


2019

Prayer

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Original Published Citation

"Prayer." *New Literary History* 50:3 (2019): In Brief. 357-61.

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Prayer

Brooke Conti

EVERYONE KNOWS A PRAYER when they hear it, even if it's embedded in something else: a speech, a pep-talk, an after-dinner toast.

*Let us pray
O heavenly father
Blessed be the Lord*

Bounded on the one side by an invocation, an invitation, or an exclamation of praise, often in the subjunctive mood, and prone to mild archaisms in diction and syntax, prayer announces its arrival. Borrowing words from scripture or a worship manual are easy ways of signaling that a prayer has begun, but even in its supposedly spontaneous forms, prayer is a deeply conservative genre. An audience may not know exactly which words are coming next, but they should never be surprised by the eventual “amen.”

Despite the rhetorical features that make prayer sound like prayer, writers from the ancient world to the present have been at pains to deny their necessity. Following St. Paul, who reassures the Romans that, when they do not know what to pray for, or how, “The Spirit itself maketh intercession . . . with groanings which cannot be uttered,” the usual line is that prayer requires nothing more than the desire to pray.¹ George Herbert’s poems sound this theme repeatedly. In “Prayer (II)” he describes God as being of such “an easie quick accesse” that “if I but lift mine eyes, my suit is made.”² In this account, God is more eager to hear than we are to speak, so the very posture of prayer conveys the substance of the petition. Herbert’s “Sion” is even more directly in the Pauline tradition, with its assertion that all of Solomon’s temple was worth less to God than “one good grone.” Herbert continues, enthusiastically: “grones are quick, and full of wings, / . . . / And ever as they mount, like larks they sing.”³ If we presume that Herbert heard a groan or two and never mistook them for birdsong, his meaning must be that groans sound this way *to God*, who translates the most inchoate thoughts into something more pleasingly articulate. But although a believer might take comfort in Herbert’s insistence that a prayer’s speed to the divine

ear does not require well-formed words, his reference to God's pleasure in a *good* groan still opens up the possibility that one may groan badly. Moreover, in emphasizing the gap between how groans sound to us and how they sound to God, "Sion" inadvertently reminds the one praying that she can never be sure she has done it right.

Anxiety about prayerly deficiencies shadow sixteenth- and seventeenth-century debates about prayer, particularly the question of whether believers should rely on set forms or speak to God extemporaneously. On the one hand, it is clear that everyone prays badly some of the time. On the other hand, there is a persistent belief that some methods are better than others—and that certain approaches may be actively offensive to the divine ear. In a famous passage from one of his sermons, John Donne focuses on the failures that are common to all, using the first person to describe "the manifold weaknesses" of even "the strongest devotions in time of Prayer":

I throw my selfe downe in my Chamber, and I call in, and invite God, and his Angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his Angels, for the noise of a Flie, for the ratling of a Coach, for the whining of a doore; I talke on, in the same posture of praying; Eyes lifted up; knees bowed downe; as though I prayed to God; and, if God, or his Angels should aske me, when I thought last of God in that prayer, I cannot tell. . . . A memory of yesterdays pleasures, a feare of to morrows dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer.⁴

Donne implies that these infirmities are widely shared. Just before this passage, he criticizes those who object to the Lord's Prayer and presume to think that "the same Spirit that spake in Christ, speakes in their extemporall prayers." But a moment later he asks his audience to honestly consider "which of us ever, ever sayes over [the Lord's Prayer], with a deliberate understanding of every Petition as we passe, or without deviations, and extravagancies of our thoughts, in that halfe-minute of our Devotion"?⁵

In the era's prayer disputes, the scenario that Donne conjures up was often assumed to be the result of praying the wrong way. Those who recommended set forms, such as the Lord's Prayer, the "Te Deum," or (in public worship) the Book of Common Prayer, argued that reciting familiar words provided an anchor amidst the distractions of daily life. Set prayers, or those taken from prayer manuals, gave words to those who might otherwise be speechless, while also assuaging anxieties about efficacy: using the language of one's forebears aligns the pray-er with a transhistorical community of believers. To those who advocated extem-

poraneous prayer, however, the dull repetition of someone else's words was precisely what caused one's mind to wander away from God. After all, if what God asks of his people is an immediate, heartfelt response to circumstances, then even the most ancient prayers are inappropriate, the equivalent of sending a form letter to God.

The unknowable gap between human action and divine interpretation means that there is a tension at the heart of both the ideology and practice of prayer. To be efficacious, a prayer must be authentic, but the pray-er is not the guarantor of that authenticity. And although it is notionally God who judges the sincerity of a prayer, in practice the human ear, eye, or heart are forever judging on God's behalf: does this prayer *seem* to be made in the right spirit—with the right humility, earnestness, decorum? Such concerns are urgent enough in private prayer, but at least there the individual groaner or lifter-up of eyes might conceivably receive a sense of assurance or inner calm and take it as evidence that her prayer has been made and received in the right spirit. But in public prayer it is the audience who warrants prayer's authenticity. Groans clearly will not do—and yet if spontaneity and sincerity remain the standard, then heightened rhetoric and recognizable formal features are its most likely guarantors.

The *Directory for Public Worship*, which the Long Parliament approved in 1645 as a replacement for the Book of Common Prayer, illustrates this conundrum. Whereas the prayer book provides a script of prayers and responses, the directory aims at *describing* rather than prescribing, telling the minister and congregation generally how they should assemble, preach, and pray. Most of the *Directory's* sample prayers are phrased in the third person and are bracketed with indications that the minister is only to pray “to this or the like effect.” At the same time, these prayers sometimes go on for page after page. In their conventional turns of phrase, lists of petitions, and subtle insertions of proper doctrine, nothing could seem further from prayer as a spontaneous, heartfelt—and usually brief—ideal. They also betray unease about whether ministers should truly be left to their own devices. In other words: even those who object to set prayers have a strong sense of what a prayer should look and sound like.

Which returns us to Herbert and the elaborately wrought simplicity of his poems, which simultaneously suggest plain, authentic speech and reveal that speech to be an effect rather than a spontaneous reality. Herbert's “Prayer (I)” is a sonnet, that most celebrated of lyric forms, and runs through a series of metaphors in its attempts to describe prayer. It is, among other things, “the soul in paraphrase,” an “engine against th'Almighty,” and “the land of spices.”⁶ In the last half line, however, Herbert rejects all these lofty epithets in favor of the humbler descrip-

tion of prayer as “something understood.”⁷ It is a beautiful and justly celebrated poem, but it is only after having first met a reader’s expectations for what a poem should be that Herbert can reject the artifice of the sonnet and his exquisite turns of phrase in favor of plainness.

The same thing is true of prayer itself: no matter how much a congregation values sincerity, they do not actually want to listen to a groan, or even a halting, fumbling list of petitions. There is therefore always a gap between prayer as a private communication between two parties and prayer that, whether written or spoken, knows itself also to be a performance for a third party, which will inevitably sit in judgment. Herbert’s poems, like the meditations of many less famous devotional writers, know that they will be read by others who might take them up to express the state of their own souls; read them as models of prayerful engagement with the divine; or simply judge them as religious or artistic successes or failures.

But although it is difficult to imagine public prayer that resists the pressure of this double audience, it is not impossible. Langston Hughes’s “Personal” is the rare poem that suggests prayer while rejecting the possibility of an audience for that prayer:

In an envelope marked:
PERSONAL
God addressed me a letter.

In an envelope marked:
PERSONAL
I have given my answer.⁸

The speaker of Hughes’s poem is, apparently, communicating with God. But unlike the colloquies with the divine that we find in Donne’s Holy Sonnets or in Herbert, almost nothing about the nature of that communication is intelligible to the reader; the relationship is an utterly private one, withheld from the judgement of any third party.

Still, even Hughes does not go as far as a writer might. A book of truly sincere devotions, devotions from the heart, might be simply a gathering of blank pages—or, better yet a series of groans, AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGHM and GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH filling line after line. Such prayers might not give a reader much pleasure, but surely our pleasure isn’t the point. For all we know, they sound like birdsong.

NOTES

- 1 Rom. 8:26, King James Version.
- 2 George Herbert "Prayer (II)," lines 1, 5. For this and all subsequent quotations from Herbert's poems, refer to Helen Wilcox, ed., *The English Poems of George Herbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).
- 3 Herbert, "Sion," lines 18, 21–23.
- 4 John Donne, *Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George Potter and Evelyn Simpson (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1953–1962), 7:264–65.
- 5 Donne, *Sermons of John Donne*, 7:264.
- 6 Herbert, "Prayer (I)," lines 3, 5.
- 7 Herbert, "Prayer (I)," lines 3, 5, 14.
- 8 Langston Hughes, "Personal," in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 88.