

Religious Authority and Poetic Knowledge: The Alternative of Nicholas Oldisworth's Farewell to Poetry

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It is very easy to treat the institution of patronage as an exemplary site for the operation of the Foucauldian notion of knowledge/power: the patron and the institution of patronage dictate the nature of the poem, while the poem reaffirms, if not constitutes, the hierarchical patron/client relationship. Nicholas Oldisworth's laudatory epigram to James Hay, Earl of Carlisle, can be used to exemplify such a patron/client, knowledge/power matrix:

To the right honorable, the
lord Haies, earle of Carlile, &c.

So joyes a rising Saint, when Angels tell
His soule, that shee is likely to doe well,
As I joy at the tidings of this Favour
Your honour shews my muse; You please to save Her,
When shee deserves nought else, but Hell and Death: 5
O lett it hold proportion, that my Breath
Bee alwaies spent in singing holy laies
To Your unmatcht and everlasting Praise.¹

¹ Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Don.c.24, fol. 11v. James Hay, Earl of Carlisle, Viscount Doncaster, Baron Hay (d.1636), one of James I's favourites, was noted for his extravagance and splendid hospitality. Unlike some of the other Scots who came south with James I, he was good-natured and made no personal enemies. He was not politically astute, but at a personal level his shrewd, observant common-sense predominated. Between 1616 and 1628 he was dispatched on six diplomatic missions to France and one to Germany (on the 1624 mission to Paris he helped negotiate the marriage of Henrietta Maria with the future Charles I).

Here Oldisworth represents himself as one rescued from oblivion, constituted as a poet, by the knowledge his rightful reader, the patron, takes of him. Oldisworth's hope of preferment in some form from Lord Carlisle was not entirely misplaced. Hay (then Viscount Doncaster) had befriended John Donne from 1608 until the poet's death in 1631.² Donne had acted as Chaplain to the Earl on his embassy to Germany in 1619. After 1628 Carlisle no longer enjoyed the confidence of Charles I, and this may be the reason why there are no records of connections between the Earl and Oldisworth, since by then Carlisle was no longer a centre of power at Court.

The strategies of vituperation or, in this case, encomium, that one would expect to find in the epideictic rhetoric which instantiates the power structures of Court poetry are clearly evident in this poem. But one has to ask whether the Court with its power-broking milieu, or those literary practices which use the Court to figure other modes of conduct in terms of dominance and submission, are the only literary paradigms.³ The problem with acquiescing to the seductions of totalising, revisionary schemes is that one is compelled to submit to the constraints of a reductive metaphysic. Not all poems can be fitted into a power/knowledge paradigm. The quantifier shift fallacy holds here, as it does elsewhere: because some poems can be elucidated in terms of the scheme, it does not follow that all will be. Not all poems are poems of praise or blame.

The problem as I have set it out with this opening gambit is, however, not so simple. There is a sense in which literary works are not forms of knowledge, and so not amenable to Foucauldian analysis. As far as I am concerned, writers and philosophers should never allow themselves to be taken in by Plato's insidious though seemingly innocuous assumption that poets provide knowledge, for the simple reason that Plato offers them a version of the lawyer's gambit, 'Do you still beat your wife?' Whatever

² See R.C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

³ I have in mind the Petrarchan apparatus of most Early Modern love poetry, especially when it is used to figure actual political negotiations as in the case of Walter Raleigh and Robert Sidney. The title of Arthur F. Marotti's provocative article, "'Love Is Not Love": Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order', *ELH* 49 (1982): 396–428, makes the case very succinctly.

their answer, they will be left vulnerable. Literary works are *acts*, albeit *verbal* ones (in other words, instances of conduct), and so not in danger of either Plato or Foucauld. But for those who persist in treating poetry as conveying truth or knowledge, they must endure the jeopardy of the banishment or the slavery they bring upon themselves.

If only things could be dealt with so simply. While poetry (or poesy to give it a wider ambit) may not be grist to the Foucauldian mill, the study of poesy and all other forms of human conduct is. This is particularly the case, if I understand Foucault's position correctly as having the force of a Kantian Transcendental Argument, to the effect that there is a necessary implication of knowledge in power, and of power in all knowledge.⁴ Whichever way one turns it, this position is either seductive or coercive (I happen to think it is both). Rather than tackling the problem head on, however, for reasons which will become apparent later, I want to approach it indirectly, by looking at more Oldisworth.

In one of the earliest poems in his collection, Oldisworth addresses a poem to another of his patrons (if that is the right term), his cousin Michael Oldisworth.⁵ The poem is relevant to the present discussion because it raises the issue of knowledge directly, in ways that make a book historian's ears prick up: one learns not simply from the content of books, but from their very materiality. Even more pertinent, is the passage starting

⁴ For a discussion of the importance of transcendental arguments, see Charles Taylor, 'The Validity of Transcendental Arguments', in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 20–33.

⁵ Michael Oldisworth (159[?]-1645). On 10 June 1611 Oldisworth graduated BA from Magdalen College, Oxford, where he was granted a fellowship. After proceeding MA in July 1614, he became secretary to William, Earl of Pembroke, the Lord Chamberlain. The Earl's influence led to his election to Parliament as the member for Old Sarum in January 1624. He was re-elected in 1625, 1626 and 1628. When the Earl, as Chancellor, recommended that Oldisworth should be one of the University's parliamentary representatives, Oxford refused to comply. On the Earl's death in 1630, Oldisworth was unemployed, but in October 1637 he succeeded one Taverner as the secretary to Philip Herbert, Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery, William Herbert's brother, and his successor as Lord Chamberlain. Oldisworth identified himself with his new master's fortune. It would appear that he himself was always inclined to support the parliamentary cause, and was later thought to have ensured that Philip Herbert's loyalties lay in the same direction. Robert Herrick pays tribute to him in 'To the most accomplisht gentleman Master Michael Oulsworth', in *Poems*, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 329.

at line 21, which attends to the arrangement of the books in the library. Divinity presides. Oldisworth celebrates the ordering of the poems in ways which would rejoice the heart of the Foucauld of *The Order of Things*, since here is a system of classification which overrides the seemingly arbitrary, even wild, concatenation of Medieval knowledge that has to be disciplined and punished.

On his seeing the Study
of Master Michaël Oldisworth.

Never, till now, I thought that unredd Bookes
 Could teach men Knowledge: but the onely Lookes
 Of this place dart such Learning through mine eies,
 That on a sodaine I am growne more wise.
 Here dwells true Beauty; I had rather see 5
 The lovely face of this faire Librarie,
 Than all the White-hall ladies at a Play,
 By their bright aspects turning Night to Day.
 Lett handsome Women hate mee, if I finde
 Ought in them, but what (in an higher kinde 10
 Adornes these paper'd shelves; doe men delight
 In colours? see, not onley Redd and White,
 But any other Hue: doe men stand on
 Due symmetrie, and just proportion?
 Angles and lines are drawne so rightly here, 15
 As all the authors of Mathematiques were;
 For my part, I can Want of nothing spie,
 But onely of the courtship how to lie,
 Dead friends indeed tell truth. You seldome have
 Two hearts, or two Tongues, found in one man's grave. 20
 Those upper Volumes are the mouthes of God,
 Holy and sharpe DIVINES, whose very Nodde
 Makes all the Devils tremble: these below
 Are *Nature's* proude clerks, and pretend to know
 What-ere is understood, felt, heard, or seene, 25
 When (good-folkes!) they scarce know why Grasse is green.
 On this side stand *Historians*, and on that

Stand *poëts*; both are liars, that is flatt,
 Yet poëts are the better: for, they wrappe
 Truth under tales; wheras Historians lappe 30
 Tales under truth. Those there are wrangling fooles,
 Drown'd in their owne Doubts, who have taught the schools
 To contradict the Schooles, and made the Lawes
 Oppose themselves in every second clause.
 Take heed; here lurkes the plodding *Politick*, 35
 Who loves to lett men blood, and is as quick
 At killing, as hee next him, the *Physician*;
 Whith whom the *Globist* and *Arithmetician*,
 The *engineer*, and more (whose names alone
 Puzzle some Readers) joyntly take their throne. 40
 But how have I those two great Counselors mist,
 The noble *Oratour* and *Moralist*,
 Those two, which queene THEOLOGIE so honor,
 That they at ev'ry turne doe waite upon Her?
 Yee spurres of Honesty, and twinnes of Fame, 45
 Proceed as ye beginne: yee serve a Dame
 Who your corrupt and grosse parts will refine,
 And make you, like her selfe, pure and divine.
 Of all the Wonders in this Paradise
 None pleaseth mee so much, as that Device 50
 To keepe so many Workes of diverse tongues
 In ranke and order: noe Affronts, noe Wrongs
 Are offer'd, but as Brother does helpe Brother,
 So these Bookes helpe and hold upp one another.
 O that the Libraries in every Colledge 55
 Would hence learne to grow civill: on my knowledge
 They are so wild and madd, that men are faine
 To binde each Writer with a severall Chaine.⁶

Divinity presides, and this brings me to the heart of the matter. The Foucauldian paradigm does not come to terms with, or acknowledge, the sacred and divine, but is predicated on the secular. It assumes that

⁶ MS Don.c.24, fols 9v–10.

Mine eies, perceiving how mine Eares did scape,
 Forbare to carry Errands to my Braine;
 To teare them out, my Nailes did fiercely scrape:
 What said mine Eies, to winne my grace againe? 10
 Forsooth when they had seene the heav'nly Lights
 Of *Doncaster*, they scorn'd all earthly sights.

My soule tooke snuffe, that shee was thus bereft
 Of two chiefe Senses, and away she went;
 I overtooke Her, ere shee quite had left 15
 My body, and demanded what shee meant.
 She answer'd not, but fledd, and stay'd at Dover,
 Till *Haies*, the great ambassador went over.

Rob'd of my soule, I was about to kill
 My selfe; yet with my selfe I spake a word: 20
 What is this *Doncaster*, *Haies*, and *Carlile*?
 Forsooth hee is your meritorious Lord.
 Then tooke I heed how I my selfe did wrong:
 For, my selfe did to You, not mee, belong.⁸

The poem as it stands, if read at a pedestrian literal level, submissively declares that the identity of the client is subsumed in that of the patron. This is the language of Christian surrender of will to the Creator, and used in a secular context amounts to blasphemy. But it is the very nature of figurative language, that at a literal level it asserts the impossible in order to signal the need for figurative construal. The language of idolatry thus becomes the hyperbolic expression of otherwise inexpressible subjectivity, intensity of feeling that is only too easily dismissed and deflated if responded to as mere exaggeration.

The poem in isolation can perversely be misread in a secular manner, but in the context of Oldisworth's collection as a whole this is impossible. The primary audience for the poem is Oldisworth's wife. The title-page of the collection reads: 'A Recollection of Certain Scattered Poems.

⁸ MS Don.c.24, fol. 11v.

Written long since by an Undergraduate, being one of the students of Christchurch in Oxford. And now in the yeare 1644 transcribed by the author, and dedicated to his wife. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. 1 Cor. XIII. 11.⁹ The present poem, like all the others, cannot be read without an awareness that our secondary readership must take account of the fact that the poem to a patron is displaced into a poem to a patron presented for the scrutiny of a wife, who thus becomes the primary reader functioning within the Christian paradigm invoked by the epigraph.

Oldisworth and his contemporaries were well aware of the ways of the world, and that it functioned according to binaries of dominance and subservience that make so much sense to Foucault. But they also had access to a paradigm of self-understanding which is incomprehensible in terms of the categories of the secular. Fulke Greville could write in a letter to John Coke: 'I know the world and believe in God',¹⁰ which is interestingly echoed in a short hymn by Oldisworth:

An hymne to God.

O thou All, conforme my Minde
 So thy goodnesse to embrace,
 That it may noe Pleasure finde
 But in wondring at thy grace.
 Things below
 Lett mee knowe:
 Lett mee love ¹¹
 Things above.

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In addition to this hymn, located near the end of the collection, Oldisworth uses two further explicitly religious poems, as the antepenultimate and penultimate items, to ensure an appropriate, if fairly

⁹ MS Don. c. 24, fol. 1.

¹⁰ Cit. in Ronald A. Rebholz, *The Life of Fulke Greville, First Lord Brooke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 217.

¹¹ MS Don.c.24, fol. 74.

conventional, closure to the collection. The first of these is a metrical version of the *Te Deum*:

At the Command of his reverend
diocesan Godfry Goodman
Bishop of Gloucester.¹²

A translation of the *Te deum laudamus*
after the tune of the 100 Psalme.

God, ô our god, wee praise thy name:
Thee for the chiefest Lord wee know.
To thee, ô Father still-the-same,
The totall Earth does homage owe.

To thee all Angels reare their Voice, 5
The heav'ns, and each celestiall Power;
Cherub and *Seraphin* rejoyce
To chant this Song to thee each houre,

OF SABBATH, HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

LORD GOD. So great's the majestic 10
Of thy dread presence, that thy glorie
Fills the earth below, fills Heav'n on high.

That faire and glorious Companie,
The twelve Apostles thee doe laude.
That goodly large Societie 15
The clear-ey'd Prophets thee applaude.

Those hosts, which did for thee expire,
The martyrs, thine admirers bee.
And like an universall Quire
The Christians, through the world, praise thee. 20

¹² Godfrey Goodman (1583–1656) entered Westminster School in 1592, and was elected to scholarship at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1599. He became Bishop of Gloucester in 1625. He was frequently reprimanded for his Papist sympathies which severely embarrassed Archbishop Laud and his supporters, but only in his will did he make a declaration of his allegiance to Roman doctrine.

- Thee, one in three, and three in one,
 The father, who vast Sway does beare,
 Thine honour'd, true, and onely Sonne,
 The holy Ghost the Comforter.
- Thou, *Christ*, the King of glorie art, 25
 The father's everlasting Sonne;
 When thou began'st to take man's part,
 The virgin's wombe thou didst not shunne.
- When thou hadst blunted *Death's* sharpe sting,
 To all men thou free Leave didst give, 30
 Who pleas'd, might bee an heav'nly King,
 If first hee truly did believe.
- Thou now on god's right hand dost sitt:
 Thou wilt sitt Judge of quick and dead,
 O then thy dear-bought Servants quitt, 35
 For whom thy precious blood was shedd.
- Grant them such endlesse Happynesse,
 As thy triumphant Saints enjoy:
 Thy people save, thine heritage blesse.
 Governe and lift them upp for ay. 40
- Wee day by day extoll thy name.
 World without end wee thee adore.
 Lord, keepe us this day free from blame.
 Mercie, thy mercie wee implore.
- Thy mercie so to Us afford 45
 As wee doe putt our Trust in thee.
 In thee I trusted have, ô Lord
 Confounded lett mee never bee.¹³

¹³ MS Don.c.24, fols 75v-76.

This poem places Oldisworth in the mainstream of traditional orthodox Christianity because of the nature of the text translated, but accommodates it to the Reformed tradition by using the metrical psalm setting of the Old Hundredth ('All people that on earth do dwell'). Furthermore, by acknowledging the injunction of his diocesan, Oldisworth engages the poem, and the collection as a whole, with the constitutive community of an Established Church whose values and beliefs would require no explicit articulation.

Moving on from a liturgical set-piece like the *Te Deum*, Oldisworth's penultimate poem unsettles and complicates the orthodox complacency achieved by the previous poem. The paradoxical title reminds us that Oldisworth is writing as a contemporary of Donne and Carew, so that in addition to an allusion to 1 Thess. 4: 17, contemporary readers would be aware of the profane literary tradition of rapture (and would consequently be invited to recall the secular poems from earlier in the collection).

A divine Rapture.

Scorn, scorn to grovle on the earth, my Soule,
 All here is base, thou seest, all here is foule;
 Look upp to heav'n (thy country) mount, and flie
 Above the bright vault of the spangled Skie:
 Converse with holy Angels, and acquaint 5
 Thy knowledge with the manners of each Saint;
 And when thou com'st to God, there, ô there rest
 In thy beginning, middle, Ending blest.
 Then, if thou canst, come down again, to doe
 (As thou wert wont) like Men, and devils too; 10
 Noe, fie! noe: triumph over Sinne and Hell,
 And instruct others to doe, say, think well.
 I know, thou n'er wilt after mony duck:
 What is a litle white and yellow Muck?
 And what is Honour, but that very thing 15
 Thou now hast, being next the supreme King?
 Pleasures tast bitter of the Hoppe and Leaven,
 Onely except these thy Delights in heaven.
 And I forewarn thee to beware of Friends:

Friends, for the most part, seek but their own endes. 20
 Praise is the best of humane goodes: yet that
 (Alas!) too is not worth the ayming at.
 In short, what-ever is below the Moone
 Like the Moone, blotted is, and wanes as soone.
 Goe, center thee in **GOD**: there, ô there rest 25
 In thy beginning, Middle, Ending, blest.¹⁴

The poem begins and ends by confirming the values of the next world and dismissing those of the quotidian. This would seem to be in keeping with a conventional closure predicated on worldly rejection. From line 9, however, Oldisworth appears to entertain the possibility of reform before coming to terms with disillusionment, seemingly abandoning hope and settling firmly for other-worldly consolation. These incompletely resolved tensions serve as a preparation for the last poem in the collection.

Oldisworth makes the final three-part poem of his collection a very unconventional abjuration of poetry.

His Farewell to *Poëtrie*.

Goe, gett thee back to heav'n, thou sacred Fire
 Which faine wouldst mee with melodie inspire;
 Here is noe Worke for thee,
 Thou canst noe goodnesse see:
 When *Vice* shall ende her Raigne, 5
 Then hither come againe.
 Now each man strives to hide his name,
 That hee may therby hide his Shame;
 Noe other Praise their Actions crave
 But silence, darknesse, and the Grave. 10
 Out of the Earth they peepe,
 And in they forthwith creepe;
 Poore wormes! lett them alone:
 They joy thus to bee gone.
 Thou art too cruell, if thou bring'st to light 15
 Those which putt all their confidence in Night.

¹⁴ MS Don.c.24, fol. 76v.

Poetry's Answer.

Straight, straight I will goe back to heav'n. But here
 Does one* of such heroick Worth appeare, [*Master Michael
 That ere I hence depart Oldisworth
 I needes must shew my Art,
 And in a matchlesse Storie 5
 Labour to spreade his glorie.
 Who knowes but I was hither sent
 Just for the very same Intent?
 Dreame not that I was bidd, in vaine,
 Onely to come, and goe againe. 10
 My office is to sing
 Of some egregious thing,
 Which when thy World shall heare
 They may at once forbear
 To wallow in their wonted Lustes, and strive 15
 By noble Deedes to keepe their Fame alive.

His Reply to *Poëtrie*.

Doe, shew thy Art. But yet half way upp flie,
 That so thy Straines may bee divine and high.
 If thou below should'st crawl
 On this grosse earthly Ball,
 The rellish of the place 5
 Would make thy Musick base.
 Above the Cloudes exalt thy flight;
 There shalt thou find both Heat and Light:
 There thou mayst thundering Speeches make,
 And colours from the Raine-bow take. 10
 There single thou mayst sitt,
 As in a throne of Witt;
 And thence droppe down a Booke,
 On which who-ere shall looke,
 Shall wonder, and confesse Thou wert so hallowed 15
 Thou scornedst or to follow, or bee followed.¹⁵

¹⁵ MS Don.c.24, fols 77–77v.

The convention of poets abandoning the poetic toys of their youth and turning to serious spiritual concerns, especially in their old age, is an ancient one. In the first part of the poem Oldisworth invites us to consider this possibility. But his muse has far more nerve, and instead of encouraging him to turn his back on the world urges him to celebrate egregious human worth. The poet accepts the challenge, but in so doing adopts a new stance, a new self-understanding, one which distances him from worldly affairs and so maintains his aloof independence by freeing him from the strategies of dominance or submission. This is something to which the Foucauldian analysis is conceptually blind because of its fundamental secularity.

Foucault's intuitions are nevertheless sound. He is attempting to make sense of human understanding as a project distinct from the knowledge of things and processes (though these too are of course inevitably subject to understanding which is ever and always only human), by attempting to break away from the enslaving ideals of the universal, transcendent and homochronic by asserting the primacy of the local, the subjective and the heterochronic, where knowing is relative to the knower. (Foucault is of course returning to the insights of traditional rhetoric, most importantly to the notion of *kairos*, the opportune time, place and occasion for speech).¹⁶ His project fails, it seems to me, because of the inadequacy of the limiting and limited notion of agency, and of the agent's conduct as reducible to tactics (rather than strategies even) of dominance and submission and of the agent's understanding of procedures of ascendancy and suppression. Human beings can and do conduct themselves in terms of dominance and submission, but not of necessity. The religious perspective is predicated on the assumption that human conduct is not reducible to such binary categories.

I am suggesting, too, that much can be gained by attending to Michael Oakeshott's dictum that we are what we understand ourselves to be.¹⁷

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977) and *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970).

¹⁷ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1975).

This notion needs to be qualified: we are what we understand ourselves to be, not necessarily what we say we are or fail to say what we are. We are also not always the best understanders of ourselves: the vain man is always the last person to discover his vanity. But Oakeshott's insight is that we understand human conduct by attending in the first instance to how agents understand themselves. Thus agents who conduct themselves with a religious self-understanding will always be invisible to those who will not acknowledge the primacy of this self-understanding.

In the Early Modern period, it is not only religion which offered a way out of the coercive negotiations of civil life, though it offered the most comprehensive one. Political commitments which refused to see human beings as either guardians or slaves, or masters or servants, but as free beings, equal and unsponsored, provided ways for people to escape the ancient binaries and contradictions. Some kind of liberation could also be achieved by who chose, if only temporarily, to figure themselves as lovers and friends.¹⁸ (John Donne is not the only writer of love poems and familiar epistles.) Others chose contemplative life, figuring it as pastoral or life in a country house. Many turned to the teachings of Epicurius.¹⁹

My quarrel is, therefore, not really with Foucault but with myself. How easy it has been to read the literature of the past as if it were constituted not simply by my own presuppositions, but by my own secular self-understandings. But how much has been lost in not being willing to listen to others on their own terms. Having wandered, myself, for forty years in the wilderness of the secular, I now have the delight of being a denizen of both sides of the Jordan.

¹⁸ See my article, 'Nicholas Oldisworth, Richard Bacon, and the Practices of Caroline Friendship', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 4 (2005): 366–401.

¹⁹ See Howard Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1989).