race / Of all my thoughts hath neither stop nor start / But only Stella’s eyes and Stella’s heart.”<sup>40</sup> Like other body parts, they were prone to phenomenal over-signification: the excess is well marked in a parodic sonnet by Philipp von Zesen:

You eyes so full of fire! No, not fire: diamonds that flutter: no, not that either! They are lightning, flashing through the air, from her eyes into mine. Not lightning: they are darts with which she is wont to show off,  
with which she is wont to pay love’s tribute in coin. Not darts: they are suns with which she endeavours to outshine the light of others, and which no one ever beholds but that he must be punished for it. They are not suns or stars that play  
from the heaven of her forehead: not that either: as what I can see shimmering, fire is not as intense, diamonds not as glittering, lightning not as powerful, arrows not as joy-bestowing, the sun is not as powerful, a star cannot shine as brightly,  
why then, in their delusion, do people regard them as [mere] fire, diamonds, lightning, darts, sun and stars?<sup>41</sup>

Often, the problems the eyes induced for representative figurative expression are matched by doubt about the true purpose of this organ. While enticingly drawing in the

<sup>37</sup> Lobanov-Rotovskiy, “Taming the Basilisk”, 196.

<sup>38</sup> *St Robert Southwell: Collected Poems*, 1. On the relationship of Herbert’s religious verse to secular traditions, see Rosemond Tuve, “Sacred “Parody” of Love Poetry, and Herbert,” *Studies in The Renaissance* 8 (1961): 249-290, and the essays in *George Herbert: Sacred and Profane*, ed. Helen Wilcox and Richard Todd (Amsterdam : VU University Press, 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Poem 221 l. 9 in *Tottel’s Miscellany: Songs and Sonnets of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Others*, ed. Amanda Holton and Tom MacFaul (London: Penguin, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> *Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 161 (A&S sonnet 23).

<sup>41</sup> Philipp Von Zesen, “On the eyes of his Love” (“Auf die augen seiner Lieben”), in J. P. Hill and E. Caracciolo-Trejo, eds., *Baroque Poetry* (London: Dent, 1975), 123-4.

innocent viewer, the notion that they are “false eyes” and “smiling baytes” are often found in love poetry,<sup>42</sup> such as that found in Tottel’s *Songs and Sonnets*:

Whose dainty eyes such sugred baits do hide,  
As poison harts where glims of love do glide.  
....  
Two laughying eyes so linked with pleasing lokes,  
As wold entice a tygers hart to serve:  
The bayt is swete but eager be the hookes,  
For Dyane sektes her honour to to preserve. (269 ll.5-6, 19-22)

Thus, lying closely behind the layers of extravagant praise is posited a rather less appealing reality – woman are to blame for over-alluring pliable men. As such, the eyes are seldom represented as simple passageways to the interior character of a loved one.<sup>43</sup> These anxieties about the reliability of the eyes are a part of wider early modern anxieties about deceit, and what has been described as a “crisis of representation” – “a situation in which individuals struggled to detect the true and authentic from the false or fraudulent.”<sup>44</sup> In this culture, the place of sight within theological discourse was especially important, since key reformation thinkers had inaugurated a movement away from the visual in favour of the aural, to replace “the image with the word”. Most obviously enacted through the violence of iconoclasm, devotional practices were removed as far as possible from the sight: Luther’s instruction was to “not look for Christ with your eyes but put your eyes in your ears”.<sup>45</sup> The lies and deceit that could be committed against the eyes of the protestant subject were not just inconvenient, but a form of idolatry that could distract you from the work of salvation. Herbert’s writing of the eyes takes place in this context, drawing on prevalent anxieties, and combining them in new ways.

In several poems by Herbert, the eyes are the basis for specific and sustained complaints about amatory verse. In the second of his new year’s sonnets from 1610, “Frailtie” and “Conscience”, the eyes are the central and most visible symbol of a larger system of literary and poetic representation: just as the eyes often stand as a synecdoche for the whole body, so do they act as a convenient synecdoche for a much wider range of poetic practices. Herbert’s criticisms extend some of the more anxious moments of secular love poetry, at the same time as trying to undermine the basis of that poetry. Whereas love poetry is most concerned with deception, Herbert is more worried about mistaken perception, and the inconsistency between conventional metaphorical descriptions and the realities of what they refer to; in “Frailtie”, this is difference between “what is styled” and “what is”. Accompanying this objection comes a persistent interest in revealing the truth of what really lies behind the eyes, whether by

<sup>42</sup> David Norbrook and Henry Woudhuysen, eds., *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse 1509-1659* (London: Penguin, 2005), 192, 215.

<sup>43</sup> On the eyes in Renaissance love lyrics, see Takashi Yoshinaka, “Renaissance Eyes: Ocular Poetics in Sidney, Shakespeare, and Marvell,” (DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 1998).

<sup>44</sup> Rob Iliffe, “Lying Wonders and Juggling Tricks: Religion, Nature, and Imposture in Early Modern England,” in *Everything Connects: In Conference with Richard H. Popkin: Essays in His Honor*, ed. James E. Force and David S. Katz (Brill: Leiden, 1999), 185-209, drawing especially on Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: the Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>45</sup> Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 161-164.

aggressive “discovery”, patient “proving”, or a more forceful assertion of intellectual-religious knowledge. The fact that the eyes are chosen to convey these messages is vital: as an unusually and involuntarily expressive body limit, the necessity of their revelation is very significant.

Problems with the eyes are announced in one of Herbert's earliest surviving poems, in the second of two New Year's sonnets, written to his mother in 1610. The pair of poems argues in strident terms against love poetry, inaugurating an engagement with poetics that would persist throughout Herbert's later authorship of *The Temple*.

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

After an introduction stating the sufficiency of God for all human actions (ll. 1-5), the speaker makes three related complaints about love poetry. First, that nature is “abused” if it is used to describe the body; second, with a shift of tone, that thinking of the eyes as crystal (a comparison made in so many love lyrics) is especially affronting; and third, that the “invention” involved in this kind of writing is not a competent contribution to poetry. The youthful earnestness of the poem escalates into a forceful zeal in the last few lines, which preface the importance of “discovery”<sup>46</sup> with a convoluted and startlingly gruesome image of the body. From poetry, the skin and flesh are wrenched away, the bones split and pushed apart, all to reveal nothing but “filth”. By making the face itself a kind of receptacle, instead of a surface – “in the best face”, not *behind* – the superficial becomes the conveyor of horror, not merely a cover for it.

Although the poem addresses general questions about the nature of poetry, it is especially focussed on questions of perception and interpretation. It is apposite, then, the eyes should be the organ especially chosen to represent the corrupting effects of poetic writing, and suggestive that it is the reader declines to “take” eyes in a particular way. “Take” is linked to vision and knowledge (and thereby glossed as “perceive” or “understand as”), but crucially, it also suggests “mistake”, an error of judgement. More obscurely, “take” includes a kind of “removal”, as though the true perception of women's eyes must be literally forfeited if you choose to use any kind of false representation. These overlapping meanings correspond to the denounced crystal, which simultaneously evokes transparency and brilliance, offering both unadulterated access and worrying distraction; it is also an example of shallow material wealth.

The poem conducts itself on a grand scale, addressing a subject that even “Oceans of *Ink*” could not adequately commend. As such, the emphasis on very minute aspects

<sup>46</sup> On the importance of this word for Herbert, see Arnold Stein, *George Herbert's Lyrics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), 4-5.





I surname them *gilded clay*,  
*Deare earth, fine grasse or hay*;  
 In all, I think my foot doth ever tread  
 Upon their head.

But when I view abroad both Regiments;  
 The worlds, and thine:  
 Thine clad with simpleness, and sad events;  
 The other fine,  
 Full of glorie and gay weeds,  
 Brave language, braver deeds:  
 That which was dust before, doth quickly rise,  
 And prick mine eyes. (ll. 1-16)

The eyes here appear in this poem in both their positions in relation to perception, as an object both perceived and perceiving. The two separate positions are rehearsed across the first two stanzas, which move in turn from an isolated and privative “silence”, towards an attempt to actively apprehend and understand the world.

Amongst the three concepts chosen for criticism in the first stanza, “what upon trust / Is styled *honour, riches, or fair eyes*”, the eyes are not obviously congruent with the other two. There is a kind of downward passage across the three, from the primarily conceptual achievement of “honour”, to the material gathering of “riches”, down to the simple ownership of eyes that are described as “fair”. The eyes are divorced from their proper context in any body, and put next to these grander manifestations of human achievement, seem almost trivial. Taken together, this array of deceits emphasises the ubiquity of the “styling” that is so much the problem, and the necessity of the “surnaming” that the resentful speaker appears so proud to have undertaken. Tasso would describe “honour” as “that empty weightless name, that idol of errors, idol of deceit, which the mad mob thereafter called honour and made a tyrant over our [human] nature”<sup>47</sup> – Herbert’s move attempts to give a similar status to the eyes created in literature.

The second stanza of “Frailtie” moves out of the conceptual framework of the first, with the senses put to work to “view abroad both Regiments; / The worlds, and thine”. While beholding both the “simpleness, and sad events”, and the “glorie”, the “dust” of the first stanza returns, and in a witty irony, the *perceived* eyes now become the problem for the eyes that are doing the perceiving. The words of the final two lines of the stanza recall Thomas Nashe’s more gentle and ominous declaration that “Dust hath closde Helens eye”,<sup>48</sup> but now with a frustration and dismay, even though the problem is lost perception, not death itself. Given the failure of his plans, the initial idea that the speaker may “ever tread / Upon their head” is shown to be anxious wishful thinking. While the “Frailtie” of the title refers to the fragility of the human objects the poem describes, clearly, the process of re-naming by which man is to understand the frailty of those objects is, itself, just as frail, and susceptible to failure. The confidence of “discovery” is absent, allowing spiritual perception to remain as a method of imposing words on things. As “Frailtie” says much about a particular approach to religion, it is interesting that the eyes should feature so centrally. To a much greater

<sup>47</sup> “Chorus from Aminta,” in *Baroque Poetry*, ed. and trans. J. P. Hill and E. Caracciolo-Trejo (London: Dent, 1975), 7.

<sup>48</sup> “Song // Adieu, farewell earths blisse”, in *Summer’s Last Will and Testament* (London: Simon Stafford for Water Burre, 1600).

extent than in “Sure Lord...” or “Vantitie (II)”, the perceived “fair eyes” exist almost solely as a literary construction; there is no real-life comparator by which they might be more authentically understood.

The examples of Herbert’s poetry discussed so far show how looking *at* the eyes demands a response to a very particular aspect of a literary tradition. For Herbert’s predecessors, those inexpressibly enticing eyes often contained hidden snares and traps for the unwary; whereas for Herbert, the very idea of naming the eyes in terms of anything else is an act of deception. When he turns to write about the perceiving eyes, the physical organ responsible for sight, he rehearses similar problems with deception and mistaking. As “Frailtie” begins to suggest, their physical sensitivity makes them prone to abuse – whatever clarity the eyes may promise, they are easily compromised by things that “affront those joys” of God and heaven. In further examples, we will see how this particular vulnerability and subservience to material conditions also takes on a more exaggerated form, in poems that narrate the actual loss of the eyes.

The fact that Herbert talks about the eyes being lost at all is noteworthy. It is a trope that literature characteristically reserves for the most terrifying and heightened moments of tragedy and epic, as in the putting out of the eyes of figures like Oedipus, Samson, and Gloucester in *King Lear*. Yet instead of the heavily *literary* register in which Herbert wrote about the perceived eyes, Herbert discusses the perceiving eyes in a register that is distinctly proverbial and familiar, even ‘homely’. Herbert’s ability to write in this way hints at a background knowledge of ocular proverbs he would have gained by compiling the posthumously published collections of *Outlandish Proverbs* (1640) and *Jacula Prudentum* (1651); the earlier volume includes 13 different examples of proverbs involving eyes, to which the later adds another one.<sup>49</sup> This is more than in any other equivalent contemporary collection. Moreover, Herbert is a unique source for four proverbs: “The eye will have his part” (no. 466), “The Eyes have one language everywhere” (no. 959), “War and physic are governed by the eye” (no. 906), “The Heart’s letter is read in the eyes” (no. 220). In some others he is one of only two early witnesses: “One eye of the master sees more than ten of the servants” (no. 687); “To whirl the eyes too much, shows a kite’s brain” (no. 717); and “The ignorant have an eagle’s wings and an owl’s eyes” (no. 902). For the slightly more frequently cited motto that “You should never touch your eye but with your elbow” (no. 203), he provides the earliest example (albeit as “Diseases of the eye are to bee cured with the elbow”). Herbert’s attention to such unusual phrases mark him as unusually attentive to the strange metaphorical configurations into which “homely” wisdom could twist the eyes. Thus, the strangeness of Herbert’s configurations of the body are augmented by the idiom of the proverb – simple, direct, and short, but often surprisingly opaque.

Herbert’s proverbial art is applied to the loss of eyes in two poems, “Conscience” and “Miserie”. The first of these, “Conscience”, is a poem with a defensively introspective voice similar to that found of “Frailtie”:

<sup>49</sup> *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941), 321-362. These counts are based on *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, rev. F. P. Wilson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970). I quote the proverbs as listed in the dictionary – Herbert’s renditions in *OP* are identical except for some spelling and punctuation.

Peace pratler, do not lowre:  
 Not a fair look, but thou dost call it foul:  
 Not a sweet dish, but thou dost call it sowre:  
 Musick to thee doth howl.  
 By listning to thy chatting fears  
 I have both lost mine eyes and eares.

Pratler, no more, I say:  
 My thoughts must work, but like a noiselesse sphere;  
 Harmonious peace must rock them all the day:  
 No room for pratlers there.  
 If thou persistest, I will tell thee,  
 That I have physick to expell thee.

And the receipt shall be  
 My Saviours bloud: when ever at his board  
 I do but taste it, straight it cleanseth me,  
 And leaves thee not a word;  
 No, not a tooth or nail to scratch,  
 And at my actions carp, or catch.

Yet if thou talkest still,  
 Besides my physick, know there's some more for thee:  
 Some wood and nails to make a staffe or bill  
 For those that trouble me:  
 The bloudie crosse of my deare Lord  
 Is both my physick and my sword.

With the wished-for “noiselesse sphere” of the imagination mentioned in stanza two, “Conscience” recalls the “silence” of “Frailtie”, and with it, some of the frustrated anxiety at being out in the public world. Given the desire for the “noiselesse”, complaining of having “both lost mine eyes and eares” is ironic, but also posits a conflicted desire for isolation from external influences. Having these organs in their right places means an ability to order sensory experiences in a particular way, and not just the ability to receive those experiences *per se*. This is shown in the most immediate effects of the loss of eyes. The stimuli that are supposed to be pleasant – a “look”, “a sweet dish”, and “Musick” – are needlessly converted to “foul”, “sowre” and “howling”. When his attention is turned specifically to perceiving, Herbert seems concerned to place limits on the concerns of his poems about the eyes-as-perceived; here, he admits that there are things in the world that are good and useful, but the effects of “Conscience” – of over-thinking in some way – are obnoxious to these ends.

The poem's consistent attention to problems of frustration and impotence indicate the bigger implications of the loss. “Conscience” provides many promises and threats offered at a significant distance: “*if* thou persist, I will tell thee”; “the receipt *shall* be”; “Yet *if* thou talkest still, / Besides my physick, know there's some more for me” (my emphases). The last quote has a double distantiation: the threat is not an actual application of the spiritual “physick”, but informing the “pratler” that this will happen. The importance of these repetitions of impotencies are crystallized in the title. “Conscience” is often glossed with an emphasis on the split voices, following William Ames as “man's judgement of himselfe, according to the judgement of God in him”,<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *English Poems of George Herbert*, 380.

and the poem read with attention to the problems of a personal internal division.<sup>51</sup> But neither party is named as “conscience” within the poem, and perhaps it is equally productive to consider the poem to be, as a whole, a statement about the way the conscience works. A more relevant account of the problems of “Conscience” may, then, begin with Hamlet, who complains

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pith and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action.<sup>52</sup>

The bigger problem of “Conscience”, then, is the issue of over-thinking, with the loss of “the name of action”. To lose the eyes might imply an impossibility of having functional mechanisms of perception, but it has a concomitant effect of powerlessness: being deprived of them only leads to inaction.

If “Conscience” is a poem in which the speaker suffers from thinking too much, “Miserie” pronounces on the problems of thinking too little. The person subject to these issues is not the frustrated individual of so many of the poems in *The Temple*, but rather a generalized figure of “man” who faces a sermon-like denunciation for his crimes, an unusual tone for Herbert’s poetry. The poem’s focal point is “foolishness”, with “man” standing blissfully ignorant of his problems – as such, the exterior voice is really the only way of vocalising these concerns. Here, “foolishness” and knowledge are frequently linked to images of sight and vision, as the first four stanzas of this long poem show:

Lord, let the Angels praise thy name.  
Man is a foolish thing, a foolish thing,  
Folly and Sinne play all his game.  
His house still burns, and yet he still doth sing,  
*Man is but grasse,*  
*He knows it, fill the glasse.*

How canst thou brook his foolishnesse?  
Why he’l not lose a cup of drink for thee:  
Bid him but temper his excesse;  
Not he: he knows, where he can better be,  
As he will swear,  
Then to serve thee in fear.

What strange pollutions doth he wed,  
And make his own? as if none knew, but he.  
No man shall beat into his head,  
That thou within his curtains drawn canst see:  
They are of cloth,  
Where never yet came moth.

The best of men, turn but thy hand

<sup>51</sup> See especially the influential article by Sidney Gottlieb, “Herbert’s Case of “Conscience”: Public or Private Poem?”, *Studies in English Literature* 25 (1985): 109-26.

<sup>52</sup> Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells (eds.), *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 3.1.85-90.

For one poore minute, stumble at a pinne:  
 They would not have their actions scann'd,  
 Nor any sorrow tell them that they sinne,  
 Though it be small,  
 And measure not their fall. (ll. 1-24)

Man does not see that "his house still burns" (l. 4); he is sarcastically said to "know, where he can better be" (l. 10); presumes, again, that God "within his curtains drawn canst see" (l. 16), and collectively "would not have their actions scann'd" (l. 21). We see here, too, that as well as being linked to wilful ignorance and blindness, the "foolishness" is also connected to concerns that are trivial - "insignificant, paltry, poor, mean, trifling" (*OED*) - and objects of this kind litter the poem and man's miserable life, including the his occupation with his "game" (l. 3), the "cup of drink" (l. 8), and the threat that he would, without God's protection, "stumble at a pinne" (l. 20).

After this introduction, the poem moves away from such direct indictments against man, which later return, where the loss of eyes here begins a suddenly higher pitch of contempt for his stupidity:

Oh foolish man! where are thine eyes?  
 How hast thou lost them in a croud of cares?  
 Thou pull'st the rug, and wilt not rise,  
 No not to purchase the whole pack of starres:  
 There let them shine,  
 Thou must go sleep, or dine.

The bird that sees a daintie bowre  
 Made in the tree, where she was wont to sit,  
 Wonders and sings, but not his power  
 Who made the arbour: this exceeds her wit.  
 But Man doth know  
 The spring, where all things flow:

And yet as though he knew it not,  
 His knowledge winks, and lets his humours reigne;  
 They make his life a constant blot,  
 And all the bloud of God to run in vain.  
 Ah wretch! what verse  
 Can thy strange wayes rehearse? (ll. 49-66)

As in "Conscience", the eyes are lost in the course of a relationship with some "other", in this case a figurative crowd. The image of these eyes being lost in such a provocatively imagined setting emphasises the physical properties of the eye, even while suggesting a metaphorical function for them that is spiritual, or at least intellectual. That purpose becomes comes confused as the lines go by. The stars, recalling the imagery used in "Vanie (II)", are now more emphatically visual with their "shine", representing the higher knowledge that man refuses when he "pull'st the rug" over his face. At this point, heavenly knowledge is imagined in terms of a bodily sense; but it is not long before the significance of the body is detached from those aspirations. To say man's "knowledge winks" allows the eyes as a (misused) spiritual tool, a role that is undone in the following line and a half, in which he "lets his humours reign / They make his life a constant blot". When the un-sensing flesh is given precedence, the gateways of the eyes are stopped from performing as they should do,

mediating between God and man. To describe the purpose of the eyes, then, involves a contradiction – they are the means of spiritual perception, but they must still be located as vulnerable and sensitive within the body.

The statement about the eyes in “Miserie” is very odd, even ridiculous in its ridiculing; as if “man” should be so irresponsible as to allow his very body to fall apart, when confronted with certain problems. The loss of self-control and the ability to organize oneself are emphasised here, and even more at the very end of the poem, where he is merely a “lump of flesh” (l. 74), a “sick toss’d vessel, dashing on each thing” (l. 76). The possibility of losing one of the senses underscores man as an inadequate and fleshly being.

Herbert’s verse portrays a complex and difficult relationship between the human and the divine: his representations of the eyes are one of the significant frontiers on which that relationship is explored and contested. The eyes from love poetry force him to turn away from the lies of literature, and towards the greater truths of God’s glorious creation, and the corrupt and transient world; but those rejections and connections are manifest with an ever-decreasing confidence, so that the appellations of “fair” or “dust” ultimately seem arbitrary and forced. In the end, the eyes’ tendency to fall out at moments of pressure prove them unreliable, sending the believing subject into a spin of confusion and complete loss of control.

The references to the eyes in Herbert, as for other body parts, tend to be elusive and gnomic, which makes their enormous range of signification and ambiguity easy to ignore. Yet the importance of the eyes for the tradition in which Herbert played such an important role might be well underscored by a passage from Richard Crashaw, who in his ode in “Prayer” warns the gentle-woman addressee:

To dance ith’ sunshine of some smiling  
 But beguiling  
 Spheares of sweet & sugred Lyes,  
 Some slippery Pair  
 Of false, perhaps as fair,  
 Flattering but forswearing eyes;  
 Doubtless some other heart  
 Will get the start  
 Mean while, & stepping in before  
 Will take possession of that sacred store  
 Of hidden sweets & holy ioyes (ll. 54-64)<sup>53</sup>

Crashaw is much more open than any of the examples this article has discussed, providing six lines of extravagant baroque imagery to what Herbert might allude to in two or three words. Herbert’s less art keeps a view of an “actual” version of the body much closer at hand; Crashaw’s eyes disappear under the weight of their associations. It is not for him to beg for God to “reave us from this loathsome lump of clay”;<sup>54</sup> this might be taken first a sign of Herbert’s relative affluence and good health, before it is as

<sup>53</sup> *The Poems English Latin and Greek of Richard Crashaw*, ed. L. C. Martin, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); the lines quoted are from the later version published in *Carmen Deo Nostro* (Paris, 1652).

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Melville Colville, *A Godly Dream*, in *Female and Male Voices in Early Modern England: An Anthology of Renaissance writing* ed. Betty S. Travitsky and Anne Lake Prescott (Columbia University Press: New York, 2000), 137.

sign of philosophical erudition. Nonetheless, the body retains an enormous currency in his poetry, even while it is shown to be corruptible, faulty, and distracting.

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## Ochii în poezia lui George Herbert

Scrierile despre corp ale lui George Herbert au implicat adesea concentrarea asupra unor părți specifice ale corpului, așa cum s-a întâmplat și la alți scriitori renascentiști, dintre care un loc special în poezie îl ocupă ochii. Cel de-al doilea Sonet de Anul Nou (1610), „Frailtie” [Fragilitatea] și „Vanitie (II)” [Vanitatea (II)] răspund la abordarea convențională a problematicii ochilor din poezia timpurie modernă de dragoste, portretizând „frumoșii ochi” ca primă metodă a decepției. „Conscience” [Conștiința] și „Miserie” [Nefericirea] portretizează eșecul ochilor ca organ de percepție mai ales în plan grafic, ca obiect fizic care poate fi în mod frustrant „pierdut”. Concentrarea asupra acestor aspecte arată cât de semnificativă este creația lui Herbert ca poezie a corpului.