IS GOD A VERB?
THE DYNAMICS OF THE DIVINE IN RELIGIOUS POETRY

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Aristoteles orationis duas partes esse, vocabula et verba, ut homo et equus...
Aristotle says there are two parts of speech, nouns and verbs, like a rider and his horse...
M. Terentius Varro[1]

Discussing the language of *Paradise Lost*, Thomas Merrill claims that religious language is *performative:* it *does* what it says.[2] If this is true, and I think it is especially true of religious poetry, then a close look at the writer's grammatical choices will illuminate what he is trying to do. One of the most important choices is whether a poet speaks *to* God in a first and second person dialogue, or writes a first and third person reflective-narrative *about* God. I use the term 'dialogue' because, although God does not literally utter words in any of the poems I discuss in this paper, the level of interaction between God and the poet goes far beyond the term 'monologue'.

Dialogue is a more intimate mode than reflective-narrative. As Martin Buber says, 'the basic word I-You can only be spoken with one's whole being. The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being;' when we talk *about* another being, he or she is 'limited by other Hes and Shes', but when we talk *to* another, then 'neighbourless and seamless he is You and fills the firmament'.[3]

As well as being more intimate, poetic dialogue, remaining close to speech, tends to be more dynamic, with a high proportion of verbs, while reflective-narrative writing tends to have more nouns. As the grammarian Halliday has noticed, writing favours the noun group where *things* predominate, while speech has more verbs, and prefers the clause where *processes* or actions take place.[4] Dialogue is not concerned with things, but with relationship: as Buber says,

> I perceive something... I want something... All this... is the basis of the realm of It. But where You is said, there is no something. You has no borders. Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation.[5]

Speaking of the deeper significance of nouns and verbs, Aristotle observes that:

> A noun... is independent of time... a verb is concerned with time... The words 'man' and 'white' give no indication of time, but 'walks' and 'has walked' indicate respectively present and past time.[6]

One distinctive feature of God in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is that he chooses to enter time, to speak and act in the world, particularly in the Incarnation, which T.S. Eliot describes as 'the point of intersection of the timeless with time' ('Dry Salvages' V). Speaking of the nature of Spirit as a 'going out', a verb rather than a noun, John Macquarrie writes:

> Must we not say then... that ... God is the One who goes out from himself? He... must be described in verbs rather than in nouns, for he is sharing, coming, even suffering, then overcoming...[7]

In the Bible, God is presented in terms of verbs rather than nouns: he speaks or acts, but is rarely described. 'I am that I am,' he tells Moses (Ex. 3: 14), and when he appears to Elijah it is as 'a still small voice'(I Kings 19:14), as the act of speaking. In Greek, *Logos* means 'the word by which the inward thought is *expressed*', [8] a concept which the Vulgate translates as *Verbum*, a word, or verb. The Gospels do not *describe* Christ as a man, a noun, but tell us what he did and said.

If God is primarily action, the 'Prime Mover', this poses a problem for visual artists, who must use material *things* to express God's dynamic reality. From about the fourth century, artists were allowed to paint Christ as a man, but could only paint God's hand (suggesting his power of intervention). When the Father is painted, there is a risk of presenting him as the proverbial old man in the white nightie. Michelangelo solves the problem by painting a very muscular God in moments of intense action. The modern Australian sculptor Elizabeth Boothby takes a different approach: her Crucifixion, for example, rather than being figurative, suggests the verbs involved in sacrifice, the pouring out or emptying of divine love - motion made permanent in metal. The three poems I will be discussing in this paper adopt interesting grammatical approaches to conveying the dynamic nature of God.

I

Psalm 6 (Authorised Version), falls into three thematic sections marked by strong syntactic changes. In the first (Verses 1-4), the psalmist addresses God directly:

> O Lord, *rebuke* me not in thine anger, neither *chasten* me in thy hot displeasure.

> *Have* mercy upon me O Lord; for I *am* weak:. O Lord, *heal* me; for my bones *are vexed.*
> My soul *is also sore vexed:* but thou, O Lord, how long?
> *Return,* O Lord, *deliver* my soul: O *save* me for thy mercies' sake.

The passage is very verbal,[9] with ten finite verbs in fifty-nine words (16.9%); God is the agent of seven of these, acting upon the speaker. The speaker is the subject only of the verb 'to be' or the passive 'vexed': he is not the agent of any action. The main message is a simple plea, 'God help me' (subject-verb-object), repeated with variations.

In the second section (5-8a), God is no longer the agent:

> For in death there *is* no remembrance of thee: in the grave who *shall give* thee thanks?
> I *am* weary with my *groaning;* all the night *make* I my bed to swim; I *water* my couch with tears.
> Mine eye *is consumed* because of grief; it *waxeth* old because of all mine enemies.
> *Depart* from me, all ye workers of iniquity;

As the poet begins to bargain with God, he becomes concerned with himself rather than with God, dwelling on his relationship to things other than God: his bed, his couch, his eye, his enemies. The syntax is more complex with clauses like 'who shall give thee thanks' (subject-verb-indirect object-direct object) and 'it waxeth old because of all my enemies' (subject-verb-complement-adjunct). There are fewer verbs (9 in 61 words, or 14.8%), and the speaker is the agent (implied or stated) of most of them. The moment God ceases to be the agent, the language becomes much more self-absorbed, and rather less verbal.

In the final section (verses 8b-10) God is again the agent, and the language is more verbal (8 in 38 words, or 21%):

> for the Lord *hath heard* the voice of my *weeping.*
> The Lord *hath heard* my supplication; the Lord *will receive* my prayer.
> Let all mine enemies *be ashamed* and sore *vexed:* let them *return* and be *shamed* suddenly.

However, the verbs are driven more by the psalmist's anger than by God: in the first section he prayed God to help him because he was 'sore vexed'; here he prays God to 'let all mine enemies be ashamed and sore vexed... shamed suddenly.' He no longer addresses God in the second person, and instead of the intimate 'me' and 'O Lord' of the first section, 'the Lord' relates to 'the voice of my weeping... my supplication... my prayer.' In the last verse, God is in relation with the enemies, not with the speaker; the speaker is no longer a participant in the action, but is reduced, grammatically, to the single possessive 'my'. The passives 'be ashamed and sore vexed', with their unexpressed agent, mean that God himself, as the implied agent, is removed from the last verse, as

if the poet is subconsciously ashamed of asking God to act against his own nature. The intimacy between God and the speaker has been lost in the transition from dialogue to the use of the third person.

II

Donne's 'Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward' starts with a reflective third-person passage, with no use of the first person:

> Let mans Soule *be* a Spheare, and then, in this,
> The intelligence that moves, devotion *is,*
> And as the other Spheares, by *being grown*
> Subject to forraigne motions, *lose* their owne,
> And *being by others hurried* every day,
> Scarce in a yeare their naturall forme *obey;*
> Pleasure or businesse, so, our Soules *admit*
> For their first mover, and are *whirld* by it.

God is not present here. The soul loses its natural motion (the idea of motion is repeated three times) by following 'forraigne motions' – the worldly cares of business and pleasure. The loss is reflected in the grammar: for a poem by Donne, this passage has few verbs, only one per line (8 in 62 words: 12.9%). Losing direction, the soul becomes passive, 'hurried every day' and 'whirld'.

In the second section, the poet speaks in the first person: he too is passive, 'carried' Westward, unable to follow the natural bent of his own soul:

> Hence *is't* that I *am carried* towards the West
> This day, when my Soules forme *bends* towards the East.
> There should I *see* a Sunne, by *rising set,*
> And by that *setting* endlesse day *beget.*
> But that Christ on this Crosse did *rise* and *fall,*
> Sin had eternally *benighted* all.

The lines which describe what he would see if he turned, the mystery of Christ's death and Resurrection, are the most verbal in the poem, with eight verbs in four lines (8 in 50 words: 16%); Christ is the agent of six of these.

The poet cannot bring himself to see this sight:

> Yet *dare* I' almost be glad, I *do not see*
> That spectacle of too much weight for mee.
> Who *sees* Gods face, that *is* selfe life, *must dye;*
> What a death *were* it then *to see* God *dye?*
> It made his owne Lieutenant Nature *shrinke,*
> It made his footstoole *crack,* and the Sunne *winke.*
> Could I *behold* those hands which *span* the Poles,
> And *turne* all spheares at once, *pierc'd* with those holes?

> Could I *behold* that endlesse height which *is*
> Zenith to us, and our Antipodes,
> *Humbled* below us? or that blood which *is*
> The seat of all our Soules, if not of his,
> *Made* durt of dust, or that flesh which *was worne*
> By God, for his apparell, *rag'd* and *torne*?
> If on these things I durst not *looke*, durst I
> Upon his miserable mother *cast* mine eye,
> Who was Gods partner here, and *furnish'd* thus
> Halfe of that Sacrifice, which *ransom'd* us?
> Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,
> They' *are* present yet unto my memory,
> For that *looks* towards them;

Although here there are almost three verbs to every two lines (31 in 175 words: 17.7%), many of them are negative, they do not actually happen: the poet dares not see, nor behold, nor cast his eye. Apart from the terrible 'what a death were it then to see God dye', God's agency is turned upside down, his activity negated by the passives of suffering: those hands which span the poles are pierced with holes; the endless height which is our Zenith is humbled; that blood which is the seat of all our souls is dirtied; and the flesh which God chose to wear for his apparel is ragged and torn.

The final section starts with a dramatic grammatical shift as Christ enters the poem with that sudden change to 'thou':

> and thou *look'st* towards mee,
> O Saviour, as thou *hang'st* upon the tree;
> I *turne* my backe to thee, but *to receive*
> Corrections, till thy mercies *bid* thee *leave*.
> O *thinke* mee worth thine anger, *punish* mee,
> *Burne* off my rusts, and my deformity,
> *Restore* thine Image, so much, by thy grace,
> That thou *may'st know* mee, and I'll *turne* my face.

The proportion of verbs rises only slightly (12 in 62 words: 19.4%), but the agency changes markedly: of the twelve verbs, Christ is the agent of nine. The passage starts slowly, with a fairly complex grammatical structure of subordinate clauses. In the last four lines, the pace builds up with a simple co-ordinate structure in which the poet implores Christ to punish, burn, and restore him. This reiterated action by Christ leads to another dramatic grammatical shift: in the only future construction of the poem, the poet promises to return to his natural motion, to 'turne my face'. This verb, however, is in the future: the poet will only be able to act if Christ acts first.

III

My last example is Hopkins' 'As Kingfishers catch fire' which falls into two parts:

> As kingfishers *catch* fire, dragonflies *draw* flame;
> As *tumbled* over rim in roundy wells
> Stones *ring*; like each *tucked* string *tells*, each *hung* bell's
> Bow *swung finds* tongue *to fling out* broad its name;
> Each mortal thing *does* one thing and the same:
> *Deals* out the being indoors each one *dwells*;
> *Selves* – *goes* itself; myself it *speaks* and *spells*,
> Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*
>
> I *say* more: the just man *justices*;
> *Keeps* grace: that *keeps* all his goings graces;
> *Acts* in God's eye what in God's eye he *is* –
> Christ.
>   For Christ *plays* in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
> To the Father through the features of men's faces.

The first nine lines describe the urge of all creatures, including man, to express their nature in action. This part of the poem, culminating in the word Christ, has more verbs than any other passage discussed in this paper, almost three to a line (27 verbs in 95 words: 28%). The last three lines, in which Christ is the agent, have only one verb (1 in 25 words: 4%), which makes this the least verbal passage discussed. God himself is not the agent of any verbs, occurring only in the prepositional phrase 'in God's eye' and 'to the Father.'

Since the poem is written in the first-third person mode, this seems to undermine both my hypotheses: that dialogue has more verbs than reflective-narrative; and that God is best expressed by verbs. A closer examination, however, reveals that this poem is the exception that proves the rule. The creatures do not actually perform any of the actions described. Kingfishers do not catch fire, nor do dragonflies draw flame: these effects are caused by reflected light. Stones, strings, and bells can only make sounds because some other agency tumbles the stones, tucks the string, and swings the bell. The just man acts only through grace: one of the central Christian doctrines is that grace is prevenient, that it is not earned by good actions but is necessary before one can perform good actions.

In all three cases the action is second-hand, and the sense of rush engendered by the verbs in the first part of the poem comes to a sudden stop at the word 'Christ'. The word is heavily accentuated: it occurs at the start of a line, and the dash which makes a pause before it only increases the force of the enjambment; a full stop forces another pause after it; and the word is repeated

almost immediately. The pause before 'Christ' also emphasises the word before it, 'is', which, in such close proximity to God, suggests the great 'I AM' of the creator. It turns out that the feverish activity of the first section of the poem is dependent on Christ who 'plays in ten thousand places': he is the *being* the Godhead, dwelling within each creature. The sole action of the creatures is to 'deal out' this being: and this, Hopkins says, is an act of speaking: *'myself* it speaks and spells, Crying, *What I do is me, for that I came.*

REFERENCES

[1] C.T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966) entry for *verbum*.

[2] Thomas Merrill, *Epic God Talk*, (Jefferson North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 1986) p.1.

[3] *I and Thou* (Walter Kaufmann, trans. New York, 1970) pp.54-9.

[4] M.A.K. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language* (Victoria: Deakin UP, 1985) p. 99.

[5] Buber, pp.54-55; the distinctions between I-You and I-It, and betweeen spoken and written language, largely correspond to the distinction Halliday makes between the two main kinds of linguistic meaning, 'the "ideational" or reflective, and the "interpersonal" or active.' *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Edward Arnold, 1985) p.xiii.

[6] *On the Art of Poetry* in *Classical Literary Criticism*, (T.S. Dorsch, trans. London: Penguin Classics, 1965) pp.59-60.

[7] *The Humility of God* (London: SCM Press, 1978) pp.79-80.

[8] *A Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: OUP, 1949) λοуοσ.

[9] In analysing the number of verbs I include participles and infinitives; where auxiliaries are separated from their lexical verb, I have underlined only the lexical component.