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From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit  
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire  
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding", Collected Poems: 1909-1962 (London, 1963), p. 219. All subsequent references to Eliot's poems are to this edition.

### Introduction

Like many other readers of Herbert I have puzzled over the arrangement of poems in The Temple. Does their sequence point to a resolution of spiritual conflict as many critics have argued? In order to answer that question, one has to examine the conflicts themselves: where do they begin, who expresses them, and does their pattern change significantly at some discernible point?

The conflicts begin literally in the first poem following "The Sacrifice", "The Thanksgiving". In this poem, one encounters the first of many speakers who discovers himself to be unequal to his alleged task: he cannot hope adequately to imitate Christ's grief and suffering. But the seeds of that conflict are contained in the previous poem. The reader readily discerns the speaker's dilemma because he found himself in a similar position while reading "The Sacrifice". Christ's dramatic monologue is so rhetorically demanding we are forced to consider the immensity of his grief and suffering in very personal and immediate terms. But how does the rhetorical structure of "The Sacrifice" specifically relate to the lyrical poems that follow it?

No doubt there are a variety of valid answers, but there is one in particular that is replayed thematically throughout the poems of "The Church". I realize it must seem odd that a thesis devoted to Herbert derives its title, its epigraph, and several of its organizing principles from Eliot's Four Quartets. My justification is simply that a particular metaphor in Eliot's poem "East Coker" gave me new insight into the interlinking themes and structure of "The Church". Eliot's description of Christ the wounded physician acting on the patient-penitent even as he is acted upon, as he is wounded afresh by our sin, points toward one of

the central images of Herbert's poems. The image suggests the reciprocity of redemption: the numerous personae who grieve and suffer and participate in their own cure as Christ purges their sinful hearts and restores them to spiritual health.

Two other themes I have borrowed from Eliot relate directly to spiritual conflicts in "The Church". One of these I have called the ambiguity of understanding. Herbert's personae are frequently frustrated in their attempts to comprehend God's divine purpose or to define their role in relation to God. The variety of methods the poet employs to dramatize the ambiguities implicit in what can and cannot be understood about one's role in relation to God, forms the basis of my second chapter. The third theme concerns the voices of response; Herbert's speakers succeed and fail from one poem to another as they struggle to reach God through thought and feeling. Voices can range from praise to lament, from grief and submission to rebellion and atonement; their complexity and, moreover, the ways in which they express a particular kind of active response is the topic of my third chapter.

Thus far I have explained the spiritual conflict I have chosen to discuss and identified its origin; the next question is, in what sense do these themes shed any light on the pattern and sequence of the poems? These themes are related to each other, and to the overall structure of "The Church", through the process of self-examination each speaker undergoes. Whether he is attempting to find an appropriate response to Christ's grief, to understand God's purpose as it is veiled in the Holy writ, or to express contrition in the act of writing a poem, Herbert's personae constantly seek to analyze their behaviour and the tenets of their faith from new perspectives.

But is there a resolution implicit in the structure of "The Church"? I would have to answer "no" for two reasons. First, I do not believe there is simply one speaker who, in a variety of disguises, stands for the poet. There are naive speakers of allegorical fictions who completely misunderstand their role in relation to God until the poem's resolution, others who are rebellious and argumentative, some who are detached and rational, still others who engage in passionate praise or blame. I cannot see that the naive speaker of a poem like "Love Unknown" exhibits the same character traits as the speaker of "The Forerunners" or of "The Banquet" or of "Providence" and so forth.

Second, although there are clearly repetitions of theme and identifiable groups of poems that are interrelated, I cannot support the notion of a linear sequence that works through conflict to a spiritual resolution apparent in the final poems and culminating with "Love (3)". The very rigorous, vigilant nature of the process of self-examination precludes any such neat solution. I hope to demonstrate that the changing themes and moods of the final poems do not suggest a resolution of conflict; quite the contrary; the reciprocity inherent in God's bargain with man demands an unceasing re-assessment of thought and action.

Professors Martz<sup>1</sup> and Lewalski<sup>2</sup> have profoundly influenced my thinking on this subject. Even though I disagree with their shared opinion that "The Church" ends on a "plateau of assurance",<sup>3</sup> I have

<sup>1</sup> Louis L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation (New Haven, 1965), p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Lewalski, Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric (Princeton, 1979), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Martz, p. 92.

frequently applied the seventeenth-century models of meditation, both Catholic and Protestant, they have related to Herbert's poems. I have tried to illustrate through repeated reference to both meditational models that these models are fundamental to an understanding of the process of self-examination implicit in Herbert's poems, and that they do not fundamentally contradict each other even though their theological origins and focus are different.

When I first read Herbert's poems I came to believe Rosalie Colie's assessment of their deceptive simplicity, "The poems of George Herbert, so transparent, so simple, so direct, have the distinction of being among the hardest poems in the English language to paraphrase".<sup>4</sup>

"Having paraphrased a great many of Herbert's poems, I am more convinced than ever that she is right--and with a vengeance: "The more one tries to say something intelligent in explication of these poems, the more gibberish one tends to talk".<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Rosalie Colie, Paradoxica Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox (Princeton, 1966), p. 190.

<sup>5</sup> Colie, p. 190.

The wounded surgeon plies the steel  
That questions the distempered part;  
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel  
The sharp compassion of the healer's art.

(T.S. Eliot, "East Coker", p. 201)

I. "Sharp Compassion": Suffering and Healing in The Temple

There is a balsome, or indeed a bloud,  
Dropping from heav'n, which doth both cleanse and close  
All sorts of wounds; of such strange force it is.  
Seek out this All-heal, and seek no repose,  
Until thou finde and use it to thy good:  
Then bring thy gift . . .

("An Offering", 11:29-23)<sup>1</sup>

In "The Sacrifice", Christ, who is the speaker throughout the poem, refers to the blood and tears he sheds as "A Balsome . . . for both the Hemispheres:/Curing all wounds, but mine" (26-27).<sup>2</sup> Herbert's use of the word balsam in this poem and in the lines cited at the top of the page from "The Offering", draws our attention to the purgative function of Christ's wounds; the blood and water which flow from his side signify the sacraments of baptism and communion necessary for salvation. The deliberate emphasis on the paradox, "Curing all wounds, but mine", is employed in every stanza of the poem to dramatize Christ's grief and man's ingratitude.

Antithetical images of suffering and healing occur several times in "The Sacrifice" with both physical and spiritual connotations. The opening lines of the poem establish Christ's grief at human indifference to his suffering,

Oh all ye, who pass by, whose eyes and minde  
To worldly things are sharpe, but to me are blinde;  
To me, who took eyes that I might you finde . . .

There is more than reproach intended by the rhetorical tone of this address; we are, as it were, stopped in the act of "passing by" to the

<sup>1</sup> George Herbert, "An Offering", The Works of George Herbert, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), p. 147. All subsequent references to Herbert's poems are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Works, p. 27.



next line and forced to acknowledge Christ's solitary agony in very personal terms. He accuses us--"all ye"--not only of worldliness, but of refusing to use the faculty of sight to recognize either his physical torment or his identity as the Incarnate God. In fact, if one conflates these three lines with their scriptural source, the demands placed upon the reader take on an added dimension. The original verse from Lamentations begins, "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow" . . . (Lam. 1:12).<sup>3</sup> We are being asked the rhetorical question of the poem's refrain--"Was ever grief like mine?"--and we are being asked more specifically what we feel at the very moment we acknowledge the immensity of his suffering. "Is it nothing to you?" is a very uncomfortable question that demands a considered response: What exactly does his suffering mean to us?

Since the entire poem focuses in such visual detail upon various aspects of the Incarnation, it is not surprising that Herbert plays figuratively on things common to men which assume a different significance because of their belonging to Christ. Thus his robe becomes, "The type of love, which once cur'd those/Who sought for help" (242-3), just as his tears and blood are "a balsome". Similarly, Herbert puns on "spittle", "Behold, they spit on me in scornful wise,/Who by my spittle gave the blinde man eies" (133-4). But there is again as in the first lines of the poem, an ambiguous tone. On one level, spittle is a form of hospital which Herbert uses in the subsequent poem "The Thanksgiving".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Works, p. 485.

<sup>4</sup> This point is mentioned by Mary Ellen Rickey in Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert (Lexington, 1966), pp. 73, 191.

and in this instance to mean acts of charity while simultaneously evoking a spiritual metaphor of the Incarnation itself as restorative.

Yet the primary rhetorical function of spittle in this stanza is to juxtapose the contemptuous treatment Christ receives at the hands of his enemies--"They spit on me"--with his merciful generosity that they fail to perceive. ("Leaving his blindness to my enemies", 135).

William Empson points out that not only is there a rhetorical contrast, "but that they should spit upon me is itself a healing; by it they distinguish me as scapegoat, and assure my triumph and their redemption; and spitting, in both cases, was to mark my unity with man."<sup>5</sup> Just as we were led to consider a personal response to Christ's grief, here we are meant to perceive that the very instruments employed by his attackers to expose him as a false king are paradoxically part of the process that makes salvation possible.

Indeed, the instruments intended to humiliate and torment Christ are, through the course of the poem, turned on the reader and metaphorically serve to expose our complicity in his suffering. Perhaps the most dramatic example of the rhetorical technique occurs when the people ironically call him "Physician" and taunt him, "Now heal thy self Physician; now come Down", and he replies:

Alas! I did so, when I left my crown  
And fathers smile for you, to feel his frown . . . .

In healing not my self, there doth consist  
All that salvation, which ye now resist;  
Your safetie in my sicknesse doth subsist . . . .  
(221-228)

<sup>5</sup> William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (New York, 1957), pp. 260-261. Quoted by Michael McCanles in Dialectical Criticism and Renaissance Literature (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), p. 86.

It is not just the terrible pathos of his words that is so moving; we were initially rebuked for blind indifference and now discover ourselves among the ranks of his tormentors. The "ye who pass by" of the first stanza has become the "ye [who] now resist"--the crowd of tormentors and ourselves simultaneously. Moreover, the consistent use of the present tense--now resist--complements the double function of the rhetorical repetition of the second person.

Although the present tense is frequently used by Herbert to suggest an immediacy which heightens our emotional response to the situation, looked at from a different perspective, there really isn't an ongoing set of actions in the poem. Christ tells his tormentors he has already "come down": "I did so, when I left my crown". In dramatic terms, the spectators see only the sequence of events unfold whereas in divine terms, the action is completed. Therefore, as presumably Christian readers, we are expected to comprehend the irony of "Alas! I did so" or of Christ's declaration to his disciples, "Weepe not, deare friends, since I for both have wept" (149). This dialectical tension between a sense of "temporal urgency"<sup>6</sup> to declare our culpability, and a sense that we can never adequately atone since Christ "in all grief preventest",<sup>7</sup> is replayed in rhetorical conflicts throughout "The Church" and is a dominant theme of several poems.

One might feel inclined to interject at this point that "The Sacrifice" owes its rhetorical style to traditional sources and that these rhetorical conflicts are themselves inherent in the material.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Fish, The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1978), p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> "The Thanksgiving", line 4.

Several critics have remarked on its style which derives "from the Improperia or Reproaches of Christ which in the Roman Use are recited on Good Friday."<sup>8</sup> The precise function of the Reproaches according to Professor Tuve and others<sup>9</sup> is to name all Christian sinners as guilty parties who share equally in Adam's curse and hence require the Atonement. But the Reproaches are rhetorical in a formal and ritualistic sense only. Herbert's Christ reveals an intensely personal anguish that manipulates the reader to consider the problem of finding an appropriate response to him whose very name epitomizes and defines all suffering.

To be sure, there are traditional liturgical echoes in "The Sacrifice". However, Professor Martz's reading is more useful for an understanding of Herbert's stylistic devices. He stresses the distinctive seventeenth century method of meditation inherent in the structure of the poem:

... the central aim of the art of meditation was precisely to make explicit whatever remained implicit: to analyze, to understand, and then to feel and profit from the matter. This is exactly the difference that we feel between Herbert's subtle, packed, deft, explicit treatment of the paradoxes and the simple, implicit statement of the paradoxes which one finds in the liturgy and in the popular medieval poetry cited by Miss Tuve.<sup>10</sup>

This "explicit treatment of the paradoxes" in "The Sacrifice" is an essential element of Herbert's style that has a significant bearing

<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Freeman, English Emblem Books (London, 1948), pp. 160-2; also see Rosemond Tuve, A Reading of George Herbert (London, 1952), pp. 19-99 for a similar discussion.

<sup>9</sup> See Patrick Grant, The Transformation of Sin (Montreal and London, 1974) pp. 123-133, for further discussion of Herbert's medieval sources.

<sup>10</sup> Martz, p. 92.

upon his treatment of the typological figure of Christ the Physician. If we merely regard the medieval liturgical surface of "The Sacrifice", then Christ the Physician "curing all wounds" is no more than a commonplace meditational emblem receiving appropriate devotional attention. If, on the other hand, we apply Professor Martz's model, then it seems to me the paradoxes concerning Christ as wounded physician are made explicit deliberately "to analyze, to understand, and then to feel and profit from the matter." Moreover, this meditational process is analogous to the journey we make through the poem as readers: we, too, try to grasp the implications of Christ's all-encompassing grief, feel our responsibility for his suffering, and frame an appropriate response to what we have understood and felt in order to "profit from the matter".

Before proceeding any further, it is important to consider how the symbol of Christ the Physician may be seen to extend beyond the formal ritualistic imagery of "The Sacrifice" into the subsequent poems of "The Church" which are generally thought to be about problems of praise, or the "problems and premises of the Christian life",<sup>11</sup> or "a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my Soul",<sup>12</sup> as Herbert says in his last message to Nicholas Ferrar. How is the "dilemma of gratitude for the Passion",<sup>13</sup> the dominant theme of the subsequent eleven poems, related to the emblem of the wounded physician?

11 Martz, p. 292.

12 Works, p. xxxvii

13 Martz, p. 292.

Although each stanza of "The Sacrifice" contrasts Christ's love and man's sin, there is a central paradox which serves as a dramatic pivot prefiguring larger thematic designs. Christ says the world was created by words but must be redeemed by something much greater than words (205-7). His suffering is: "Such sorrow as, if sinfull man could feel, / Or feel his part, he would not cease to kneel" (209-10). The conditional "if sinfull man could feel" forms, in imaginative terms, the portal of entry into the succeeding poems where it is transformed into an implied question: if sinful man could feel his part, how could he express it? Thus a rhetorical pattern is established by the paraphrased question from Lamentations--"Is it nothing to you?"--amplified in the conditional clause "if sinfull man could feel his part", and continued through the problems of response as in the closing couplet of "The Thanksgiving", "Then for they passion-I will do for that-/Alas, my God, I know not what."<sup>14</sup>

"Feeling our part" becomes almost a catechistical series of questions and answers explored by various personae of poems in "The Church" as they grapple with the consequences, whether moral, physical or psychological, that evolve from the kinds of responses that are made. Professor Tuve describes the complexities of the responses many personae make to the passion very neatly as "a painful paradoxical attempt to lose the self in sacrifice, to devote the very personality without ceasing to be a person and yet without trace of self-interest or self-approbation".<sup>15</sup> Yet despite the "attempt to lose the self, there is

<sup>14</sup> Works, p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> Tuve, p. 190.

a terrible yearning to be made whole.<sup>16</sup> "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick", Jesus says in St. Matthew (IX.12) and it is the manifestations of inadequacies--spiritual and physical--that appear in the eleven poems following "The Sacrifice".

However, the fact that Herbert frequently relates images of personal suffering to Christ's grief and suffering, or that he poetically equates signs of grace with images of healing, does not explain the ambiguous and elusive symbol of the wounded physician. The lines quoted from Eliot's poem "East Coker" on the page preceding this essay perhaps best encapsulate the way in which I feel this symbol takes on meaning even in poems that do not seem to be, at first reading, directly related to physical or spiritual health and sickness.

Eliot's modern image of a surgeon operating on a patient--"plies the steel"--<sup>17</sup> is a twentieth century version of Christ the Physician administering to the afflicted soul. The surgeon is described as "wounded" and he "questions the distempered part" in order to restore spiritual balance and health. What is striking about these four lines is not so much Eliot's skill at re-framing the traditional emblem of Christ's sacrifice in the first two lines, but the sudden shift to our--that is the persona and the reader's--direct participation in the action, "Beneath the bleeding hands we feel", we are conscious of being acted upon and of experiencing pain.

We are conscious, too, that the hands working above us bleed; that the wounds of the physician blend mysteriously and necessarily with

<sup>16</sup> cf. Tuve, p. 190.

<sup>17</sup> Eliot, "East Coker", p. 201.

his role of healing mankind. That role, "the healer's art", is captured in the wonderfully allusive oxymoron, "sharp compassion", that suggests at once all the elusive elements of meaning to do with pain and healing that weave in and out of Herbert's poems: that purification is a painful process, that Christ's compassion was sharpened by his own suffering and is constantly re-sharpened by his grief, and that compassion is both immediate and eternal. We are always in the presence of divine love as we are acted upon, and we re-experience the spontaneous sharpness of our atonement as we participate in our own recuperation.

I began by talking about "The Sacrifice" because it develops the icon of the wounded physician and through its focus on the reader--in this sense including the poet--effects a growing awareness of individual and collective complicity in Christ's suffering. By the end of the poem, Christ's monologue has implicated each of us in the "crime" of his death while paradoxically affirming our safety in his sickness.

The poems that immediately follow "The Sacrifice" explore different facets of the same theme: how can the poet imitate and express grief as a response to Christ's suffering? The rhetorical question requiring an answer in "The Thanksgiving"<sup>18</sup> is asked early in the poem, "Oh King of wounds! how shall I grieve for thee, / Who in all grief preventest me" (3-4). John Mulder comments interestingly that a structural crux from "The Sacrifice" is extended in "The Thanksgiving":

The Poet re-enacting Christ's sacrifice . . . does not finish Christ's words on the cross. ["My God, my God--/Never was grief like mine" 215-16.] But in "The Thanksgiving", as he looks for a way to repay his "King of grief", he completes Christ's words



and adds a comment: "My God, my God, why dost thou part from me? Was such a grief as cannot be".<sup>19</sup>

Mulder argues that the speaker is "utterly confident of his salvation; he is a fearless young man. Trying to match Christ's sacrifice, he promises a life of good works; he has, moreover, noticeably great expectations of his career in the world".<sup>20</sup>

It seems to me that Mulder's remarks about the character of the speaker are both true and untrue. It is almost a critical commonplace to say that the speaker tries to match Christ's sacrifice. This is surely borne out by the kinds of questions he asks focusing on the events of the passion, and the list of responses he gives which proves to be unsatisfactory. Mulder's characterization of the persona as a "fearless young man" with "great expectations", however, does not account for the tonal shift at the end of the poem; the speaker is finally unable to resolve the problem of how to show adequate "thanksgiving" for the passion.

Stanley Fish describes the speaker's rhetorical progress in the poem as a "strategy . . . to imitate Christ, to match him deed for deed, and so prove victorious in a contest of love".<sup>21</sup> If we look at the movement of the speaker's thoughts from one seemingly insoluble assessment of the dilemma to another as a "strategy", certain ambiguous images become clearer.

<sup>19</sup> John Mulder, "George Herbert's The Temple: Design and Methodology", Seventeenth-Century News, 31 (1973), 37-45; p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Mulder, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> Stanley Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1927), p. 182.

The first eight lines present us in very clear terms with just how frustratingly and overwhelmingly futile a task it is to undertake an imitation of the sacrifice. Any form of physical suffering has already been prevented, "Tis but to tell the tale is told" (8). Although to this point in the poem the speaker has given a fairly straightforward account of the problem, the word "tale" prefigures the rhetorical dodging and covering up that follows. For as soon as the speaker turns away from the events of the passion themselves, and seeks an alternate rhetorical route, military and musical imagery appears in conjunction with the telling of his "tale" of would-be sacrifice--Christ's tale, as he reminded us, has been told.

Words and phrases such as: "victorious", "revenge", "triumphant glorie", "The world and I will quarrel" (37) and "O my deare Saviour, Victorie!" (48), suggest the military strategy of campaigning throughout a lifetime of good works to match Christ's love. When at line eleven, he speaks of singing the saviour's glory, the puns on strokes and stroking-- "Shall thy strokes be my stroking?" (13)--sustain the musical parallel. "Strokes" refer to Christ's suffering, but also represent musical terms, "The twenty-sixth of the Outlandish Proverbs reads 'Great strokes make not sweete musick'. Stroking, then, Herbert implies here, is doubly unsuitable as provoker of pleasure in general and as technique of music in particular".<sup>22</sup>

The speaker discovers that it is equally inappropriate to sing joyfully about the sacrifice; there is, in the re-telling of Christ's tale, no way to "[skip] thy dolefull storie" (11). But singing is also

versing as the speaker calls to our attention with the sly pun, "Copie thy fair, though bloudie hand" (16). "Hand provides a witty yet painful bridge between the event of the Death and the poet's effort to imitate it in verse: in handwriting, Herbert will attempt to describe Christ's handwound."<sup>23</sup>

From line sixteen onward, the rhetorical movement shifts to the speaker himself and he becomes entirely caught up in the telling of his own tale--his catalogue of future good works. Quite predictably, he weaves such an elaborate web of "thanksgiving", we anticipate the deflation of the final line, "Alas, my God, I know not what". We have been led to expect this partly because his first two attempts to confront the awesome magnitude of the sacrifice ended in obvious failure, partly because his tone then shifted a trifle too hastily and glibly onto the more comfortable ground of pious promises, and primarily because the speaker betrays himself at line twenty-nine by returning momentarily to the original subject, "As for thy passion--But of that anon"; Christ's emanation of love continues to overwhelm him even as he speaks of victories. And the source of his "mistake" is soon apparent. The speaker had tried not to confront Christ's handwound--since it was impossible to imitate the passion--but rather to copy his "hand", to discover and match "[his] art of love" (46). He had sought to sing his song (or tell his tale) in imitation of Christ the master poet and source of all "art of love" poetry.

In many of Herbert's poems, the discovery that the persona's vision is flawed or naive or that he fails to perform the task he set

for himself becomes part of the reader's experience of reading the poem. The rhetorical process I've outlined adds up to what one might call the sustained illusion of "The Thanksgiving"; it is the recognition that the persona (and we) are left with after our journey through the poem. Yet behind the "veil of illusion" to use Professor Gombrich's felicitous phrase,<sup>24</sup> lie the ambiguities which, though visible, resist the reader's attempt to place neatly within the rhetorical framework.

These ambiguities concern the mysterious elusive images in the poem related directly to the passion. It is fairly standard for the speaker to ask rhetorically if he should "weep blood", as in "The Sacrifice", where Christ's bloody tears are a traditional emblem. But when he says, "Shall I be scourged, flouted, boxed, sold?" (7), the latter two verbs are jarring. Similarly, "thou hast wept such store/That all thy body was one doore" (6). Hutchinson's comment on the puzzling use of "doore" is illuminating, "The word doore has been found difficult, as from 1678 it was replaced by gore; other emendations--e.g. sore, pore--have been suggested, but there is no need to emend. It is an outlet for the blood : . . ."<sup>25</sup> He then directs our attention to "The Bag" in which the meaning of that ambiguous word is exactly reversed; whereas the door acts as an outlet for blood in this poem, in "The Bag", it becomes the means of entry. The wound in Christ's side is a metaphor for a mail-bag containing messages for God; he reminds the faithful pointing to his side, that, "the doore/Shall still be open".<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> E.H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation (Princeton, 1972), p. 396.

<sup>25</sup> Works, p. 487.

<sup>26</sup> "The Bag", ll. 38-9; p. 152.

Doors, then, lead both ways. Meditation on the wounds of Christ flowing blood should correspondingly induce a sense of gratitude on the part of the penitent sinner, since the same wounds make salvation possible. By the same token, those resistant verbs "boxed" and "sold" merge with the pattern. "Herbert conceived of the crucifixion as a purchase-sale in which Christ, going about God's business, purchased (for man) mankind's salvation at the cost of His own degradation and agony."<sup>27</sup> The purchase bought the gift of life and no imitation (no secondary purchase or wounds) are required or indeed possible as the speaker of "The Thanksgiving" discovers. Gratitude for the gift is best expressed through the acknowledgement that all is God's, "We must confesse that nothing is our own".<sup>28</sup>

This recognition, in abstract terms, reveals the method Christ the Physician has adopted to effect our cure. The rhetorical process of "The Thanksgiving" showed the persona and ourselves that there is no answer to the passion. We must recognize the ways in which we are acted upon even as we contemplate how Christ was acted upon; grief for his wounds is the surgical knife that, while piercing, allows remorse to issue forth. In saying this, I'm anticipating the greater awareness expressed by the personae of the succeeding ten poems. The speaker of "The Thanksgiving" goes no further than to admit he cannot through art, whether military, musical, or poetic, oppose himself to Christ.

27. Bernard Knieger, "The Purchase-Sale: Patterns of Business Imagery in the Poetry of George Herbert", Studies in English Literature, VI (1966), 111-124; p. 111.

28 "The Holdfast", l. 7, p. 143.

Continuing the military imagery,<sup>29</sup> "The Reprisall" amounts to unconditional surrender. Contrition is perfectly balanced with awareness; the speaker of this poem admits the discomfort of self-abnegation, "Couldst thou not griefs sad conquests me allow, / But in all vict'ries overthrow me?" (11-12). Yet he still chooses to submit his will ("by confession") in order to overcome the old Adam in himself. The two lines which perfectly capture the ambiguity implicit in the confession of total self-surrender are, "And yet thy wounds still my attempts defie, / For by thy death I die for thee." (708). There is such an evocative richness to the words, "And yet . . . "; they suggest the poignant immediacy, even permanence, of Christ's suffering which, though moving us profoundly, ultimately defies understanding. Hutchinson reads the second line, "Only in the strength given me by thy death could I die for thee."<sup>30</sup> The arrangement of the prepositions "by" and "for" enhance that meaning: it is by Christ's death that we can die for him; returning to the military metaphor suggests dying in the knowledge we are on his side as Christians. Also, the two prepositions represent appropriate active and passive roles: by his active intercession as Incarnate God and by his passive suffering, he acts and is acted upon, on our behalf. Our passive acceptance and active atonement must be for him, in commemoration of his death.

In the first poems following "The Sacrifice", the speakers attempt to see themselves in relation to Christ's sacrifice. It is not my purpose in the scope of this thesis to discuss at any length the arrangement of

<sup>29</sup> cf. Rickey, p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> Works, p. 488.

poems in The Temple, but a few words concerning sequence are probably necessary since my reading of poems thus far has been based on their sequential order. Many critics have seen the early poems as a deliberate sequence primarily because their themes similarly meditate on the passion and tend to be, "ritual and sacramental".<sup>31</sup> Moreover, "The Altar" launches the image of the hard heart offered penitently that recurs through so many of the poems: "the speaker of the rest of the lyric learns that it is fruitless to try and match or imitate by his own good works the passion of Christ, but that he can only accept the overwhelming gift as the true sacrifice to be offered on the altar of his stony heart".<sup>32</sup> Professor Lewalski thinks this first "theological sequence" concludes with "Easter Wings"<sup>33</sup> whereas Professor Martz, who describes the pattern of the opening poems in much the same terms, extends it to include the two "Holy Baptisme" poems, "Nature" and "Sinne".<sup>34</sup>

My own assessment of the arrangement of poems in The Temple as a whole concurs generally with those of Professors Lewalski and Martz and Professor Fish,<sup>35</sup> insofar as I agree that "Herbert has taken pains to avoid any obvious, easy arrangement: chronological, thematic,

<sup>31</sup> Martz, p. 292.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara Lewalski, "Typology and Poetry: A Consideration of Herbert, Vaughan, and Marvell", Illustrious Evidence: Approaches to English Literature of the Early Seventeenth-Century, ed. Earl Miner (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), 41-93; p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> Lewalski, p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> Martz, p. 292.

<sup>35</sup> Fish, The Living Temple, p. 123.

or otherwise".<sup>36</sup> Rather than a linear sequence, one finds rhythms,<sup>37</sup> repeated themes and images, and certain groupings in which a particular question or problem is addressed from more than one point of view. Such is the case with the first group of poems. "Easter Wings" neatly prefigures "Affliction I" because it ends, "Affliction shall advance the flight in me". But what of the two "Holy Baptisme" poems that immediately follow? Their themes are similarly sacramental and directly concern the passion. "Nature", too, refers plainly to the "sacrifice of the stony heart" that Professor Lewalski outlined as a primary theme. ("O smooth my rugged heart, and there/Engrave . . . " 13-14). And "Sinne I" introduces the "Fine nets and stratagems" of "Afflictions sorted"<sup>38</sup> that will be realized in the next poem.

Professor Martz clarifies the connection between the poems that follow "Easter Wings" and come before "Affliction I", "Baptism . . . makes possible the spiritual conflict with 'Nature'--fallen nature--described in the poem that follows these two poems on Baptism. 'Nature' thus appropriately marks the beginning of those conflicts and questionings which constitute the main body of The Temple."<sup>39</sup>

Since this chapter is more concerned with interlinking images of suffering and healing, than with all the manifested spiritual conflicts and their corresponding patterns of imagery, there will be much that is left conspicuously unsaid even about the first group of poems that dwell

<sup>36</sup> Martz, p. 296.

<sup>37</sup> See Fish, The Living Temple, p. 120.

<sup>38</sup> "Sinne I", ll. 7,6.

<sup>39</sup> Martz, p. 292.



on the passion in some detail. ("Redemption" for example, is discussed in a subsequent chapter.) However, within this first group of poems, my readings follow the parallel and often horizontal/movement of the personae's varied reactions to the sacrifice, and focus on a particular order only when it seems that a clear reply or comparison to the preceding poem is intended.

Returning now to the first cluster of poems subsequent to "The Sacrifice", one can see in the structural pattern of "The Agonie" the speaker's gradual identification with the iconographic images he describes. The central images in "The Agonie"<sup>40</sup> are so intricately visual that they really serve as emblems recalling to mind the emblematic tableaux in "The Sacrifice".<sup>41</sup> What is immediately striking is that the emblems are identical.<sup>42</sup> Sin acts on Christ during the agony in Gethsemane as an instrument of torture, "that presse and vice" and wrings bloody sweat from him. Love is likened to a winepress broaching the blood for holy communion.

But the distinctive change of verb from the second to the third stanza indicates a difference not of perception, but of participation. The second stanza begins, "Who would know Sinne, let him repair/Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see" (7-8); the third stanza begins, "Who knows not Love, let him assay/And taste . . . / . . . then let him say." (13-15). "The involvement in the second emblem is participatory, while

<sup>40</sup> Works, p. 292.

<sup>41</sup> See Helen Vendler's excellent reading of "The Agonie", in The Poetry of George Herbert (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), pp. 72-75.

<sup>42</sup> Vendler, p. 73.

the relation to the first was visual (naturally Herbert does not want his bystander to "know" Sin experientially, as he "knows" Love)".<sup>43</sup>

The speaker has been addressing a vague shapeless second party in very formal rhetorical language when he suddenly shifts to a personal intimate tone and turns the lesson on himself, "Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine" (18). (One can apply Professor Martz's meditational mode in terms of the poem's structure, "to understand, and then to feel and profit from the matter.") A reciprocity, resolving the seemingly polar opposites, sin and love, is effected in that final line balancing what Christ "feels" against what the speaker "feels". The blood of the wounded surgeon mingles with that of the patient, "a double circulatory system is suggested, by which the same 'liquor' that flows through the veins of Jesus flows also through the veins of Herbert".<sup>44</sup>

The lines from "The Sacrifice" are recalled, "For they will pierce my side, I full well know;/That as sinne came so Sacraments might flow" (246-7) especially because "broach" literally means to pierce a cask to let the wine flow out. Also the image of Christ as a winepress is mirrored in the conclusion of "The Bunch of Grapes", "Ev'n God himself being pressed for my sake" (28).<sup>45</sup> Another interesting connection between those two poems may be found in a meditational text of Fray Luis de Granada quoted by Professor Martz (who does not link it to the later poem, but it seemed to me an apt comparison), "Yee that are desirous of

<sup>43</sup> Vendler, p. 74.

<sup>44</sup> Vendler, p. 75.

<sup>45</sup> Works, p. 128.

wyne, to cure your woundes, this is that cluster of grapes, that was brought out of the lande of promise into this vale of teares, which is now crushed, and pressed upon the presse of the Crosse, for the remedie and redresse of our offences".<sup>46</sup>

This passage suggests the themes of both poems. The Old Testament reference to the bunch of grapes brought back from Canaan by the Israelite spies is the subject of the second and third stanzas of "The Bunch of Grapes". The speaker of that poem asks, "But can he want the grape, who hath the wine?" (22); the wine press of the new dispensation has yielded much more than fruit from the vine. Wine is, in Fray Luis de Granada's passage, a "remedie and redresse" which "ye" desire to "cure your woundes": the blood of the physician drunk from the ceremonial communion cup has a medicinal effect upon our wounds.

Now the speaker of "The Agonie" does not talk about suffering himself, but of Christ's suffering; nonetheless the Incarnate God experiences the "presse and vice" of mankind's sin which the speakers of subsequent poems experience literally as vice.<sup>47</sup> Thus the following poem is appropriately entitled, "The Sinner" and its speaker suffers the "agues" of sin. Because of his sin he is wracked with sickness and his "hard heart" can scarcely groan to God, although he is aware that only his penitent groans can restore God's image (One thinks of "Sion" and all of Solomon's temple not so dear to God as "one good grone";<sup>48</sup> and of "The Altar" deliberately recalled by "Remember that thou didst once write in

<sup>46</sup> Martz, p. 85.

<sup>47</sup> Mary Ellen Rickey notes the pun on "vice", p. 73.

<sup>48</sup> Works, p. 106, line 18.

stone", 14). In his suffering he reminds us of the healing wine of the previous poem, "dregs"; "spirit and good extract", are all that remain. And he anticipates the suffering speaker of "Sighs and Groans" who sees the medicinal properties of the wine as it were, through the looking glass:

O do not fill me  
With the turn'd viall of thy bitter wrath!  
For thou hast other vessels full of bloud,  
A part whereof my Saviour empti'd hath,  
Ev'n unto death: since he di'd for my good,  
O do not kill me!

(19-24)<sup>49</sup>

This, then, is the dual function of the wine which acts as "remedie and redresse" to "cure [our] woundes". The suffering inherent in the purgative process forces the penitent to experience the "turn'd viall"; what the speaker of "The Agonie" tastes as "liquor sweet" becomes the "turn'd viall of . . . bitter wrath" (20) in "Sighs and Groans". At the end of the poem, the speaker recognizes--a hard won and painful understanding--that Christ is both "Cordiall and Corrosive" (28), that "caustic remedies"<sup>50</sup> are a necessary precursor to "feeling and profiting from the matter".

Another application of caustic remedies is discussed in the pattern poem "Easter Wings" which traces the persona's afflictions; physical sickness is paralleled to spiritual atonement. Mortification of the flesh and spirit ("sicknesses and shame", 12) reduces the persona literally and metaphorically until he becomes "Most thine" (15). Similarly, the speaker of "Holy Baptisme (2)", wishing to remain child-like in his

<sup>49</sup> Works, p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> Works, p. 505.

obedience, describes his physical growth to adulthood since his baptism as "but a blister;/Childhood is health" (14-15). Whereas in some poems, such as "An Offering" (20-1), wounds are scabbed over and healed, "blister" suggest the excoriating potency of the corrosive cure; that which stings as it purges and makes healthy the soul within. Sir Thomas Browne, presumably drawing on his professional knowledge says, "The greatest Balsames doe lie enveloped in the bodies of the most powerfull Corrosives; . . . poysons containe within themselves their own Antidote".<sup>51</sup> In "Providence", Herbert echoes Sir Thomas' observation, "Since where are poysons, antidotes are most:/The help stands close, and keeps the fear in view" (87-8).<sup>52</sup> So with suffering. Its ultimately restorative role keeps pain in perspective.

Remedies for affliction, both cordial and corrosive, are recurrent themes in the later poems of "The Church". Whereas the initial poems following "The Sacrifice" focus almost entirely on the personae's responses to the Crucifixion, in later poems, the emblem of the wounded physician is assimilated more completely into the process of self-examination and atonement. Christ as physician becomes more closely associated with his purgative remedies; several poems identify signs of spiritual sickness with physical manifestations of tears, groans, purges of one kind or another that are gradually recognized by the speakers to be aspects of Christ's benevolent care. In "Love Unknown", the narrator describes his hard heart as blistered, "I found a callous matter/

<sup>51</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, The Prose of Sir Thomas Browne, ed. Norman Endicott (Garden City, N.Y., 1967), p. 82. All subsequent references to Browne's prose are to this edition.

<sup>52</sup> Works, p. 119.

Began to spread and to expatiate there:/But with a richer drug than  
scalding water/I bath'd it often, ev'n with holy blood" (38-41).<sup>53</sup> The  
holy blood softens his calloused heart as he bathes it, and the wine works  
"inwardly, and most divine/To supple hardenesses" (44-5).

The remedy may sting while penetrating the wound as in "Confession"  
where the afflictions that accompany atonement "are too subtile for the  
subt'illest hearts;/And fall, like rheumes, upon the tendrest parts"  
(11-12).<sup>54</sup> These rheumes of affliction which settle on the stony heart  
may be "expelled" when spiritual health is restored: "I have physick to  
expell thee./And the receipt shall be/My saviour's blood . . . /I do but  
taste it, straight it cleanseth me" (12-15).<sup>55</sup> Or physical and spiritual  
purges may blend together; the observance of Lent is welcomed as "the  
cleannesse of sweet abstinence/ . . . Whereas in fulnesse there are  
sluttish fumes,/Sowre exhalations, and dishonest rheumes" (19;22-3).<sup>56</sup>

Water and wine are the confluent streams flowing from the pierced  
side that act in turn as purges, restoratives, corrosives, and cordials.  
Thus in "Holy Baptisme (1)"; the speaker apostrophizes the "blessed  
streams! either ye do prevent/And stop our sinnes from growing thick  
and wide,/Or else give tears to drown them, as they grow" (7-9).<sup>57</sup>

Either the "streams" become--as in the sacrament of baptism, "an outward

53 Works, p. 130.

54 Works, p. 126.

55 Works, p. 106, "Conscience".

56 Works, p. 86, "Lent".

57 Works, p. 44.

and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace"<sup>58</sup>--or they become, as an emblem of Christ's suffering, the instrument which induces our own contrite tears. (Like the "holy bloud" in "Love Unknown" which bathes the heart outwardly and cleanses inwardly when ingested as wine.) Tears and water purify from without and from within; they can dam up sins or drown them.

There are many examples of tears and water related to the agony of inner torment (i.e. being unable to weep and dispel grief) or the sweet release of/remorse. In "Ephes. 4:30", the speaker reproaches himself for lack of tears, "Then weep mine eyes . . . /And weeping live" (7;9). He craves God's pardon for seeming to manifest insufficient grief by citing Christ's sacrifice as the boon which "Makes good/My want of tears with a store of blood" (35-6).<sup>59</sup> Although Christ's gift balances the debt in this poem, sometimes afflictions are not so easily resolved. The speaker of "Grief" calls upon "all the watry things,/That nature hath produc'd" (3-4) to flood his veins; his grief is so great that it cannot be expressed adequately by his own "two little spouts" (9). "My weary weeping eyes, too drie for me,/Unless they get new conduits, new supplies" (6-7).<sup>60</sup> But there is no healing deluge forthcoming in "Grief".

As in many smaller thematic units in The Temple, the answer or resolution may be provided a few poems later. The poem that follows "Grief", "The Crosse", ends with mortification of the body and spirit

58 The Book of Common Prayer - Canada (Toronto, 1959), p. 550.

59 Works, p. 136.

60 Works, p. 164.

("And lay my threatnings bleeding on the ground." 12), and a reaffirmation of obedience, "my words, Thy will be done" (36).<sup>61</sup> Grief and mortification make possible the "sweet and clean" returns of spiritual health. The poet alludes to cleansing streams when he says, in the next poem "The Flower", "Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart/Could have recover'd greenesse?" (8-9);<sup>62</sup> he experiences the life-giving rain of God's forgiveness.

In two other poems, "The Water-course" and "Marië Magdalene", Herbert gives us the remedy for affliction and projects afflictions onto a third person who successfully employs the same remedy. The persona of "The Water-course" recommends "turn[ing] the pipe and waters course/To serve thy sinnes" (6-7).<sup>63</sup> (This is an interesting application of the dam-deluge imagery of "Holy Baptisme (1)". Hence, before the purgative flood can issue forth, there must be a turning of a river's natural flow--fallen nature as in the first stanza, "the condition of this world is frail".) There is the possibility of a pun on "sov'raigne tears" which sounds rather like sovereign's tears; but the matter-of-fact tone suggests someone saying, "Try this sovereign remedy for your affliction". Mary Ellen Rickey thinks the endings of the two stanzas "are probably intended to look like the subject".<sup>64</sup> (She is no doubt reminded of "Anagram of the Virgin Marie" in which "army" and "Mary" are parenthetically inserted into the poem.) This is a fruitful suggestion with respect to the poem's

61 Works, p. 165.

62 Works, p. 166.

63 Works, p. 170.

64 Rickey, p. 123.



theme: the speaker's remedy can metaphorically turn the course of fallen man's life away from strife and damnation, towards salvation.

Correspondingly, one can describe the speaker's rhetorical tone as detached, but not unfriendly. Much the same sort of tone is heard in poems where the personae don't actually appear themselves, but recount stories or moral lessons for the readers' benefit. Along these same lines, Herbert remarks in A Priest to the Temple that telling stories in sermons is a good idea, because people, especially country people, remember them better than "exhortations".<sup>65</sup> He also says that the "things of ordinary use are not only to serve in the way of drudgery, but to be washed, and cleansed, and serve for lights even of Heavenly Truths".<sup>66</sup> Since "The Water-course" is presumably a later poem--it is not in the Williams manuscript--one might imagine Herbert's having had some experience with country people, and knowing about spring floods and changing the course of streams.

No doubt I seem to belabour the point, particularly given that my nominal subject is purgative tears and/or water. However, I am struck by Helen Vendler's reading of this poem, "In this same harsh vein [she had been speaking of "Self-condemnation"]", Herbert offers no comfort to the troubled soul that weeps. Rather than wail, he says coldly in 'The Water-course' . . . These are hard sayings and no gentle recourse is offered . . . "<sup>67</sup> It seems to me that one can regard the speaker's tone as I said earlier, as detached or disinterested, but surely not as

<sup>65</sup> Works, p. 233.

<sup>66</sup> Works, p. 257.

<sup>67</sup> Vendler, pp. 187-8.

cold. Moreover, one can't see him opposing man's "true remorse" to "as [God] sees fit" or thereby saying penitence is futile because God judges as he sees it. The essence of the rhetorical address is in effect: true remorse is a sovereign cure for your affliction because Christ made salvation possible; it is a "course" you may "turn" to because God gives salvation or damnation, life or death, as he sees fit.

The second poem, "Marie Magdalene", is a scriptural story which also like "The Water-course", illustrates the use of tears as a "sov'raigne" remedy. There are two statements made relative to tears that apparently contradict each other. In the second stanza, the speaker asks why Mary didn't save her tears for her own manifold faults. Suddenly, he is no longer simply recounting a story, he changes the third person "she" to the plural first person "we" and extends the metaphor to include us all, "Though we could dive/In tears like seas, our sinnes are pil'd/Deeper then they, in words, and works, and thoughts" (10-12).<sup>68</sup> The speaker seems to be saying, here, that no amount of crying and penitence can mend our fallen state. Yet he says in the third stanza, "So to bring in wherewith to wash:/And yet in washing one, she washed both" (17-18). The answer to the apparent conflict lies in the opening lines of stanza three. Why did she have the temerity to wash Christ "who could not be defil'd" (8), when she herself was so "stain'd"? Because "she knew who did vouch safe and deigne/To bear her filth" (13-14). Christ "deigned" to carry the burden of her uncleanness; she washed the feet of the Incarnate God and her tears cleansed her penitent heart. She "washes both" because she has first acknowledged him in her heart and repented her

fault—a necessary pre-condition to salvation as Christ reminds the speaker of "Love (3)", "know you not . . . who bore the blame?"<sup>69</sup> For it is not, as the speaker affirmed in stanza two, our tears or any amount of washing that can mend our fallen state. Christ has already "climb[ed] the tree"<sup>70</sup> and paid the price to eradicate the old Adam. Our recognition of his role, the essence of our faith, must precede penitence.

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned ways in which Herbert seems to group certain poems, related to the interconnecting themes of affliction and atonement, around parallel themes, balanced antitheses, or facets of the same argument filtered through varied points of view. With the exception of more clearly related sequences like the poems immediately following "The Sacrifice", or the interlinking meditations on "Church-floore, lock and key, monuments and musick", it is always difficult to be certain that a clearly delineated sequence exists even in poems that seem to be about the same things.

An example of this difficulty is the order of the five "Affliction" poems. They seem to be about the same thing because they all have the same title. Lending credence to this notion is the fact that some poems like "Love (1) and (2)" or "The Temper (1) and (2)", are juxtaposed in the text and possess thematic cohesiveness that indicates more than mere titular resemblance.

By contrast, the "Affliction" poems all occur in the early part of "The Church", but are arranged in a puzzling manner. "Afflictions" (1), (4) and (5) all appear in the Williams manuscript as well as the

<sup>69</sup> Works, 1. 15, p. 189.

<sup>70</sup> Works, "The Sacrifice", 1. 202, p. 33.

Bodleian, a sign that they are early poems. "Afflictions (2) and (3)", however, appear in the Bodleian manuscript only and to complicate matters further, "Affliction (4)" is one of eight poems in the Williams manuscript retitled at Little Gidding, from its original designation, "Tentation". Mary Ellen Rickey remarks that of the eight poems that were retitled "Affliction (4)" is the only one that doesn't reveal "additional meaning"<sup>71</sup> as a direct result of the altered title.

How, then, are they related? Professor Summers remarks somewhat cryptically that the five poems "represent a developing spiritual maturity in the attitudes which they express".<sup>72</sup> This argument is rather hard to believe considering that "Affliction (2), (3)" were written later than "Affliction (4) and (5)". Mary Ellen Rickey, in attempting to account for the changed title, offers a more plausible explanation of their relationship:

We cannot, of course, assign the change to a definite cause. Perhaps Herbert intended it to associate the mode of temptation treated here, that of one's own rebellious thoughts, with those of the other affliction poems--illness in "Affliction (1)", awareness of one's own unworthiness in "Affliction (2)", grief which shows man his affinity to Christ in "Affliction (3)", and the vicissitudes of all men after Adam which, properly undergone, make him stronger than the first man in "Affliction (5)"--and so to make the group a five-part complement commenting on human calamity. One simply cannot be sure.<sup>73</sup>

Exactly; one cannot be sure. Nonetheless it seems to me more helpful to say about such a puzzling group of poems, that they are related facets or "a five-part complement" of the same "problem"--"human calamity", then to say they represent developing spiritual maturity. In fact, I

<sup>71</sup> Rickey, p. 117.

<sup>72</sup> Joseph Summers, George Herbert: His Religion and Art (London, 1954), p. 87.

<sup>73</sup> Rickey, p. 117.

will argue that "Affliction (1) and (2)" reveal a maturer handling of a common Herbertian theme than their predecessors.<sup>74</sup>

"Affliction (1)" seems unusually autobiographical: references to an academic "gown" (40), "Academick praise" (45), and the scholarly life recall Herbert's own life at Cambridge. One could extrapolate and argue as John Mulder does, that the speaker has "great expectations of his career in the world". These expectations come to grief--witness "Affliction (1)".<sup>75</sup> It is always dangerous with a poet as enigmatic and elliptical as Herbert to play Izaak Walton and infer too much with respect to the poet's personal life. Mulder seems far more sensible when he says that sequence in The Temple "pretends to be a record of personal experience, while the author both hides and reveals himself under the cover of his story".<sup>76</sup> That insightful comment could be applied to the theme of "Affliction (1)".

The speaker of "Sinne (1)" spoke of "Afflictions sorted anguish of all sizes, / Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in" (6-7).<sup>77</sup> He leads us into a "fine net"--the following poem, much the way the narrator or chorus of an Elizabethan play might say, "Here you will see Afflictions sorted, etc.", or "Fine nets and stratagems that tangle up the unwary speaker in his own arguments". "Sinne (1)" also describes

<sup>74</sup> see Helen Vendler who does not compare all five poems, but does argue that "Affliction (2), (3)" show greater thematic sophistication. pp. 238-241.

<sup>75</sup> Mulder, p. 37.

<sup>76</sup> Mulder, p. 37.

<sup>77</sup> Works, p. 45.

a variety of spiritual "fences" (13) a Christian has at his disposal, to protect him yet "One cunning bosom-sinne", (14) can blow them all away.

No sooner is this observation made than the chorus, to continue my dramatic metaphor, leaves the stage and a personal narrative recounting "One cunning bosom-sinne" begins. The narrative opening of "Affliction (1)", "When first . . . ." signals to the reader that a story is underway. A record of past joys and innocent happiness is followed by--still in the past tense--the onset of sicknesses. These physical symptoms of illness follow much the same pattern as those of other later poems I have discussed already: flesh complains to the spirit, the speaker groans to God, is consumed by agues and overwhelmed by grief. Soon the speaker tells us, he has become quite thin (35) (as in "Easter Wings") and lacks "a fence", he is "blown through with ev'ry storm and winde" (36).

This is precisely the imagery of "Sinne (1)": he is consumed by one "cunning bosom-sinne" and no longer feels God's protective "fence". So, in spiritual terms, the speaker relates his journey and gradual decline from childish innocence or unawareness of his fallen state, into the pitfalls of adult life: sinful rebellious thoughts disguised as concrete problems. Throughout most of the poem the speaker is shown to believe he has a legitimate complaint. He's constantly ill and frustrated by lack of fruitful employment. John Mulder says, "In 'Affliction (1)' the Poet insults God with an antiphrasis or 'broad flout'; he changes 'the service brave' (of line two) into contemptible drudgery as he tests his strength".<sup>78</sup> "Well, I will change the service, and go seek/Some other master out" (63-4). The speaker has woven himself

into the sense of his complaints to such an extent that he is finally caught in his own "fine net". He has mentally "sorted" his afflictions --as in "Sinne (1)"--until he can see nothing but his own misery. He grows increasingly peevish; he finishes his tale of past woes and shifts to the present tense, but his tone bears the full weight of his accumulated afflictions, "Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me/None of my books will show" (55-6).

As readers, we have not been participants in the action; rather we've been listening to a parable and have been directed throughout to observe how the disaffected rebellious speaker creates his own dissatisfaction and affliction. Instead of turning to God or recognizing how Christ the Physician works on him to confess his unworthiness, he complains his earthly status and blames God for it. Now in the last line, "Let me not love thee, if I love thee not", there is a kind of recognition, but it is incomplete. F.E. Hutchinson paraphrases the line to read, "if he cannot hold on to his love of God even when he feels forsaken or unrewarded, he had better not hope to love at all".<sup>79</sup> The speaker grasps the point that God is the only way out of affliction; however he has not seen God's purpose at work.

In "Affliction (4)"<sup>80</sup> the speaker sees rebellious thoughts for what they are, whereas the previous speaker merely saw the result--that he was unhappy. The speaker of "Affliction (1)" felt as useless as a "blunted knife"; in the fourth poem, "My thoughts are all a case of knives,/Wounding my heart/With scatter'd smart" (6-8). He urges God to

<sup>79</sup> Works, p. 492.

<sup>80</sup> Works, p. 89.

"scatter" his rebellious thoughts, "As the sunne scatters by his light/  
All the rebellions of the night" (23-4); to cancel out the "scatter'd  
smart" (9) he suffers in his spiritual sickness. Unlike the previous  
speaker, he has re-affirmed his trust in God's divine healing powers by  
promising to "Enter [his] pay" (26): to enter the "service brave".  
This service, this daily labouring God's praise will effect his relief,  
"With care and courage building me" (29).

While the first and fourth poems anatomize sections of what  
Professor Martz would call "the body of conflicts", the fifth "Affliction"  
poem employs a very different impersonal tone. If we think again of the  
useful meditational model, "to understand, to feel and profit from the  
matter", then the first poem gropes toward the beginning of an understanding;  
the fourth poem expresses understanding and feeling, and the fifth poem  
attempts to profit from the lessons that have been internalized and  
experienced. Thus it opens, "My God, I read this day", using the poet's  
immediate conversational tone. There is no immediate suffering here; the  
subjective "At first thou gav'st me milk and sweetnesses" (19) of  
"Affliction (1)" has become, "At first we liv'd in pleasure" (7).<sup>81</sup>  
Personal suffering has given way to an understanding that God works on  
all fallen mankind to effect their cure, "Now thou wouldst taste our  
miserie" (12). There is a simple statement of fact in this poem that  
indicates the speaker is attempting to "profit" from his recent suffering.  
As the speaker of "Sighs and Groans" had recognized, God is cordial and  
corrosive, "There is but joy and grief" (13). We experience both  
emotions in turn, "We are the trees, whom shaking fastens more" (20).



Helen Vendler says the second and third "Affliction" poems are so similar that they seem like, "one poem twice reworked".<sup>82</sup> Returning to the personal voice and anguish of "Affliction (4)", the speaker of "Affliction (2)"<sup>83</sup> urges Christ to assuage his grief even as he recognizes that his Lord's death, "Is more than all my deaths can be" (3). It would seem he has returned to the earlier problems of how to grieve for Christ "who in all grief preventest". Yet there is a difference. In the first affliction poem he suffered and complained, in the fourth he recognized his fault and craved relief, in the fifth he acknowledged affliction to be the human condition. This speaker of the second poem not only craves relief and pledges his service, he assimilates Christ's suffering to his own,<sup>84</sup> "Thou art my grief alone" (11). Not only does Christ represent all affliction which the penitent must acknowledge, his grief works within us, is part of us. "Thou Lord conceal it not: and as thou art/ All my delight, so all my smart" (12-3).

"Affliction (3)" refines this perception. The speaker cries, "O God!"<sup>85</sup> from the heart and instantly concludes, "By that I knew that thou wast in the grief,/To guide and govern it to my relief" (2-3). This is more than an admission that suffering is part of the divine plan. We see the "phenomenon of Christ as permanent sufferer"<sup>86</sup> at work in the third stanza. "Thy life on earth was grief and thou art still/Constant

<sup>82</sup> Vendler, p. 239.

<sup>83</sup> Works, p. 62.

<sup>84</sup> See Vendler, p. 239.

<sup>85</sup> Works, p. 73

<sup>86</sup> Vendler, p. 238.

unto it" (13-14). ("Thou art still" in the sense of now and always re-experiencing grief as a result of human sin.) The blood of the wounded surgeon mingles with that of the patient; as the patient feels the sharpened knife, he absorbs and becomes part of the greater suffering of the surgeon. And it must be a permanent re-sharpening and re-experiencing for both surgeon and patient. As the speaker of "Giddiness" recognizes:

Lord, mend or rather make us: one creation  
Will not suffice our turn:  
Except that thou make us daily, we shall spurn  
Our own Salvation.

(25-29)

Having initially denied the notion of a developing spiritual maturity, I may seem now to be caught up in the "fine net" of my own argument by thus urging a new sequence. Let me hasten to point out, however, that I repudiated numerical development; and should the reader think my arrangement of the poems as arbitrary and unworkable as the very interpretations I cautioned against imposing wholesale on any sequence in The Temple, I would be the first to agree--making only this small amendment.

I grouped the poems as I did to illustrate a kind of rhythm that rises and falls throughout The Temple, and may be seen or felt in many groups of poems. Problems are posed, grappled with, speakers humble themselves, recognize God's intervention, feel and internalize Christ's suffering. I do not mean to suggest at all that "Affliction (3)" solves the problem of affliction or that the speaker of that poem learns in any permanent lasting sense "to feel and profit from the matter". There are

innumerable accounts of conflicts with God, joy, despair, and efforts after understanding to come. The "Affliction" poems occur fairly early in the text. Moreover, if one were to argue that it makes better sense, that it clarifies the record of conflict, to place, say, the fifth before the fourth poem, or not to group them together at all, I am sure sound evidence could be found to support either position.

My point quite simply, is that the record of conflict, the path of suffering, the yearning for understanding and relief, can really be traced or assembled in whatever manner best suits the reader's understanding. If that sounds facile, consider how many poems sound just like the "Affliction" poems, without the academic details of "Affliction (1)". This is not to say that the same conflicts, as they are re-experienced, do not become more finely honed--I was not alluding to the poet's mastery of his craft. Rather, as long as we live in this world, Herbert says, "Affliction is ours". "There is but joy and grief"; and they intermingle, are juxtaposed, weave in and out of "understanding, feeling, and attempting to profit from the matter". And from a rhetorical perspective:

As readers and critics we are similarly deprived of pattern and similarly tempted by its intermittent availability, as we too enjoy apparent (interpretative) successes and achieve supposedly full understandings, only to find again and again that the successes are temporary and the understandings partial. If the never-ending process of self-examination is what these poems record, it is also what they provoke.<sup>88</sup>

One final note about physicians. In A Priest To The Temple, Herbert the priest assumes the role of physician to his parishioners on three levels. First, he tells us the country parson is often called upon

to cure his flock. "Now as the Parson is in Law, so is he in sicknesse also: if there be any of his flock sick, he is their Physician".<sup>89</sup> He goes on to say that country parsons should learn the practical uses of herbs for curing illness since, "our Saviour made plants and seeds to teach the people: for he was the true householder".<sup>90</sup> Thus he can imitate the Lord in concrete ways by making the garden an herbal shop, yet the parson must do more than this, "In curing of any, the Parson and his Family use to premise prayers, for this is to cure like a Parson, and this raiseth the action from the Shop to the Church".<sup>91</sup> The priest combines pragmatism and piety to a nicety. Perhaps Herbert was thinking of one of the Outlandish Proverbs he recorded, "God heales, and the Physitian hath the thanks".<sup>92</sup>

The Parson is responsible for more than physical afflictions. He also comforts the sick and bereaved by persuading them that "Christ himself, perfecting our Redemption no other way, then by sorrow; from the Benefit of affliction, which softens, and works the stubborn heart of man".<sup>93</sup> Moreover, he urges the afflicted to take communion because it is a, "Soveraigne Medicine . . . to all sin-sick souls".<sup>94</sup> It would seem the cordial and corrosive aspects of the divine cure were as significantly applied by Herbert in his chosen vocation as they are by

<sup>89</sup> Works, p. 260.

<sup>90</sup> Works, p. 261.

<sup>91</sup> Works, p. 262.

<sup>92</sup> Works, p. 326, line 169.

<sup>93</sup> Works, p. 249.

<sup>94</sup> Works, p. 250.

Herbert the Poet in his poems. It is interesting to note as an aside that Anglican liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer has not changed much since Herbert's time, with respect to the imagery employed by the priest in his role as physician. A modern prayer from "The Ministry To The Sick" begins, "O Lord Jesu Christ, thou great Physician: Look with thy gracious favour upon this thy servant; give wisdom and discretion to those who minister to him in his sickness; bless all the means used for his recovery".<sup>95</sup> The priest imitates Christ by becoming "physician in little" evoking the aid of the divine physician.

Thirdly, the parson imitates Christ the Physician in his role as priest administering the sacraments. Herbert says as the parson prays, he must appear "truly touched and amazed with the Majesty of God, before whom he then presents himself; yet not as himself alone, but as presenting with himself the whole Congregation, whose sins he then beares, and brings with his own to the heavenly altar to be bathed, and washed in the sacred Laver of Christ's blood".<sup>96</sup>

The priest seems to re-enact the passion by bearing the sins of the congregation in order to most effectively demonstrate to his flock the mystery of redemption. For the immediacy of the experience--the cleansing--is as essential to the spiritual health of Herbert's parishioners as it is to the speakers of Herbert's poems who assimilate Christ's permanent suffering to their own affliction: grief re-sharpened, re-experienced. The parson also confesses his sins, though, as the

<sup>95</sup> Works, p. 250

<sup>96</sup> The Book of Common Prayer, p. 578.

speaker of "The Church-Porch" informs us concerning priests in general, "his condition, / Though it be ill, makes him no ill Physician" (443-4).<sup>97</sup>

Finally I return to the lines from "An Offering" which were quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The speaker tells us to seek out "this All-heal" (21) and "use it to thy good" (22); to understand, to feel and profit from the matter. "Then bring thy gift" (23), then sing hymns of thanksgiving to God for allowing us to rejoice in our afflictions and feel their beneficial cure. The poems are the journal of the sharpened experience and the offering up of thanks that the journey they trace is meaningful, that it is worth making. And the journey takes place in that "wilde of Passion, which / Some call the wold; / A wasted place, but sometimes rich"<sup>98</sup> (13-15). Rich though afflicted; because afflicted rich. As Sir Thomas Browne says, "Now for my life, it is a miracle of thirty years, which to relate, were not an History, but a peece of Poetry, and would sound to common eares like a fable; for the world, I count it not an Inne, but an Hospitall, and a place, not to live, but to die in".<sup>99</sup> Leaving the last words as I did the first to Mr. Eliot,

The whole earth is our hospital  
Endowed by the ruined millionaire,  
Wherein, if we do well, we shall  
Die of the absolute paternal care  
That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Works, p. 24.

<sup>98</sup> Works, "The Pilgrimage", p. 142.

<sup>99</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, p. 83.

<sup>100</sup> Eliot, p. 202.

There is it seems to us,  
At best, only a limited value  
In the knowledge derived from experience.  
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
For the pattern is new in every moment  
And every moment is a new and shocking  
Valuation of all we have been. . . .

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

(T.S. Eliot, "East Coker", p. 199.)

II. "The Wisdom of Humility": Methods  
of Understanding in The Temple

If we could see below  
The sphere of vertue, and each shining grace  
As plainly as that above doth show;  
This were the better skie, the brighter place.<sup>1</sup>

The first stanza of "The Foil" leads us to expect that its meaning is quite straightforward. It appears the speaker is saying something like, "If we were only able to perceive virtue as clearly as we can see the stars, we'd be better off." In the second stanza, the speaker explicates the reason for the poem's title:

God hath made starres the foil  
To set off vertues; griefs to set off sinning:  
Yet in this wretched world we toll  
As if grief were not foul, nor vertue winning.

(5-8)

The most obvious definition of "foil" in this context is "a thin sheet of metal commonly set under jewels to enhance their brilliance;"<sup>2</sup> the stars lend lustre to virtue and grief is occasioned by sin. Yet, the speaker continues, even though we should be able to distinguish sin from virtue plainly, we go about our daily lives just as if we were unaware of the difference between them.

This is the poem's paraphrased surface, or to use Professor Gombrich's term again, its illusion. However, one finds immediately beneath the surface that there are ambiguities implicit in words like:

<sup>1</sup> Works, "The Foil", lines 1-4, p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> Rickey, p. 65.



foil, toil, grief, sin, virtue. John Mulder<sup>3</sup> and Mary Ellen Rickey,<sup>4</sup> for example, discuss the nature of those ambiguities from very different perspectives. The latter argues that a second complementary theme develops through an alternate meaning of "foil". Since foil can also refer to a weapon and toil "meant in Herbert's day to fight as well as to labor",<sup>5</sup> a kind of ongoing warfare between sin and virtue is suggested, with virtue the eventual winner (line 8) and sin "foul--both loathsome and a breaker of the rules of the contest."<sup>6</sup> The second duelling metaphor is juxtaposed to the first, that of jewel setting, thereby enhancing the theme, "man's perverse winking at the obvious nature of the antagonists prevents his understanding of this outcome",<sup>7</sup> that is the outcome of "vertue winning".

John Mulder, on the other hand, reads "foil" to mean a frustrating obstacle, "Stars are ambiguous: they are images of order and beauty but they constitute a "foil" or baffling check . . . Grief is, like the stars, ambiguous. It may be a sign of salvation . . . or it may be a sign of God's displeasure and so raise the spectre of damnation."<sup>8</sup>

Mulder notes the unexpected substitution in the last line of "grief" for "sin"; ("As if grief were not foul, nor vertue winning."<sup>9</sup>)

3 Mulder, p. 42

4 Rickey, p. 65.

5 Rickey, p. 65.

6 Rickey, p. 65.

7 Rickey, p. 65.

8 Mulder, p. 42.

9 Mulder, p. 42.

and ~~in~~fers a Calvinistic connotation, "We toil on the assumption that grief is not foul--that it is proof of our acceptance and salvation--but we have no certain evidence of the other hope: that virtue shall win."<sup>10</sup>

I have described these two readings in some detail because indirectly, they both point to an ambiguity concerning the limitations of human understanding, a thematic undertone of many lyrics in "The Church", which is sometimes posed as a question, other times told allegorically as a tale, and in still other instances, such as this one, framed as a statement. It is simple enough to say that in terms of the Christian doctrine, man is fallen, his reason impaired and his only recourse to salvation is to acknowledge that all truth and blessings are derived from God, and that all faith and trust must be placed in God. But a Christian must also come to understand these tenets and moreover, consciously to assess and re-assess his own role in the reciprocity between God and man that renders salvation possible.

In the previous chapter, I frequently cited Professor Martz's meditational model, "to analyze, to understand, and then to feel and profit from the matter".<sup>11</sup> Professor Lewalski, in speaking of a strictly Protestant response to the Pauline process of justification, points out that in "The Church", a major motif is "the struggle to understand, accept and respond to justification through Christ's

<sup>10</sup> Mulder, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Martz, p. 92.

sacrifice".<sup>12</sup> Both these useful models stress the significance of "understanding".

It seems to me there is a dialectical tension present in many of Herbert's poems that concerns the ambiguities of Christian understanding.

On the one hand are the required rigors of self-questioning; the individual speaker constantly seeks to re-define and reassess his role in relation to unfathomable divine truths and mysteries. But counterpointed to this analytical frame of mind, is an overwhelming and often disconcerting awareness on the part of the speaker that not only can he not comprehend divine truth or purpose, he cannot know whether or not he is saved. He can never be certain if his affirmations of faith and virtuous actions are pleasing to God. Moreover, as a result of his fallen state, his ratiocinative powers are flawed. Frequently, Herbert's poems such as "Divinitie" or "The Agonie" rebuke man's attempts to reduce God's mysteries to the level of human understanding. And just as frequently, as in "Dialogue" or "Miserie", the persona himself is revealed to be guilty of excessive rationalizing in his attempts to accommodate the ineffable to the spoken word.

This dialectical tension takes many shapes. There are times when it even seems temporarily resolved and the questioning process leads to what Professors Martz and Lewalski call "a plateau of assurance". (I am thinking especially of poems like "Providence", "Faith", "Peace", "Prayer (1)", "Love (1)", "Love (11)".) On other occasions Herbert employs

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Lewalski, Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric (Princeton, 1979), p. 25. It is not my purpose here to discuss the differences between her assessment that the influences brought to bear on Herbert's poetry were Calvinistic and Professor Martz's argument that Herbert derived much from Salesian and Ignatian models of meditation. On the question of meditation and structural unity, see my Introduction.

the fiction of a naive persona whose allegorical journey ends with an unexpected tone of immediacy and intimacy surprising to the reader despite the familiarity of imagery and theme. (Examples of this technique include: "Redemption", "Dialogue", "Love Unknown", "Pilgrimage", "Time", "Love-joy", "Jesu".)

There are other poems which seem "discursive or speculative"<sup>13</sup> and seek to define some aspect of man's relationship to God, or reflect on particular forms of human ingratitude, or comment on the redemptive process in general philosophical terms rather than through the vehicle of an intimate personal voice. (Poems that are thematically very different from each other yet display this detachment are: "Man", "Mans medley", "Avarice", "Vanity (1)", "The Water-source", "The World", "Dotage".)

Another method of inquiry takes the form of a question or problem usually posed early in the poem that requires a resolution. The resolution may be turned on the speaker at his own expense or may emerge from a sudden twist in the argument revealing a new and startling perspective on an old familiar crux. (Such poems include: "Justice (1)", "Justice (2)", "The Rose", "The Answer", "Self-condemnation", "The Pulley", "The Size", "Divinitie", "Church-monuments", "The Glance", "Giddinesse".)

But the elusive ambiguities themselves, the spiritual essences that consistently resist analysis and rational assimilation are not--at least in this world Herbert suggests--resolvable. "Dialectic, as Herbert's poetry shows, comments finally neither upon the realms of history and of the divine, nor upon the ineluctable structures of human

13 Vendler, p. 181.

thought, but upon the confrontation between the two."<sup>14</sup> It is the "confrontation" between what is known and unknown within the self, of the world, and about "the ineffability of the divine salvific economy"<sup>15</sup> in Herbert's poems that will be explored in this chapter.

If one re-examines "The Foil" from the perspective that, in conjunction with the previously mentioned themes, Herbert is also speaking of the ambiguity of knowing, a different pattern emerges. The structure of the first stanza identifies the limitations circumscribing human understanding, "If we could see below/The sphere of vertue," (1-2) and the implication is, of course, that we can't. In fact the word "plainly" encapsulates an essential paradox of Christian understanding. It is revealed through the scriptures that those of us who are saved will, in the next world, be able to see "vertue and each shining grace" as "plainly" as we all now see the stars. For the duration of this life, however, only the word one reads on the biblical page is comprehensible; its manifestation and fulfillment are blocked or "foiled". Thus "plainly" ("As plainly as that above doth show", 3) is part of the obvious simile that compares moral vision to the faculty of sight and simultaneously represents the only way we can express that which remains beyond our capacity to fathom, "it is the fit attendant of earnestness, reasonableness and integrity of statement."<sup>16</sup> Even if we cannot "see" truth plainly, we can endeavour to find a means of expressing the essential plain truth revealed in the scriptures.

<sup>14</sup> McCanles, p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> McCanles, p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> Rickey, p. 174.

But the struggle to express truth plainly, or indeed to live as though we could see virtue plainly, provides no sense of assurance, as John Mulder's reading of the poem stresses. Even though we are capable of knowing that grief and by extension, repentance, inevitably follow from sin; we are incapable of perceiving how to "toil" effectively to make virtue "win" over grief and sin. Sir Thomas Browne expresses this paradox of fallen understanding admirably when he says, "we naturally know what is good, but naturally pursue what is evil: the Rhetoricke wherewith I perswade another cannot perswade my selfe".<sup>17</sup> The speaker is implying the same message that Sir Thomas states so clearly: even though he can reveal our shortcomings to us, he is no more intrinsically capable of benefitting from his powers of reasoning than we are from ours.

I hasten to point out that this elusive, ambiguous quality regarding the limitations of human understanding, does not in any way contradict the levels of illusion and ambiguity identified in the two readings previously quoted. "Toil" is a jewel setting, a sword and "baffling check", just as "grief" is occasioned by sin or can stand for sin, and "toil" is both labour and a duel. Indeed, we are meant I think, to notice the conspicuous absence of faith--rendered conspicuous by the emphasis on work--and to think of a struggle between virtue and sin. Both these illustrations indicate uncertainty and serve to enhance the ambiguous and tenuous nature of our capacity to reason. We cannot know the outcome of our lives, of whether or not we are saved, of our daily toil between grief and virtue, any more than we can profit from reasoning

<sup>17</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, p. 63.

to that extent. Like light refracted through a kaleidoscope, different yet related patterns in Herbert's poems take shape, offering up the possibility of multiple meanings.

Earlier I mentioned that some of Herbert's poems are allegorical tales that employ the fiction of a naive persona. I intend now to examine those poems one by one as a group, not because of their themes, are related (although they bear some similarities to each other) but because they all follow the same pattern of developing understanding aimed at both the speaker and the reader. Now the speaker and reader do not understand the same things at the same time; the speaker is naive and relates either a story or a set of images that we recognize the significance of long before the end of the poem. Yet both speaker and reader perceive the message of truth of the tale in an unexpected way by the conclusion of the poem.

The first poem of "The Church" which follows this pattern is "Redemption".<sup>18</sup> Its fiction is presented in imagistic terms as the quest of a tenant to re-negotiate his lease with his landlord. The allegory is of course Christ's redemption of man and of the terms of the old Mosaic law by his atonement which allows the new dispensation to issue forth; man's new, as it were, "lease" on life. All the legalistic imagery points to this transition: the tenant is a petitioner who "make[s] a suit" (3) to his landlord whom he will urge to "cancell th' old" (4) lease.

The landlord is initially described as being rather like any wealthy landlord: he lives in a manor, seems to charge his tenant too

18 Works, p. 40.

much rent, and, as absentee landlord, he has left his home to see about another property "he had dearly bought" (7). Mary Ellen Rickey remarks in this context, that what Herbert has cleverly done is remind us of the other common meaning of "redemption" as opposed to its more frequent theological application. "By insisting on the connection of 'redemption' with human law, a connection usually forgotten in theological uses of the word, Herbert has drawn emphatic contrast between the Lord in his poem and the landlords of the world."<sup>19</sup>

This is exactly the surprise in the poem. Through the eyes of the speaker, the landlord is very worldly indeed. Not only are the images to do with renting and buying, but the landlord is sought in the fashionable haunts of the rich, "in great resorts; / In cities, theatres, gardens, parks and courts" (10-11). Arnold Stein, in a very perceptive reading, comments, "The leisure of the fiction (extraordinary in a sonnet) begins to grow crowded as the humble petitioner searches in likely places".<sup>20</sup>

The first eight lines slowly develop our identification with the naive persona; Herbert takes his time to congeal our association of a worldly landlord with Christ in order to heighten our surprise at the double sense of "redemption". As we become more and more firmly woven into the sense of the story and lulled by its gradualness, we are well prepared by the speaker for the startling last three lines.

The "crowded" quickened pace Stein alludes to is the concrete physical description of an urban setting; all the listed nouns of place--

<sup>19</sup> Rickey, p. 98.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold Stein, George Herbert's Lyrics (Baltimore, 1968), p. 184.



cities, theatres, etc.--combine to a swelling sound that evokes an image of many people coming and going. That sound culminates in "a ragged noise and mirth" (12), as one accompanies the speaker pushing and jostling to see what it is hordes of people have gathered to see. Moreover, we are clearly placed in a social context with "theeves and murderers"--a stark contrast to the gardens and courts that the worldly lord of "great birth" (9) had been thought to frequent by the speaker.

In the midst of all this crowded imaginary cacophony, the speaker says at line thirteen, "there I him espied"; he makes no reference to the traditional allegorical accoutrements of cross, nails, blood and so on. The "astonishing scene of recognition"<sup>21</sup> in the final line is astonishing because with breathtaking suddenness, the long-sought landlord gives the petitioner no chance to deliver his rehearsed request, he leaves the reader and the speaker speechless by anticipating the question and replying "straight, 'Your suit is granted'". In granting the suit, the original legal sense of redemption begun at the first line, is connected with the atonement of the new dispensation, the only reference to which, in the entire poem, is the final word "died". Then the poem's fiction abruptly dissolves itself.<sup>22</sup>

The ambiguity of understanding effected so powerfully in "Redemption" arises from the well-orchestrated intimate immediacy of tone. Joseph Summers points out that what we come to understand from the fiction is the synthesis of historical scriptural past with the discovery made by every Christian at any given time, "the discovery was made by humanity

<sup>21</sup> Stein, p. 185.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Stein, p. 185.

at one moment in the past, but it is also made by individuals at every moment present and future".<sup>23</sup> We are left speechless by that evocative last line precisely because there is no reply to Christ's ineffable grief; the silence counterpoints the noisy busy images that led to this climax. And the ambiguity lies in our understanding of Herbert's successful attempt at throwing us off-guard. Instead of complacently watching familiar emblems unfold in a familiar allegory, we are forced to re-think the scriptural meaning and further, to re-examine our emotional response to it.

A similar although less startling method of revealing what is already known in an unexpectedly fresh way, occurs in the poem, "Jesu".<sup>24</sup> Once again, the pace begins slowly. "Jesu is in my heart, his sacred name/Is deeply carved there." (1-2). Stanley Fish says with reference to the poem's first lines, "in the first line and one half everything seems to be already settled . . . this is the kind of statement or realization with which other Herbert poems conclude".<sup>25</sup> The allegorical surface is established by stating the known or obvious facts; the actual fiction starts in the middle of the second line, "but th' other week". As in "Redemption", the formal structuring of allegory is undermined by this chatty anecdotal tone which significantly begins with, "but". In other words the transitoriness and impermanence of assurance (much like Herbert's frequent use of the conditional "if"), of Jesus:

23 Summers, p. 182.

24 Works, p. 112.

25 Fish, The Living Temple, p. 31.

"always in my heart",<sup>26</sup> is subtly conveyed by the very first word of the fictional narrative.

Both Stanley Fish and Helen Vendler<sup>27</sup> acknowledge the reader's complacent sense of recognition at line two, that we know what is to follow. "This leads to the expectation that in what remains of the poem the history of that recovery ["the little frame", 3] will be recounted".<sup>28</sup> Like "Redemption", there is also a feeling on the part of the reader that the speaker is naive and that we see more clearly than he does what will happen next. "A great affliction broke the little frame/ Ev'n all to pieces" (3), has a plaintive timorous tone. "This faintly querulous worrying care for his little fragile heart reveals the speaker as no hero, but rather as a weak vessel."<sup>29</sup>

One anticipates the speaker's search and recovery of the scattered letters which are significantly discovered in the right order. There seems to be no implicit ambiguity in lines five and six; the reader's eye skips from letter to letter with confidence. But the slower more dogged protagonist has to sit down, gather the letters together and then spell them out—a procedure that seems almost irritatingly painstaking. Line nine, however, reveals a shock of recognition on three simultaneous levels of awareness. First, that one had not correctly anticipated the speaker's spelling, "That to my broken heart ~~we~~ was I ease you" (9). Secondly, one had slid over the "great affliction" (3) -

26 Fish, p. 31.

27 Vendler, p. 71.

28 Fish, p. 31.

29 Vendler, p. 71.

and had rather forgotten it since it was mentioned so slightly in passing. So many Herbert poems express states of affliction in such dramatic detail, that this "great affliction" of "th' other week" seemed but a conventional aspect of the allegory to come. On reading the unexpected, "I ease you", the reader is startled into recalling the afflicted condition--a rhetorical device that serves to return one's attention to the beginning of the little poem and consider its meaning anew.

Thirdly, at line nine, one is also aware that "I ease you" sounds almost like "Jesu". This similarity increases the reader's surprise at "misspelling"<sup>30</sup> or, by extension, at misreading the significance of the speaker's affliction. The first line had begun, "Jesu is in my heart", and the final line completes the structure by reassembling it, whereas Christ "was I ease you" to the speaker's broken heart, to his "whole is Jesu".<sup>31</sup> Our transformed realization, together with that of the speaker, is that the name of Jesu is more connotative than we were at least superficially aware of,<sup>32</sup> just as the process of redemption was full of richer meaning than we had supposed.

The narrative surface and strategy<sup>33</sup> of "Love-joy"<sup>34</sup> is very similar to that of "Jesu". Both poems upset the reader's expectations by revealing that sounds and letters--the components of words--contain

<sup>30</sup> cf. Fish, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> This observation is noted by Fish, p. 34 and Vendler, p. 72.

<sup>32</sup> cf. Fish, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> cf. Fish, p. 27.

<sup>34</sup> Works, p. 116.

more than is initially thought. This is of course a common tenet of biblical exegesis, that scriptural words, incidents, or tales may be explicated on several levels of meaning. However, through the fiction of a naive persona who consistently seems far more obtuse than the knowing readers, our own inadequate understanding of the word (and more specifically of "the word made flesh") is repeatedly exposed.

So in "Love-joy", the speaker casts his eye on "grapes with J and C/Anneal'd on every bunch" (2-3) and we expect no other meaning than "Jesus Christ". This time there is a second character who participates in the narrative action and draws the unexpected reply from the speaker that the letters signify, "Joy and Charitie" (7). As Stanley Fish very properly points out,<sup>35</sup> our anticipation of the speaker replying "Jesus Christ" really places us as readers in the same category as the naive persona who says he is "never loth/To spend [his] judgement" (5).

The fullness of Herbert's metaphors is like, "A box where sweets compacted lie",<sup>36</sup> each meaning enriches the next. In "spending our judgement" too hastily, we fail to reflect that Christ is "the Bodie and the letters" (6), the word made flesh, whose all-encompassing love subsumes all other virtues. His name alone represents joy and charitie. Herbert's treatment of emblems manipulates our understanding in such devious ways that even as we gaze on the clusters of grapes, the association with wine inevitably comes to mind.

Sacrificial blood commemorated as wine is so visible an inference that one would not necessarily have had to read "The Agonie"

<sup>35</sup> cf. Fish, p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> Works, "Vertue", l. 10, p. 88.

or "The Bunch of Grapes" in order to think of Christ "pressed for [our] sake".<sup>37</sup> Similarly the letters themselves, "J and C" (2); become representative of God's personal monogram. In "Love-joy" they are "Anneal'd on every bunch" (3) just as in "The Windows", "[Christ] dost anneal in glass [his] storie".<sup>38</sup> It is as though Christ himself had fashioned the stained glass window, autographed the grapes, and tugged at our sluggish memories to evoke the appropriate response to "the bodie and the letters both".

The technique of using a second character (other than Christ) who participates in the narrative fiction by illuminating the speaker's difficulty or who changes the course of the action in some respect, is extended in "Time"<sup>39</sup> and "Peace".<sup>40</sup> In the former poem, Herbert turns his wit upon the speaker's longwinded musings with an abrupt twist.

The theme of the poem is effectively delivered by the speaker to the figure of Time whom he chides for going so slowly about his business. Since Christ's coming, time is no longer a "hatchet" (9) but a "pruning-knife" (10), and one need have no fear of death. However, as the speaker warms to his subject, his tone shifts and transforms explanation into a garrulous meditation on infinity. ("Of what strange length must that needs be, / Which ev'n eternitie excludes!" 25-26). Time's ironic rejoinder is rendered more effective by the speaker's unwitting use of words like, "detains", "increase", "length", "eternitie", even as he

37 Works, "The Bunch of Grapes", l. 28, p. 128.

38 Works, "The Windows", l. 6, p. 67.

39 Works, p. 122.

40 Works, p. 124.

lengthens his own monologue. Time recognizes that the very man who chided his lack of speed has detained him unduly ("He doth not crave lesse time, but more" 30), and so delivers what amounts to a light-hearted poke at human self-importance. No matter how well we think we see objective truth, Herbert tells us, our perspective is inevitably distorted by our own vanity.

By contrast, the speaker of "Peace" instead of inserting himself into the story, effectively erases himself out of it. He seeks peace "in solitude, in the cosmos, and in nature"<sup>41</sup> until "a rev'rend good old man" (19) is encountered and becomes the storyteller. The speaker no longer has a role in this tale within a tale, he has effectively abdicated his position as shaper of our response, left the stage and joined us in the audience. But in so doing, he has further directed our response to the new teller; our listening attitude is modified by the speaker's self-effacement.

For in pursuing peace "With so much earnestnesse" (41), we become, like the speaker, too engaged in the actual search. The old man's wondrous tale of the "twelve stalks of wheat" (28) creates an atmosphere that is soothing and enchanting, preparing us to re-discover "the peace that passeth all understanding". Christ's body is the miraculous sacrament and source of repose; peace lies "onely there" (42).

In "Dialogue",<sup>42</sup> the persona appears not so much naive as rebellious, his stubborn adherence to his own patterns of reasoning turn the poem into a kind of debate in which Christ delivers the rebuttal.

<sup>41</sup> Vendler, p. 97.

<sup>42</sup> Works, p. 114.

Nonetheless, his arguments do prove naive at the poem's conclusion and the debate ends more abruptly and poignantly than we might have expected from its initial tone.

As in "The Foil", the speaker indicates there is no assurance to be had from the performance of good works, only on this occasion, the observation is grounds for despair. "What delight or hope remains?" Arnold Stein remarks that perhaps the speaker's tone is really "a bid for assurance",<sup>43</sup> but if this is the case, the personated voice of Christ doesn't soothe the rebellious child, rather he replies in corresponding terms of debate. Christ answers by undercutting the "presuppositions of the speaker's argument";<sup>44</sup> his somewhat irritated "Finger not my treasure" (12) suggests the childish persona is displaying an unwarranted curiosity, a tendency to "meddle in something beyond his understanding".<sup>45</sup>

It is in this sense that the speaker is exposed as being naive after all. In his vain-glorious attempt to exercise his debating skill and take on Christ under the guise of "excessive humility",<sup>46</sup> his ratiocinative powers are reduced to those of a sulky child who fancies himself precocious. Yet he persists in following his own pattern of logic until he wittily announces, "I disclaim the whole design/Sinne disclaims and I resign" (23-24). There is a tone of premature triumph since Christ

<sup>43</sup> Stein, p. 124.

<sup>44</sup> McCanles, p. 84.

<sup>45</sup> McCanles, p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> Stein, p. 124.



had not mentioned sin in his rebuttal,<sup>47</sup> and so in appearing to confess his complicity in sin, the speaker is actually "disclaiming" any responsibility for his personal transgressions by apostrophizing "Sinne" as the guilty party.

But the personated Christ does not take up the speaker's terms of reference in the way he had anticipated. Instead, he recounts the circumstances of his own "resigning" (28) and "the historical act is made present and personal and painful".<sup>48</sup> Christ says all he desires is the speaker's "resignation", a resignation that is finally reversed and given as it should be in the surrender of the last line, "Ah! no more: 'thou break'st my heart" (32).

The reader who has been detached and alienated from the peevish speaker's petty rebelliousness throughout the poem, is caught up in Christ's poignant tale of his resignation and sacrifice. When the speaker breaks in suddenly in the last line, one is unexpectedly moved into identifying with his overwhelming grief; "thou break'st my heart" is the only fit reply.

"Love Unknown"<sup>49</sup> unveils a more complicated dialogue between a fictional persona and Christ. This poem is thematically far richer and structurally more complex than my present purpose will do justice to; my chief concern is with its method of illuminating the speaker's and the reader's understanding. The persona of this poem is unquestionably naive and in a very particular sense: he is not unaware of his relation-

<sup>47</sup> cf. Stein, p. 125.

<sup>48</sup> Stein, p. 115.

<sup>49</sup> Works, p. 129.

ship to his Lord and he cheerfully admits his "fault" (20), but he only "knows of salvation by rote . . . [he] does not understand it".<sup>50</sup> It is not that he lacks information with respect to the process of atonement, for indeed, he is downright garrulous in his excessive attention to detail. Rather, he lacks any reflective or interpretative capacity; he eagerly narrates a series of improbable adventures and mishaps reminiscent on the surface of the allegorical cliff-hangers that prevail in Tasso's or Ariosto's poems with cartoon-like regularity.

Yet his shortcomings as a thinker notwithstanding, the persona is actually far more of a fleshed out character than any other of Herbert's fictional speakers. And he is not lacking in charm.<sup>51</sup> His initial breathless address to his dear friend, "I presume your love/Will/more comlie then help" (2-3), has a double irony that he quite misses himself; he hurtles on oblivious to the fact that on a literal level, he's damned his friend with faint praise, and on a metaphoric level, the friend will be far more compliant and helpful than the speaker realizes.

The entire story is told at breakneck speed with frequent asides and interpolations by the speaker. ("I sigh to say" 8, "which is one" 10, "I sigh to tell", "do you understand", 36 etc.). Consequently the impression one receives that the speaker has great difficulty ordering his jumbled thoughts is strengthened as the narrative progresses, and Herbert allows for moments of humour at the speaker's expense, as when he stops himself in mid-flight (his heart in the scalding pan)

50 Ira Clark, "Lord, In Thee The Beauty Lies In The Discovery": 'Love Unknown' And Reading Herbert", English Literary History, 39 (1972), 560-84; p. 576.

51 cf. Vendler, p. 87.

turns to his patient listener and asks, "Do you understand?" (36). Now of course, the irony here is consistent with the extended irony of the poem: the listener, Christ, understands only too well and the speaker does not.

We, as readers, also perceive the emblematic significance of the speaker's tribulations and our awareness of their meaning is sharpened by the laconic responses of the "dear friend". "Herbert's syntactic patterns compel us to discover how God disabuses the persona of presumption. Each of the three scenes the persona describes follows a single structure: as he prepared or began to do something for his landlord he was intercepted or thwarted. The syntax of 'I . . . But he' forming each emblem precisely mirrors the emblem."<sup>52</sup> This structural oscillation is halted momentarily by the friend who acts as an ironic commentator manipulating our response to the speaker. "Your heart was foul I fear" (18) is a literally truthful statement in terms of the allegory, but its tone is wonderfully dry and ironic.

However the friend, whose perspective we come to share, is never contemptuous or condescending in his expressed attitude to the speaker. Quite the contrary his tone suggests that of a mature and affectionate teacher who listens sympathetically to his rather callow, unreflective pupil frantically recite his misadventures while he patiently awaits the psychological moment to drive the lesson home and uncover to the speaker the significance of his experiences. Thus when the speaker, as it were, pauses for breath, the friend completes the tale and the lesson in an optimistic cheerful tenor: "your Master shows to you/More favour then

you wot of" (62-3). His response is at once comforting to the hapless speaker and illuminating to the reader.

To be sure, we have not through the course of the tale missed the emblematic theme as the speaker has done. But in listening to the engaging speaker we have been conscious of what Helen Vendler calls "the lurking comedy of the poem"<sup>53</sup> (The lines 50-52 in which the speaker finds his bed stuffed with thorns is I think actually quite funny as well as pathetic.), and our amusement has borne out one of Herbert's observations about sermons in A Priest to the Temple. He says that telling stories in the course of a sermon is quite appropriate because people remember them better than exhortations.<sup>54</sup> Rather than delivering a hortatory address as in say, "The Church-Porch", he has adapted Horace's maxim of delighting as well as teaching so effectively that at the poem's conclusion, we find ourselves enlightened by the moral of the story, "Wherefore be cheer'd, and praise him to the full/Each day each houre" (68-69); the necessity of purgation is internalized immediately and intimately. Emblems cease to be austere detached and are assimilated through the process Professor Lewalski traced of understanding, accepting and responding. Our response is to feel "new, tender, quick" (70) and refreshed after the tale is completed.

The last poem of this group I shall examine, "The Pilgrimage"<sup>55</sup> is a very curious example of allegory.<sup>56</sup> Helen Vendler argues that there

53 Vendler, p. 88.

54 Works, p. 233.

55 Works, p. 141.

56 cf. Summers, p. 173 and Vendler, p. 94 who comment on the unconventional aspects of Herbert's treatment of allegory in this poem.

is no visible "Christian purification by suffering . . . no good end is unambiguously attached to the afflictions in this poem; the journey is simply foul, in itself and in its result".<sup>57</sup> I would agree there is "no good end unambiguously attached" to the persona's afflictions, and disagree that the result of the journey is "simply foul".

As the pilgrim's unfortunate experiences dissolve into each other,<sup>58</sup> his hopes and expectations are dashed at every turn, "A lake of brackish waters on the ground/Was all I found" (23-24). The pilgrim's trials are a conventional aspect of the allegorical journey; however, as William Empson remarks, "the traveller lets drop the general appearance of the 'place', before going on to the incident which made it worth mentioning."<sup>59</sup> This descriptive technique is especially evident in stanza three where the "wilde of Passion" (13) is "A wasted place, but sometimes rich;" a hauntingly lovely oxymoron and perhaps one of Herbert's most evocative images.<sup>60</sup>

We follow the pilgrim-persona through his moment of despair--"Can both the way and end be tears?" (28)--and expect as in the course of traditional allegory that he will take heart and carry on, "[I] then perceiv'd/I was deceiv'd" (29-30). Thus the last stanza should "correct" the persona's perspective: he had been deceived and had misplaced his hopes. One is surprised however that the sepulchral voice doesn't say something

<sup>57</sup> Vendler, p. 94.

<sup>58</sup> cf. Vendler, p. 94.

<sup>59</sup> William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (London, 1930), pp. 129-131. Reprinted in Poems and Critics, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York, 1972), pp. 60-62; p. 61.

<sup>60</sup> Mr. Empson calls it "exceedingly beautiful", p. 61.

to the effect of "This must not yet be so while you live", allowing the pilgrim but a glimpse of the New Jerusalem—like Spenser's Red Crosse Knight—that awaits him at the end of life's journey. Instead, the cry is prohibitive and ominous, although truthful in the sense that the pilgrim cannot enter the next world while he lives.

Yet there is a further surprise. As disconcerting as the voice sounds to us since we were expecting the pilgrim to be rewarded after his arduous journey, the persona's reply lends a subtle ambiguous quality to our understanding of the poem. His trials have been so great that the threat implicit in loss of life holds no terror for him; rather the speaker's attitude toward death is very like finding a "chair" after one has been standing in a stationary queue for hours. He has been carefully led through the poem from one worsening situation to the next until, when finally permitted to see his true destination, he readily accepts the necessary conditions for entry. The reader, though startled by the ambiguous and unsatisfying last line (unsatisfying because the pilgrim doesn't achieve his deserved rest), on reflection perceives its purpose: the last hill cannot be climbed in this life so we must content ourselves with contemplating death as a "chair", a means of conveyance to the final rest whenever God judges our time to have come. As in "The Water-course", God gives to man salvation or damnation "as he sees fit".<sup>61</sup>

The second group of poems are those of a discursive or speculative nature that define some aspect of man's relationship to God, reflect on some form of human ingratitude and/or comment on the redemptive process in general philosophical terms. "The Foil" which I have already

considered in some detail is arguably the most complex of these poems. There are, as well, a few others that should be noted although I do not think their rhetorical structures require explication, and for the most part their themes are quite similar to those already discussed. For example, "Avarice"<sup>62</sup> and "The World"<sup>63</sup> are uncomplicated allegories. Images in both poems are strictly visual and concrete; they are built firmly one upon another until the final line becomes a sharply reinforced, re-focused statement of the original metaphor. Thus "Avarice" is a stamped coin which man mistakenly perceives as a source of wealth; in the last line the speaker leaves us with a portrait in miniature that animates the emblem: "man digs for gold unaware that his action causes him to 'fall in the ditch' (14). Similarly, in "The World", Love and Grace combine with Glorie to rebuild the world--a "stately house" razed to the ground by Sin and Death--into "a braver Palace then before" (20).

The theme of "Vanitie (1)"<sup>64</sup> is reminiscent of the first stanza of "The Agonie" in which philosophers measure mountains but fail to sound the depths of sin and love. In this poem, the astronomer, diver and "chymick" immerse themselves in their respective quests unaware that in spiritual terms, they "finde out death, but miss . . . life at hand" (28). The argument is not ambiguous, although there are subtly effective images such as that of the proud woman wearing the pearl obtained at great risk by the diver, "Her own destruction and his danger wears" (14). Rather the poem is a commentary on knowledge misused

<sup>62</sup> Works, p. 77.

<sup>63</sup> Works, p. 84.

<sup>64</sup> Works, p. 85.

and on priorities misplaced; reason and adventurousness are employed perniciously: man seeks to understand the wrong things.

"Dotage",<sup>65</sup> a superbly-crafted poem, chafes at human weakness for "False glozing pleasures" (1) when "True earnest sorrows" (7) are "Plain demonstrations, evident and cleare,/Fetching their proofs ev'n from the very bone" (10-11). Man's capacity for understanding is glossed over and dulled by living for pleasure; would he but use his reason effectively he could find ample evidence of life's misery and this discovery would necessarily lead him to the contemplation of real pleasure, "delights more true" (17). These delights are attainable only in the next world if sorrows are duly attended to in this one.

The poems "Man"<sup>66</sup> and "Mans medley"<sup>67</sup> are poems of assurance that define man's relationship to God and his environment. In the former poem, man is the microcosm "ev'rything,/And more" (7-8); reason and speech place him above the animals and "More servants wait on Man,/Then he'll take notice of" (43-44). The poem moves gracefully praising the riches of the world God places at man's disposal and then culminates in the central argument, "Since then, my God, thou hast/So brave a Palace built; O dwell in it" (49-50). The speaker prays that we may use our "wit" or reason to serve God and be conscious of his bountiful love.

"Mans medley" mirrors the rational defining tone of "Man". We are tied both to "things of sense" (6) and spiritual essence, "With th' one hand touching heav'n, with th' other earth" (12). This doubleness of spirit

<sup>65</sup> Works, p. 167.

<sup>66</sup> Works, p. 90.

<sup>67</sup> Works, p. 131.



and matter brings us twofold joys and griefs; therefore, the speaker argues in balanced antitheses, we must strive to turn "double pains to double praise" (36).

Perhaps the finest poem of assurance and praise is "Providence"<sup>68</sup>, which like the previous two poems is a hymn to natural creation. Also like the previous two poems, its rational tone and balanced structure inform its theme. All things are harmoniously ordered; there is no false perspective. The speaker properly attributes all the glory to God and so reaps the returns of a glad heart from God's emanating love. "But who hath praise enough? nay, who hath any?/None can expresse thy works, but he that knows them" (141-142). "'Providence' is, in a sense, the kind of poem the persona of The Temple aspired to write all the time, a poem in which God and the self are serenely at one."<sup>69</sup> The speaker, in this instance, employs his capacity to understand in an effort to praise God; he reasons out the ingenuity of God's perfectly crafted world and perfectly balanced natural cycle and is pleased as a result with the poetic fruits of his labours.

The early poem "Faith"<sup>70</sup> argues God's munificence from a different perspective: through faith God gives us all. The speaker's faith in the truth of the Old Testament mitigates Adam's sin: "where sinne placeth me in Adams fall,/Faith sets me higher in His glorie" (19-20). His faith in the truth of the New Testament, "puts me there with him, who sweetly took/Our flesh and frailtie, death and danger"

68 Works, p. 116.

69 McCanles, p. 93.

70 Works, p. 49.

(23-24). All men are worthy recipients of faith the speaker argues, "Thus dost thou make proud knowledge bend and crouch,/While grate fills up uneven nature" (31-32). No man's birth or skill renders him more worthy than another: "One size doth all conditions fit" (28).

The last three poems of this section that seek to define our relationship to God while praising his love are "Love (1)", "Love (2)",<sup>71</sup> and "Prayer (1)".<sup>72</sup> All three are early sonnets and the first two are contiguously situated; the latter is a response to the former. "Love (1)" apostrophizes God as "authour of this great frame" (1) and its speaker proceeds to scorn man's abuse of his "heart and brain" (7). Instead of devoting their ingenuity to praising the Creator, "Immortall Love" (1), poets ape the fashion of the moment and write profane love poetry. Whereas in "Vanitie (1)" men endeavoured to understand the wrong things, in this poem men labour to praise the wrong things; "and though thy glorious name/Wrought our deliverance from th' infernall pit,/Who sings thy praise?" (8-10). Once again, human reasoning capacity is shown to be limited; men wittingly or unwittingly choose the trivial over the profound and are inspired by scarfs and gloves rather than by the source of love itself.

"Love (1)" is not a discursive poem of assurance per se unless read in conjunction with "Love (2)". (One may infer this intention from the placement of the poems in both manuscripts.) Certainly the primary theme of "Love (1)" concerns the appropriateness of holy things as the subject matter for poetry and makes, in that context a statement

<sup>71</sup> Works, p. 54.

<sup>72</sup> Works, p. 51.

about the sort of poems Herbert chose to write. Yet its theme is consistent with those of other speculative poems previously mentioned. ("Vanitie (1)", "Dotage", etc.) The speakers of these poems draw attention to misuse of knowledge—for its own sake—and the speaker of "Love (1)" laments misuse of artistry.

"Love (2)" strives to correct this man-centered perspective. God is apostrophized this time as "Immortall Heat" (1) and the speaker prays for a purgative flame to cleanse the hearts that worship profane love, "Then shall our hearts pant thee; then, shall our brain/All her invention on thine Altar lay" (6-7). Even as the hard heart is rendered "tender, quick" as in "Love Unknown", the brain correspondingly must be purged of false patterns of thought. Former inspirational icons, the lady's scarf or glove, must make way for devotion to holy contemplation.

Even as Isaiah complained to God that his lips were too unclean to sing his praises and the seraphim purged his mouth by touching it with a live coal from the Altar, so the speaker urges God to "kindle in our hearts such true desires,/As may consume our lusts, and make thee way" (4-5). Then, says the speaker, the re-made poems will be hymns as brains bend their inventive powers to God's service and the purged songs become reversed fire ("send back thy fire again" [8]). Eyes that focused on the talismans of earthly love are "mended" (14) and "all wits shall rise" (13) soaring upward to praise God's glory.

"Prayer (1)" is surely one of the most remarkable of Herbert's poems. Whereas other discursive and speculative poems seek to define Providence or Love in human terms, "Prayer (1)" doesn't so much define metaphorically what a prayer is, as transport its images upward into a soaring representation of thought rising heavenward. Its metaphors are

tautly woven yet, "For all the modulation of the tone, the juxtaposition of images is very taxing".<sup>73</sup> There has been some critical disagreement concerning just how ambiguous this diffuse series of metaphors for prayer really is.<sup>74</sup> Without wishing to avoid the problem by glibly stepping over it, it seems to me that some image clusters are reminiscent of patterns we have encountered elsewhere in Herbert's poems while others are baffling and do not lend themselves to analysis.

In this context, the hymns of "Love (2)" as returning flames, remind one that "Reversed thunder" (6), or prayer, may have a similar sense of recycling; man reciprocates God's thunder by sending up his voice in prayer. Similarly, "Exalted manna" (10), like reversed thunder, suggests the image in reverse and shows a typical Herbertian use of Old Testament typology<sup>75</sup> probably connecting it to the eucharistic banquet of line one as it also refers to the redemption accomplished. "The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth" (4) like the "heart in pilgrimage" would seem to be an image related to self-questioning and atonement. Yet, "Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest" (11) is a very puzzling image;<sup>76</sup> it might refer to heaven dressed in the clothes of everyday, and man in the clothes of heaven, but it is not a clear

73 Colie, p. 207.

74 See for example: Helen Vendler pp. 38-39 who does not find the poem to be ambiguous, and E.B. Greenwood who carefully explicates the metaphors in scriptural terms, "George Herbert's Sonnet 'Prayer': A Stylistic Study", *Essays in Criticism* XV (1965), 27-45. Arnold Stein, p. 108, and Rosalie Colie, p. 207-208, argue that the metaphors are ambiguous.

75 cf. Greenwood, p. 42.

76 Miss Colie also finds it puzzling although she suggests that "well drest" may refer, like "Aaron", to priestly attire. cf. p. 207.

association. I am not sure that Helen Vendler's reading of "Angels age" (1) as "[the] angels' age may be determined by how long they have been praying",<sup>77</sup> is entirely satisfactory either.

I would agree with Arnold Stein that one can group certain images; for example, he remarks that in the first quatrain, "all the images mark the relations between man and God, and do so in terms of connection, source and return".<sup>78</sup> Further he relates "Engine against th' Almighty" (5) to "the sinner's instrument of attack, always ambiguous, always reminding him of his guilt and the benefits of his guilt".<sup>79</sup> This seems to me a very perceptive reading; for I cannot say with the categorical assurance of some readers<sup>80</sup> that "sinners towre" (5) is the tower of Babel or really know in what sense prayer is "the Bird of Paradise" (12) or "the soul's blood" (13).

But as I make my journey through the poem, increasingly dazzled by the profusion of flashing images, each of them coruscating and momentarily blinding in their brilliance, I finally arrive at "something understood" (14). This, as several critics have agreed is the poem's centre and its circumference:<sup>81</sup> at this moment we feel the appropriateness of silence, the awareness of the inadequacy of metaphor which cannot really "sound" heaven and earth, but can only approximate through sense

77. Vendler, p. 39.

78. Stein, p. 107.

79. Stein, p. 108.

80. cf. Vendler, p. 39 and Greenwood, p. 30.

81. cf. Stein, p. 108; Vendler, p. 39; and Colfe, p. 207.

impressions. It follows, then, that the intellectual journey, the arriving at "something understood" exists on two ambiguous and overlapping levels. First, in the mind of the reader is the sense, vaguely, of "something" ineffable, "the word for which no other words will do, the Word that is, in the end, simply 'something understood'".<sup>82</sup> Second, the reassurance implicit in our speculation, is that even though prayer cannot be defined any more accurately, it is "understood by God".<sup>83</sup>

The final group of poems I propose to examine are those in which a problem or a question is posed explicitly or implicitly and then, through the course of the poem, it is resolved (although not necessarily unambiguously) either by reversing the speaker's initial arguments or by creating a new startling perspective on a familiar crux. It may seem in some instances that certain poems I've chosen to place in this framework really belong to the previous category, such as say, "Justice (2)" or "The Quidditie", poems in which something is defined. My reason for arranging them in this manner is simply to illustrate a particular similarity they bear to each other in their approaches toward the limitations of understanding, and in the unexpected answers they yield up, or that the answers they lead one to expect prove to be unanswerable.

The early sonnets, "The Holy Scriptures (1) and (2)"<sup>84</sup> primarily function as hymns that praise the infinite variety of the Bible, "A full eternitie: thou art a masse/Of strange delights" (6-7). As in the first two "Love" poems, the "lookers eyes" are "mended" even as they

<sup>82</sup> Colie, p. 207.

<sup>83</sup> Stein, p. 108.

<sup>84</sup> Works, p. 58.

peruse the page, "this is the well/That washes what it shows" (9-10). Since the scriptures are so rich in meaning and so relevant to our understanding of how we should live our lives, the speaker wishes that he, "knew how all thy lights combine,/And the configurations of their glorie!" (II;1-2). He recognizes that his comprehension is fragmented, "This verse marks that, and both do make a motion/Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie" (5-6). The diverse riches of the Bible are dispersed and scattered throughout its "leaves", defying the attempts of its readers to unravel all the mysteries it contains, "Such are thy secrets" (9), the speaker acknowledges.

However, his inability to assimilate all the scriptural "strange delights" is not problematic to the speaker. He reasons in a manner most beneficial to his spiritual well-being, as in Professor Lewalaki's model, "to understand, accept and make the appropriate response". For, instead of vainly probing at that which he cannot hope to fathom, he applies the "strange delights" of the scriptures to his own life and becomes a passive recipient as biblical truths and "parallels" assume the active role, "Thy words do finde me out, and parallels bring" (11). This structural motion of turning (like the pipe and water's course in "The Water-course" turned to one's advantage) so frequent in Herbert's poems, best illustrates the felicitous application of reason; scriptural truth used as a model of "Christian destiny" (7) to "make me understood" (12).

Another early poem, "Sinne (II)"<sup>85</sup> follows the same pattern. The speaker yearns to see a sin, "We paint the devil foul, yet he/Hath some

<sup>85</sup> Works, p. 63.

good in him" (2-3). This first stanza, surprising as its subject may seem—i.e. desiring to see sin—reasons in doctrinally orthodox terms that devils have no "virtue" or "being" (5) because they are non est substantia,<sup>86</sup> they are an absence of good. The speaker's main point is to "understand and accept" the reason sin is not visible, "But God more care of us hath had/ . . . By sight of sinne we should grow mad" (6,8). God's divine plan works to our advantage, "devils are our sinnes in perspective" (10) or to paraphrase St. Paul, we see as through a glass darkly because we could not cope with the full horror of sin face to face.<sup>87</sup>

Another poem which serves to "justify the ways of God to man" is "The Pulley".<sup>88</sup> Here Herbert has synthesized the stories from Genesis and mythology as God, Jove-like, bestows on man a Pandora's box of blessings.<sup>89</sup> The poem's imagery is wonderfully allusive: God does not only pour the glass of blessings over man (3), but metaphorically gathers up the "dispersed" riches of the world and scales them down as it were, in time and space, "Contract into a span" (5)—"span" punning on the diminutive size of man and on his life-span. Helen Vendler mentions how extraordinary she finds Herbert's rendition of God's rationale for denying man "rest", "logically speaking, it is somewhat bizarre since it shows God in the process (common in the Old Testament) of

<sup>86</sup> Works, p. 498.

<sup>87</sup> cf. Works, p. 498.

<sup>88</sup> Works, p. 159.

<sup>89</sup> cf. Works, p. 533 and Vendler, p. 32.



changing his mind".<sup>90</sup> The fanciful response to that riddle, to wit, "Why, in spite of his riches, is man weary, restless and repining?"<sup>91</sup> The fanciful response to that riddle is rather like Sir Thomas Browne's account of his life, "a miracle of thirty years, which to relate, were not a History, but a peece of Poetry, and would sound to common eares like a fable".<sup>92</sup> We readers, are the "common eares", as are all men in relation to God's inscrutable purpose; consequently, fables or stories are the opaque distorted glass through which we find a reference point common to our little understanding.

God's intention is translated and validated: we are, as the paradox shows, "to keep the rest, / But keep them with repining restlessness" (16-17). We must constantly yearn for the "rest" that evades us, until overwhelmed with weariness, (As in "The Pilgrimage", where death is "but a chair") we are tossed safely to God's breast. Again, there is a subtle ambiguity on words like "rich": "Let him be rich and wearie" (18) reminiscent of the pilgrim's "world", "A wasted place, but sometimes rich" (15). The riches of this world do not compensate for its miseries, yet its miseries and our consequent afflictions are the promise of riches fulfilled in the life to come.

"The Quidditie",<sup>93</sup> as Professor Colie brilliantly observes, "reverses the trick of 'Prayer (1)'"<sup>94</sup> Images are negated and subtracted,

<sup>90</sup> Vendler, p. 32.

<sup>91</sup> Vendler, p. 33.

<sup>92</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, p. 83.

<sup>93</sup> Works, p. 69.

<sup>94</sup> Colie, p. 208.

rather than added up, until the answer is arrived at. This time, the riddle is posed through the course of the poem and never really answered.<sup>95</sup> As we follow the swelling list of things a verse is negatively compared to, we naturally expect a neatly tied up definition explaining what a verse is at the end of the poem.

Instead, we are met with a dizzying array of concrete nouns representative of the phenomena or paraphernalia of courtly life. The speaker implies that inasmuch as these activities are reflected in secular poetry, none of them, despite their capacity to entertain, can define what a verse is—to mirror the active life in words does not explain the Word. "The essence of a thing, its quidditas, can never be known, never tells what what is".<sup>96</sup>

All the speaker can define or know, as opposed to copy from the phenomenal world, is that the writing of poetry is a creative act he dedicates to God who bestows the gift of his craft and of life itself upon him; and in the act of writing and therefore of praising, he comes nearest to "the essential mystery".<sup>97</sup> Poetry's "most take all" is the artistic manifestation of "something understood".<sup>98</sup>

Verbal ambiguity, as I hope this chapter has given some evidence of, seems to have held great interest for Herbert. Even though he often disapproves of "the ways of learning",<sup>99</sup> his speakers frequently seize

<sup>95</sup> cf. Colie, p. 208.

<sup>96</sup> Colie, p. 208.

<sup>97</sup> Colie, p. 208.

<sup>98</sup> cf. Hutchinson, Works, p. 500.

<sup>99</sup> Works, "The Pearl", l. 1, p. 88.

upon common words to approach the "mysteries at the heart of things".<sup>100</sup> So with "The Sonne",<sup>101</sup> the speaker affirms stoutly, "I like our language" (3) and proceeds to outline a quite common religious pun, son-sun, that ends by encapsulating Christian history. One might have thought the pun would focus on Christ as "fruitfull flame/Chasing the fathers dimnesse" (7-8), the son of God as vital lampada,<sup>102</sup> the "light of the world" that makes possible the "light of life" (John 8.12). However, the speaker carries the metaphor much further to encompass the creation, "the first man in th' East" and the foundations of the Church, "Western discoveries of posteritie" (10). (One could also extrapolate from that line the Christian colonies in America.) And the metaphor is turned a third time ("We turn upon him in a sense most true", 12) for Christ is the Son of God, the light that traces the Church's path from east to west, and he is the "Sonne of Man" (14), who humbled himself that we should live to see everlasting light-life.

In "The Rose"<sup>103</sup> the emblem is presented to an unseen debating opponent who presumably "presses" the speaker to "take more pleasure" (1) in the things of the world. The speaker argues his rational perspective from several positions. First, the rose is compared to "sugred lies" (2), "Blushing woes" (7), things of the world that appear lovely yet deceive in their beauty. Next, the speaker acknowledges its beauty, but emphasizes "it biteth in the close" (24). All "Worldly joyes" (26)

100 Colfe, p. 208.

101 Works, p. 167.

102 Hutchinson, Works, p. 535.

103 Works, p. 177.

taken to excess "produce repentance" (27). He ironically refuses to "press" his point further ("I will not much oppose", 13) other than to say he prefers health to "physick" (29) or that he will take his pleasure moderately "My strict, yet welcome size" (4). For the rose was used medicinally as a purge,<sup>104</sup> and so in proffering it to his opponent, the speaker as debater has made his answer, the emblem is the thing itself: it is beautiful yet it has thorns and its purgative qualities are the mirror of over-indulgence.

A very similar theme is argued through "The Size".<sup>105</sup> The speaker in this instance persuades himself that "Modest and moderate joyes" (2) are best for a "Christian state and case" (31): A little pleasure, "Doth tice us on to hopes of more" (29) which we would see realized in "heav'n the haven" (47). The poem lists a series of reasons, spiritual and physical, for abstaining from immoderate pleasures culminating in a very visual metaphor that conjures up expectations of an earthly cornucopia: "do not spread thy robe/In hope of great things" (43-44). We are urged to abandon hopes of tangible rewards and concentrate our intellectual powers on the spiritual bounty that awaits us: "Call to minde thy dream . . . ." Let the mind serve the soul and not the body.

In two poems that trace the path of scriptural history from the old dispensation to the new, Justice (II)<sup>106</sup> and Ston<sup>107</sup>, the structural movements turn from general commentaries on the events themselves to

<sup>104</sup> cf. Hutchinson, Works, p. 538.

<sup>105</sup> Works, p. 137.

<sup>106</sup> Works, p. 141.

<sup>107</sup> Works, p. 106.

personal, subjective applications of the significance those events hold for the individual speakers. The "fright and terrour" (1) of "old" justice have been mitigated by Christ's "pure veil" (13) (the transparent veil of flesh)<sup>108</sup> and the speaker is therefore able to tip the scales of justice in his favour, "Why should I justice now decline?/Against me there is none, but for me much" (23-24). The vanished ancient architecture of Solomon's temple has been reconstructed as "frame and fabrick within" (12). Rather than debate in terms of his "ancient claim" (10), God submits to struggle inside the human heart, the ancient edifices are heavy and tomb-like (l. 20) compared to the penitent heart offering up "one good grone" (18) of atonement that flies upward (l. 22) as confirmation of the invisible covenant within.

Thus far the poems examined have demonstrated capacity for understanding, despite its limitations, employed to a positive and fruitful end. Arguments have turned on specific cruxes, (such as in "Sinne (II)", "The Holy Scriptures", (I and II), "The Size") and from them fresh perspectives have been fashioned. Ambiguities (as in "The Quidditie", "The Rose", "The Pulley") have been reshaped into new patterns of perception. All these readings have pointed to a beneficial use of reasoning; in other words, provided that man starts from the premise that he cannot hope to understand divine secrets, accepts his inherent limitations, then, his "response"--to remake Professor Lewalski's model--may yield up new ways of seeing, of defining himself in relation to God. First, nonetheless, must come the recognition that his own limited understanding, (as in "The Quidditie", the inability to find words to

<sup>108</sup> cf. Hutchinson, Works, p. 527.

express the Word) renders all forms of knowledge ultimately illusory; ambiguity is the impalpable enigmatic essence that cannot be known.

Other poems treat the pursuit of knowledge less kindly. Various speakers express doubt that human beings can see anything clearly at all, ("Miseric", "Giddiness", "The Answer"); other speakers turn their own over-inquisitiveness, or lack of understanding upon themselves, ("Self-condemnation", "Justice (1)", "Divinitie", "The Discharge"). I propose now to examine these poems more closely in terms of their approach to "rebellious reason"; poems in which speakers express or imply difficulty at accepting the limitations of understanding, or in which these limitations themselves appear dark and overwhelming.

"Giddiness"<sup>109</sup> begins with the same thought, only self-generated in this instance, expressed by the speaker of "The Windows" as he gazes at the stained glass window, "[Man] is a brittle crazie glass".<sup>110</sup> In "Giddiness" he is "some twentie sev'rall men at least/Each sev'rall houre" (3-4). The speaker's wayward disconnected thoughts mirror the fragmented distorted lens through which human beings interpret their behaviour. In stanza two, man would follow God (counts of heav'n, as of his treasure", 5) but is afraid others will attribute his abstinence to cowardice. In stanzas three and four, the speaker describes man in rapid succession as: aggressive, quiet, busy, slothful, constructive, destructive, his mind halter skelter until, he says, how silly we'd look if there were outward visible signs of our internal disorder: if our

<sup>109</sup> Works, p. 127.

<sup>110</sup> Works, "The Windows", 1, 2, p. 67.

clothing changed as rapidly as "a Dolphin's skinne"<sup>111</sup> each time we changed our minds. (It occurs to me that Herbert has rather remarkably reversed the meaning of sacrament, i.e., here we have an outward and visible sign of an inner, certainly not spiritual, disorder.)

And there is no resolution that comes from within. If each of us knew the other's heart, all traces of society would vanish, the speaker tells us (23-24). Our reasoning is so depraved, only God can "mend or rather make us" (25). Just as in "Love (2)" he "mends" our eyes, so here he must re-create our thoughts, piece them back together in a new creation. Our thoughts, in this poem, have become like the scattered letters the persona re-assembles in "Jesu", and it is beyond our power to reunite them.

In "The Answer",<sup>112</sup> it is not the objective human condition that is contemplated but the speaker's own "incomprehensibility to himself".<sup>113</sup> The speaker both laments his current melancholic state of mind and his inability to see beyond it. He also describes rather curiously, how he imagines other people perceive him, perhaps as one who has failed to fulfill his promise (8-13) and the reader receives a kind of double vision from this outer and inner perspective. "For he also keeps outside his grief, and he is felt as both inside and outside the experience."<sup>114</sup> The ambiguity implicit in this double perspective arises from our uncertainty whether or not the speaker completely shares this

<sup>111</sup> F.E. Hutchinson explains this to be a sort of mackerel, a dorado, p. 522.

<sup>112</sup> Works, p. 169.

<sup>113</sup> Stein, p. 92.

<sup>114</sup> Stein, p. 92-93.

outer viewpoint (a viewpoint he has fabricated, for he gives no clear indication of how others really perceive him). In the first four lines his own thoughts scatter and fall very much like the metaphor of the low-lying cloud to which he says, others may compare him. Thus the final couplet, "I have one reply/Which they that know the rest, know more than I" (13-14), may be seen partly as an answer to himself for having momentarily succumbed to what he fancies is general opinion, and partly in its more obvious context, it may be seen as a rebuke against those who would circumscribe and sum up a person's life so unhesitatingly with no hint of recognition that some questions are unanswerable.

"Justice (1)"<sup>115</sup> is a less fleshed out recognition on the part of the speaker that he cannot understand himself, a recognition that is turned inward neatly through the poem's structure. The first stanza lists a series of "injustices" the speaker imagines perpetrated by God. Upon reflection and self-questioning, he turns the analytical process on himself and perceives his own paradoxical behaviour; his desire to serve God is not reflected in his conduct, "I cannot skill of these my wayes" (12).

In "The Discharge"<sup>116</sup> the speaker ingeniously worries himself (in the sense of shake or scold) into not worrying: "Having once given up all to God, you should feel yourself free from anxiety".<sup>117</sup> The poem is an extended argument for "discharging" the obligation of thought, of rational inquiry, into cosmic enigmas which are the proper concern of

<sup>115</sup> Works, p. 95.

<sup>116</sup> Works, p. 144.

<sup>117</sup> Works, p. 528.



God. ("Presume not God to scan", is really its surface theme.) Intellectual curiosity is described as a kind voyeuristic tendency to pry, "with a licorous eye" (3), recalling to mind Christ's admonition in "Dialogue", "Finger not my treasure".<sup>118</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that despite the consistent tone, "do not question; resign all responsibility to God", the speaker is using his ratiocinative abilities very creatively. His arguments against seeking to know too much, are varied and ingenious. We are cautioned not to "break the square" (32) or undo the reciprocity between God and man by over-extending ourselves (44); "spending our judgement"<sup>119</sup> or "thoughts" (42) on "future grief" serves to intensify our present miseries. Reason, in this poem, is actively employed to demonstrate its own rebellious nature.

Similarly, in "Divinitie",<sup>120</sup> reason continues to be presented as rebellious. "Reason triumphs, and faith lies by." (8). Yet there is greater complexity of tone in this poem. The speaker asks himself a rhetorical question in the third stanza, "Could not that Wisdome, which first broacht the wine, Have thicken'd it with definitions?" (9-10). He confronts the very questions that presumably face any Christian at one time or another, "O dark instructions; even as dark as day! Who can these Gordian knots undo?" (19-20). Scriptural truths are "dark as day" because one must simply believe them not attempt to unravel them. "Faith needs no staffe of flesh" (27) reiterates the primary position faith holds

<sup>118</sup> Works, p. 114, l. 12.

<sup>119</sup> Works, "Love-joy", l. 5, p. 116. The context of "spending" thoughts or judgement is not the same in both poems, but the connotation of unwarranted or preemptory use is similar.

<sup>120</sup> Works, p. 134.

over any other type of response to revealed truth. We must bend our understanding to accept that which is as "dark as day"; only then do our thoughts "both go, and leade" (28) to heaven.

Scriptural history is wedded to the process of self-examination in the poem, "Self-condemnation".<sup>121</sup> The speaker admonishes the reader for smugly condemning the Jews' choice of Barrabas, as he reads the biblical text (16) without recognizing his own complicity in the crime, "Call home thine eyes (that busie wanderer):/That choice may be thy storie" (5-6). Our "wandering eyes" (as the "prying eyes" in "The Discharge") must be "mended" (as in "Love (2)") or made to focus inwardly; rather than wander over the scriptural page, passing random judgement on what we read, the speaker argues, we must apply the lesson to ourselves. As the "world an ancient murderer is" (10), so we who are too much of the world, have "sold for money [our] deare Lord" (17). Worse than the crowd who chose Barrabas, we are likened to Judas, ostensibly we are Christ's disciples who know his teachings, yet we betray them. The poem is really a didactic lesson in miniature that perfectly illustrates the self-questioning model, the struggle to understand the morals of the text, accept them as further proof of one's own sinfulness, and respond with appropriate penitence. "Thus we prevent the last great day,/And judge ~~our~~ selves" (19-20).

The last poem I wish to discuss in this context is "Miserie",<sup>122</sup> a complex and difficult poem that reasons through all the attendant problems the speaker finds in relation to God's bond, the obligation

121 Works, p. 170.

122 Works, p. 100.

stone (21) that transforms our leaden souls into gold (22); our lives are prolonged because transformed through Christ's salvific reciprocity.

Understanding his role in relation to Christ is the appropriate inner response which 'is, together with the outer active response, transformed. These symbiotic responses are blended into the image of the servant sweeping; he (taking communion for Christ's sake) and his task (performed as for Christ) merge like "the dancer into the dance". The still silence at the end of the poem becomes, "The stillness, as a Chinese jar still/Moves perpetually in its stillness."<sup>5</sup>

The last word of the poem, "told", refers to that which cannot be told or counted, to the pricelessness of "that which God doth touch and own" (23). It also suggests the role of the speaker as teller and the poem as tale. It draws our attention to the action implicit in every poem: the act of writing. Seen from this perspective, the last line "Cannot for lesse be told", enriches the theme of the poem: in the speaker's modified understanding, in his embracement of all "which God doth touch and own", he has, as poet, not told less than the truth.

In the first two chapters I attempted to trace roughly two different kinds of response--with numerous variations--recurrent in Herbert's poems. The first of these, although approached from several perspectives, chiefly involved a recognition that no imitation of Christ's grief can ever be adequate and therefore, that the only response possible is humble acceptance of the gift of salvation. Intimately linked to the difficulty of achieving and sustaining such a response

(what Professor Fish calls "the undoing of the self"<sup>6</sup>), is the acknowledgement on the part of the speaker that his afflictions are part of Christ's, and Christ's grief assimilated to his own; Christ's suffering is the active agent, the cordial and corrosive that renders atonement and acceptance possible through purging the sinful heart.

The second response, also approached from various perspectives, concerned problems of understanding, of what can and cannot be understood in terms of the speaker's role in relation to God. This response took the form of several kinds of recognition: that limitations of understanding must be accepted, that the ability to reason must be used to glorify God not to enhance the self, that reason may be used positively to interpret scriptures and apply them to one's own circumstances, or to define and praise God's bountiful care and purpose, that rebellious reason works more subtly than we know, and that God takes more care of us than we "wot of".

But, as Professor Summers says, "the fictional speakers of [Herbert's] poems have many voices";<sup>7</sup> there are indeed other responses. The first thing really that must be said prior to mapping out another overly-schematic series of interconnecting responses, is that in Herbert's poems virtually all responses are the same response. Since the speakers are always talking to God, or to themselves about God, or to the reader about God, all responses must conform in one narrow sense or another to typical seventeenth-century meditational modes of:

<sup>6</sup> Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> Summers, p. 150.

address. (Hence my constant reference to the models of Martz and Lewalski.) How various can responses be when they are variations on the same theme? I hope that part of the answer to that question has already been given. I have attempted to show just how complexly and variously the same theme may be replayed and remodelled to offer up new shades of meaning. But I return to Professor Summers who makes the same point more eloquently: "Even those poems in which [Herbert] directly and dramatically addresses God differ radically as they are conceived as laments or praises, rebellions or submissions, demands or requests, prayers or conversations".<sup>8</sup>

Some of the responses listed by Professor Summers that I will not--for reasons of space--examine, include the lovely lyrics of praise, occasional and "spontaneous", that comprise a large portion of "The Church". (Examples of these poems include: "Easter", "The Dawning", "Christmas", "Sunday", "Lent", "Mattens", "Even-Song", "The 23d Psalme", "Antiphon (1)", "Antiphon (2)", "The Odour".)

More complicated responses are to be found in poems like "The Elixir" with which I began. One could characterize the response in "The Elixir" as an act of submission that emerges directly from a particular understanding. Such responses, whether they occur in mid-poem as in "The Elixir", or are present from the outset, are immediately felt by the reader and stand symbolically for the resolution of the poem. The active resolution may include anything from sweeping as in "The Elixir", to writing, or in effect, re-writing a poem, as in "Jordan (2)". In some poems the understanding and accompanying response occur

simultaneously after great struggle as in "The Collar". (Several other poems fit this description but have been talked about in other contexts since Herbert's poems lend themselves to so many modes of perception: "Dialogue", the "Affliction" poems, "Thanksgiving", etc.)

I propose now to examine a small cross-section of poems that dramatize an active response of submission emerging from and blending with an understanding of the speaker's role in relation to God.

At first glance, a poem like "The Pearl"<sup>9</sup> would have been better placed in the previous chapter that dealt exclusively with "understanding". It is so rational and discursive in tone that the persona's primary response seems to consist of a traditional rejection of worldliness.

The speaker rejects intellectual pride, worldly and sensuous temptations, in three very crowded stanzas that list so many things so quickly that they read like inventories.<sup>10</sup> In effect, this rapid-fire itemizing of the "ways" of Learning, Honour and Pleasure, is rhymed off so casually that one can scarcely credit the laconic refrain, "Yet I love thee", with much sincerity. The third stanza however reveals a change of tone. It is significant that the pleasures described are suggestive and sensuous and don't sound at all like the more visceral responses one would expect from a traditional repudiation of fleshly evils. Although the speaker mentions "hot blood" (23), he couples it with "brains", "mirth and music", "love and wit" (24); one senses the civilized pleasures the speaker chooses to name are subjective and

<sup>9</sup> Works, p. 88.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold Stein makes a similar observation, p. 33.

personal. Instead of the casual indifference bordering on contempt in the tone of the first two stanzas, here the speaker admits a struggle; these pleasures are difficult to renounce because they are significant to him. He tells us outright that this is so, "My stuffe is flesh, not brasse; my senses live,/And grumble oft, that they have more in me/Then he that curbs them" (27-29).

Only in stanza four does he come to the point and metaphorically sell all he has like the "merchant-man" (Matt. 13:45) who finds "one pearl of great price". In the last stanza the purpose for the poem's shift away from a detached analytical tone to--more characteristic of Herbert--an immediate personal one becomes clear. The speaker's sophisticated disregard for the things of the world is an effective demonstration that his preference for God is not through ignorance nor lack of experience; (i.e. "I know all these, and have them in my hand" 31). Consequently when he says he understands "Both the main sale and the commodities" (34), one thinks of his masterly overview of worldly "commodities" and takes him at his word. But the commodities in themselves are meaningless if they hold no allure; it is the personal tone of stanza three that makes us believe he knows too "the rate and price" (35) he pays for God's love.

And so the active response embodied in stanza four emerges as a "sale", consistent with the scriptural theme of things of the world that do hold value, and yet are sold with "open eyes" (32) to purchase "one pearl of great price". More explicitly than the speaker of "The Elixir" who also deprecates his ratiocinative abilities, the speaker of "The Pearl" acknowledges his inventories to be "labyrinths", his wit

to be "groveling" (37); only God's "silk twist" (38) can lead him out of the labyrinth that is himself.

"The Quip"<sup>11</sup> makes a similar rejection of worldliness although this time it is the allegorized temptations who appear to have the upper hand and heap scorn upon the speaker. His abstemious behaviour receives its justification in the final stanza, God's "answer" to worldly jeers serves to make the speaker's action fine. This poem, to borrow Miss Colie's phrase, "reverses the trick"<sup>12</sup> of "The Pearl".

Whereas the former speaker prefers God to that which he knows and has in his hand, the speaker of "The Quip" dramatizes the appropriate response to the worldly who think they know him ("all in sport to geere at me", 4) and dismiss him accordingly. There is no need for "groveling wit"; God will provide the answer "when the houre of [his] designe" (21) has come. Structurally, this poem resembles "The Pearl" in that the serial renunciations achieve their justification in the final stanza and the appropriateness of the response rests in the metaphoric abdication of self and speech to God. ("Speak not at large; say, I am thine", [23] answers the refrain, "But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.")

Speech was the vehicle in "Prayer (1)" through which Herbert attempted to evoke a sense of "something understood", a metaphoric equivalent for the ineffable Word. Similarly in the poems that yoke together understanding and response into an active symbol, "subject and image do not determine speech; they are transformed by it."<sup>13</sup> In

<sup>11</sup> Works, p. 111.

<sup>12</sup> Colie, p. 208.

<sup>13</sup> Summers, p. 152.



"Unkindnesse"<sup>14</sup> the slight changes of the refrain serve to flesh out the theme of penitence; the speaker recognizes at the end of the first four stanzas that: he "would not" (5); "could not" (10), "cannot" (15), "Nor would" "use a friend" as he uses God. In the fifth stanza the lesson is taken quite literally to heart. A friend, the speaker says, could not fulfill the promise he urges God to write in brass, (reminding us of God writing on the heart in "The Sinner"<sup>15</sup>): "My God upon a tree/ His blood did spill/Onely to purchase my good-will" (22-24). The poem's last line gives further agonized recognition: "Yet I do not use my foes, as I use Thee." (25). Speech transforms the response into a deeper, more immediately felt grief; even though the speaker had acknowledged his fault from the outset, he suddenly "sees" in the last stanza that his metaphor had not been appropriate. Even his "foes" receive better treatment at his hands than Christ. Transforming a metaphor intensifies his understanding of the enormity of his sin and hence charges the response with new feeling.

Similarly, in "The Method",<sup>16</sup> the speaker searches his heart to discover the reason God does not answer his prayer and finds guilty phrases which point out his answer. "Yesterday/I did behave me carelessly,/When I did pray" (15-18). He digs a little deeper and finds another clue to God's displeasure, "Late when I would have something done,/I had a motion to forbear,/Yet I went on." (22-24). As he "reads" these messages of his own misconduct lodged in his heart, he

<sup>14</sup> Works, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> Works, p. 38, l. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Works, p. 133.

suddenly understands that he, rather than God, has not been listening. His response is at once an act of contrition and recognition; in asking for pardon, he opens the way for God's response, "Glad heart rejoyce" (32).

Repeated key words twine through "Clasping of hands"<sup>17</sup> to shape the speaker's response. As the "mine" and "thine" of each line thread their way back and forth, weaving in and out of the sense of the poem (to paraphrase "Jordan (2)"), one experiences what Professor Fish calls, "the dissolution of the lines of demarcation".<sup>18</sup> One ceases to know which actions are attributable to the speaker or to Christ, so completely do they merge. The active resolution at the end of the poem confirms Christ as "not only the substance of all things, but the performer of all actions."<sup>19</sup> The last line effects the transformation; the winding meandering speeches that have metaphorically traced the clasping of hands in prayer, and the prayer itself--a plea that God will dissolve the Ego-tu barrier--are fused and focused with crystalline clarity, "Or rather make no Thine and Mine!" (20). The structural brilliance of this poem rests in its double action: it is both a perfect artifact, a prayer and clasped hands, and a fictive linguistic exercise that sounds as though the speaker simultaneously manages to arrange his thoughts with clarity and to find the appropriate words to express them.

17 Works, p. 157.

18 Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, p. 173.

19 Ibid., p. 173.

Recognition and response emerge with greater difficulty in poems where the "voices", to use Professor Summers' term, are reluctant in some sense to understand their roles in relation to Christ, and consequently the structural process of these poems works through a series of negative responses until God actively intervenes and transforms speech into a vehicle for the new and appropriate response. Herbert's voices often reverse themselves, or rather accompany each other like counter-pointed melodies of endless variety; the "rate and price" of Christ's love which the speakers of "The Pearl" and "The Quip" accept willingly, is questioned and rebelled against in poems like "The Holdfast" and "The Collar".

In the former poem,<sup>20</sup> the speaker's misunderstandings are really quite well-intentioned. Structurally, the poem is an internal debate. The speaker puts forth a series of arguments which seek to define his role in relation to Christ. He resolves "to observe the strict decree" (1), to work within the terms of the Old Dispensation, but he is told his response is unacceptable. Christ who is predictably the shadowy second speaker, doesn't actually reply, but the speaker gives evidence of his answer through the use of the passive voice: ("But I was told", 3). Removing Christ to the background has the effect of heightening our awareness of the speaker's internal struggle to understand the enigmatic checks and foils he encounters each time he ventures a new response.

When he remodels his response in terms of the New Dispensation and offers his faith, "Yet I might trust in God to be my light" (4),

the process of stripping away is clarified. Not only one's faith but one's active confession of faith belong to God: "But to have nought is ours, not to confesse/That we have nought" (9-10). How can he respond, if he has nothing to give? "In response [the speaker] accepts a series of lesser roles only to be informed that each one of them also belongs to God. In amazement he falls silent and hears another voice supply the one answer the implicit question [He is referring to the question, "What must I do to be saved?"] would seem to have excluded—Nothing!"<sup>21</sup>

At this moment of uneasy unresolved silence, Christ emerges from the periphery of the speaker's self-examination and though his voice is not personated as it is in other poems, the speaker makes it clear that the resolution is not his own, "I heard a friend expresse,/That all things were more ours by being his" (12). Professor Fish describes the resolution of the poem in terms of its inactive response: "The proper response to the dilemma the poem poses is discovered to be not action, mental or physical, but humility and self-abnegation."<sup>22</sup>

While I certainly agree that humility and self-abnegation are the discovered and appropriate responses, I would argue that the implicit action of the poem is the struggle to understand and recognize and simultaneously respond. The fact that Christ is the active agent is affirmed through his speech. His speech is juxtaposed to the speaker's inadequate responses until the speaker ceases to speak for himself. Then, immediately, Christ's "answer" merges with the speaker's new understanding. One can see the active recognition take shape. Christ says, or the speaker

21 Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, p. 174.

22 Ibid., p. 175.

reports that he says, at line eleven that "all things were more ours by being his", and the subsequent two lines contain the transformed response. The speaker takes up the explanation-resolution where Christ left off: "What Adam had, and forfeited for all, / Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall" (13-14). My point really is that action and inaction prove to be the same thing.

Displaying a typical Renaissance delight at balancing antitheses, Herbert shows us that the most active response is the "something understood" of each poem in which he recognizes the futility or inappropriateness of any other kind of action. Thus the symbolic action, whether recognition and self-abnegation as in "The Holdfast", or recognition accompanied by metaphoric sweeping, clasping hands, renouncing worldly pleasures, asking pardon, etc., is expressed in terms of silent surrender, of passive acceptance and humility. (Herbert's speakers offer a variation on Milton's "They also serve who stand and wait": "They only serve who understand and submit").

The most famous example of a poem that achieves its resolution through playing out a series of false actions or responses is "The Collar",<sup>23</sup> insofar as it replies to God's love by seeking to escape from it.<sup>24</sup> Probably the first thing that strikes the reader—aside from surprise at the uncharacteristically violent tone—is that all the trappings of nature and freedom that are placed in opposition to service, are not portrayed seductively. This is clearly not a poem about choosing to delight in nature rather than to toil in the traces. All the natural

<sup>23</sup> Works, p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Stein, p. 123.

things the speaker compares to his dreary service: the wine, corn, fruit, flowers, etc. are described negatively as emblems of something lost. One realizes that these things are not the issue; the speaker is rebelling against his own perception of himself. Indeed, the entire tone of the poem alternates between extremes of self-contempt and self-pity. ("Shall I still be in suit?/Have I no harvest but a thorn . . . " 6-7; "Is the yeare onely lost to me?/Have I no bayes to crown it?", 13-14). One of the speaker's false responses, then, is to himself. As soon as he rejects God's service, he can no longer see himself in perspective; without God's love to bolster him, the self becomes a prison that binds him faster and more menacingly than the "suit" (6) he casts off. (One thinks by contrast of Herbert's last message to Nicholas Ferrar and the many conflicts between his soul and Jesus Before "I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master, in whose service I have now found perfect freedom." )<sup>25</sup>

As the poem progresses, his imagery grows wilder<sup>26</sup> reflecting his greater loss of self-control and self-perspective. The further the speaker flees from his accustomed point of reference, the more blurred his focus. His second false response is a kind of metaphoric inversion of time and nature. Even as he frantically frets over recovering what he has lost, he implies that nature should bloom out of season and that time should be in some sense reversed or at the very least redeemed.

("All wasted?/Not so, my heart: But there is fruit,/And thou hast hands" 16-18).

<sup>25</sup> Works, p. xxxvii.

<sup>26</sup> cf. Summers, p. 92.

The third and implicit false response is not immediately apparent, but is contained in the evocative deliberate images: thorn, blood, cordial, wine, tears, crown. Professor Patrides' brilliant analysis of this inner poem in little defines these interacting images as, "the broad circumference of the traditional vision of history". The speaker is unconsciously re-enacting the Fall:

His initial resolution to escape 'abroad' is deliberately phrased by Herbert in language reminiscent of man's first disobedience ("there is fruit,/And thou hast hands") . . . But at the same time he is boldly misappropriating to himself those terms which collectively remind us of man's redemption by Christ. . . . The narrator, subconsciously cognisant of the real context of his blatant aspirations, responds at last to the call not of the first but of the second Adam. His interior monologue ends, as history is to do, with the individual's absorption into the eternal. . . . 27

All three false responses are contained in and symbolized by the speaker's act of disobedience. After the Fall, Adam's perception of himself and his environment was disoriented. "As Reason is a rebell unto Faith, so passion unto Reason: As the propositions of Faith seeme absurd unto Reason, so the Theorems of Reason unto passion, and Both unto Faith."<sup>28</sup> Sir Thomas Browne's observations fit the structural movement of the poem. The speaker's rebellious passion transmogrifies rational and natural order; his "wild words" are an unnatural distortion of reason, "He that forbears/To suit and serve his need,/Deserves his load" (30-33). Both passion and reason are "rebels unto faith"; only after the speaker returns to faithful service, does he see, retrospectively, that his arguments had been unreasonable: "But as I ray'd and grew more fierce and wilde/At every word" (34-35). He is caught in the labyrinth of self-justification,

27 C.A. Patrides, The Grand Design of God (London, 1972), p. 82.

28 Sir Thomas Browne, p. 28.

for in this poem the labyrinth of "groveling wit" recognized by the speaker of "The Pearl", is actualized until Christ's intervention, "Child!" (35), defines his role for him. His penitent reply, his transformed speech, symbolize the combined recognition and action—contrition—required to restore order within himself and correspondingly, the structure of the poem.

I said earlier that one action Herbert frequently draws our attention to is the act of writing. It is not merely that writing is a kind of action; speakers incorporate their attitudes toward writing into the dominant mood of the poem. Aesthetic criteria for Herbert are virtually inseparable from matters of faith. His poems of despair also express despair that his pen is idle or his wit inadequate to his acknowledged task of praising God. His poems of thanksgiving express gratitude that God has restored his ability to write; his poems of prayer entreat God to send him, as a sign that his prayer has been heard, a better wit or voice or pen with which to sing his praises. As Professor Colie puts it very neatly, "writing [is for Herbert] a sign of grace."<sup>29</sup>

Barren inactivity in "Employment (1)",<sup>30</sup> is expressed in terms of a temporary inability to write. The active response the speaker makes is an entreaty that God will give, "one strain/To my poore reed" (23-24), so that he may again sing his praises. The speaker of "Deniall"<sup>31</sup> expresses his grief and inner feeling of disorder as disordered stanzas, "Then was my heart Broken, as was my verse" (3). Musical notes are

<sup>29</sup> Colie, p. 198.

<sup>30</sup> Works, p. 57.

<sup>31</sup> Works, p. 79.



interchangeable with words in Herbert's symbolic system; the speaker asks God to "tune his breast" (26) even as he prays so that the sign of grace will be manifested in his mended rhyme. (They and my minde may chime,/ And mend my rhyme." 29-30). In "Dulnesse"<sup>32</sup> the speaker laments his lack of understanding--an essential precondition to the response of writing, "Sure thou didst put a minde there,/If I could/Find where it lies" (23-24). He prays for a "constant wit" (25) to praise "my lovelinesse, my life, my light" (9). Courtly poets contribute to his despair because they can "cure" their "quaint metaphors" (7) so glibly and sharpen their Muse" (20), on unworthy objects of desire. This comparison between courtly and sacred love poetry that has so often been commented on in Herbert's poems (especially in the two "Jordan" poems) has particular significance for the synthetic response of action and understanding I have been talking about.

For unlike the courtly love poet who searches for a clever metaphor, a pleasing rhythm, who hopes his stylistic accomplishments will find favour with his lady, the poet-personae of Herbert's poems must first be inspired by Truth itself. In order to write about "true beaultie", the speaker must purify his heart, purge "sugred lyes" (21) of the flesh so that the words he pens are both beautiful and true. Consequently the psychological states of mind of the speakers are intimately linked to a specific self-examination that has either proven fruitless or fruitful in terms of understanding the truth in words and expressing them in poems. In poems like "Dulnesse" and "Deniall" the speakers trace unsuccessful

responses: either God has not yet answered the prayer for understanding or the speaker's wit has not been adequate to his task.

In other poems like "An Offering" or "Obedience",<sup>33</sup> the poem itself is the concrete embodiment of the title's expressed theme in much the same way that the pattern poems are about their subjects and are literally their subjects. The response of obedience is conveyed by the act of writing, "My God, if writings may/Convey a Lordship any way/in . . . Let it not thee displease" (1,2,4). The poem becomes the act of contrition, "On it my heart doth bleed/As many lines, as there doth need/To passe it self and all it hath to thee." (6-8). It is also the gift that affirms part of the "rate and price" of the speaker's love. In "Gratefulnesse"<sup>34</sup> the gift of the poem is bartered in a pun; the speaker asks for "a gratefull heart/See how thy beggar works on thee/By art" (2-4). The speaker is artful in two senses: in terms of the poem's fiction of wheedling one more gift, that of gratefulness, from his benefactor, and in terms of the fullness of his art which praises God "brimfull": "Such a heart, whose pulse may be/Thy praise." (31-32).

The response of art is also inextricably linked to the emotional--the heartfelt--response. In "The Flower",<sup>35</sup> one of the loveliest of Herbert's poems, recovered health, mental and physical, is heralded by the poet's renewed ability to write. His heartfelt thanks, his quickening senses, and his artful praise are all conjoined, "I once more smell the dew and rain,/And relish versing: O my onely light." (38-39).

<sup>33</sup> Works, p. 104.

<sup>34</sup> Works, p. 123.

<sup>35</sup> Works, p. 165.

Thus the speaker's emotional state of mind, the "something understood" implied in his response, the act of writing, are synthesized in the artifact of the poem. And the poem as artifact serves as concrete evidence that the speaker's harmonized efforts and understanding are inspired by divine grace.<sup>36</sup>

In both "The Temper" poems<sup>37</sup> the speakers' expressed problem is that the harmony of response and understanding that enables them to praise cannot be sustained. Like the speaker of "Giddinesse" who says man is "some twentie sev'rall men at least/Each sev'rall houre"<sup>38</sup> (3-4), the speaker of "The Temper (1)" describes the "vast extent" (9) of his emotional fluctuations between the heaven of assurance that God loves him and the hell of despair that he has deserted him (5-9). He wishes his sense of God's presence to be tempered, constant, he fears the polarity of feelings from joy to despair. As so frequently happens in Herbert's poems, the entire tenor shifts as the speaker recognizes the error of his response, "for when the speaker is able to say 'Yet take thy way; for sure thy way is best' (21), he removes the obstacle to his singing of God's praises; that obstacle is not his uneven spiritual experience, but his too easy interpretation of that experience as a sign of God's desertion."<sup>39</sup> As in "Deniall", the same musical image "tuning

<sup>36</sup> "The Dedication", Works, p. 5, really initiates this theme of the poet responding to God through writing and stipulating while he writes that the poem--and the response--really belong to God. "Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee;/Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came,/And must return." (1-3).

<sup>37</sup> Works, pp. 55-56.

<sup>38</sup> Works, p. 127.

<sup>39</sup> Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, p. 159.

of my Breast" (23) fuses the emotional understanding to the act of creation. Recognition of his false perspective enables him to "make the music better" (24).

Similarly, in "The Temper (2)" the speaker acknowledges that his "powers" (9) fluctuate according to the movements of divine grace; God the Creator--and the source of the poet's creativity--dissolves his invisible palace of grace as mysteriously as he creates it. The poet-persona can only respond to the inscrutable cosmic artistry by praying that he may serve at "thy higher Court" (15) and that his verse may be bent to God's will.

"Jordan (1)"<sup>40</sup> is a more superficial response to "truth in Beautie" (2).<sup>41</sup> The speaker's famous flourish "Who plainly say, My God, My King" (15), has a rather defiant ring to it unlike most of the humble re-made responses I have been discussing. Professor Fish characterizes the ambiguous tone of the poem very well: "Even the relinquishing of the graces of art is so artfully done as to elicit our aesthetic approval. He does not lose his rhyme by simply saying "My God, My King", But gracefully and carelessly recovers it (from an approving God one assumes). This is one poet who has his humility and his private triumph too".<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Works, p. 56.

<sup>41</sup> cf. Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, pp. 195-196; and Tuve, p. 188, who says "the problem is simply seen and simply solved".

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

The tone of "Jordan (2)"<sup>43</sup> is more consistent with the transformed speech and response of say, "The Elixir". As in "The Collar" and "The Holdfast", too, it is Christ who transforms the speaker's speech and response; he intervenes to point out the beauty inherent in truth. In the last stanza the speaker discovers his words, his "trim invention" (3), have been self-serving, "So I did weave my self into the sense" (14). He is caught as it were, in mid-flight of excessive busyness; in making the business of writing the poem a response to himself, he has neglected his father's business. The false response is activated by a false assumption or understanding: "Decking the sense, as it were to sell", (6), is not pleasing to the buyer.<sup>44</sup> Christ gently corrects his false response by pointing out that he has misunderstood his role. "Herbert, absorbed in his own inventions, is bid by his Lord to 'look into thy heart and find what I have already written (in its fleshly tables).'"<sup>45</sup> Christ "re-writes" the poem by transforming the speaker's response even as he writes, but he also gives the speaker to understand that the real creative act has already occurred, has already been written. The speaker, however, has not understood the significance of that which is "readie penn'd" (17). "Thy word is all, if we could spell"<sup>46</sup> is the sort of rueful admission that fits the theme of "Jordan (2)"; false responses are virtually unavoidable since one cannot read the "fleshly tables"

43 Works, p. 102.

44 God is the "buyer" of the poem offered penitently by the "seller" in "Obedience".

45 Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, p. 199.

46 Works, "The Flower", l. 21, p. 166.

until Christ spells them out. Responding to what Christ has "readie penn'd" on the heart is symbolized by the metaphoric action of re-writing the poem after a rigorous self-examination. In this process Christ is the active agent, for he has transformed the speaker's understanding and the implied action is the retrospective analysis of his former self-involvement. The speaker tells the reader in effect, "Christ made me see how I had woven myself into the sense and showed me the way out of the labyrinth of my own design; my response is the remade poem".

If the rewritten poem is the artifact of the remade response, how, in aesthetic terms, is it necessarily a better poem? In "A true Hymne",<sup>47</sup> the speaker says, "Whereas if th' heart be moved, / Although the verse be somewhat scant, / God doth supplie the want." (16-18). Is it enough to say only, "My joy, my life, my crown" (5)? Surely the speaker is not talking about the poet's craft per se; "we do not therefore think Herbert believed that this was the way to write poems, and that the individual details of thought and expression might safely be ignored because they would leap intervening stages if only 'th' heart be moved'".<sup>48</sup>

The answer is given somewhat ambiguously at line seven. The few simple words of praise may take their part among the best in art, "If truly said". As is frequently the case in Herbert's poems, conditional words are significant. One reads the absolute statement, "The finenesse which a hymne or psalme affords, / Is, when the soul unto the lines accords" (9-10), placing conditional, "if truly said" parenthetically beside it.

<sup>47</sup> Works, p. 168.

<sup>48</sup> Stein, p. 9.

The second conditional, "If the words onely ryme" (13) is a restatement of the first. Truth must inform the metre and meaning of the verse. But it is not an easy thing--as so many false responses have indicated--to speak the truth in poems. How is it accomplished?

Herein lies the brilliance of Herbert's subtle rhetorical manipulation of speaker and reader. The structure of the poem traces, as it does in so many others, the process of self-examination. In order to write a poem that speaks the truth as well as rhymes, the poet must scrutinize his actions, his response, the very act of writing; "the metaphor of writing is superseded in the poem by the fulfillment of the end of expression--here a confirming act, which writes and rhymes as poetry but means as metaphor".<sup>49</sup> Writing the poem is metaphorically the realization of the active response; the speaker merges with the renewed, remade understanding cum response the poet has created, like the dancer into the dance or the servant sweeping in "The Elixir". No doubt this sounds needlessly complex and abstract, but consider the poem's structure.

Nowhere does the speaker say, "all you have to do is write a few pious words and God supplies the want". No; the very enormousness of the undertaking, "He who craves all the minde, And all the soul, and strength and time" (11), should dispell any notion that the speaker is advocating sincerity at the expense of thought and technique. It is very difficult to talk sensibly about a process that works so ambiguously. The closest I can come is to use one of Arnold Stein's words in a slightly different context. Stein writes, "The meanings which are compressed and released by the word represent a train of psychological action which in turn

stands for, or may be given, an abstract formulation; but the work directly invokes the action, and only later, for those of us who wish to press on, the abstraction".<sup>50</sup>

I think "compressed" is a wonderful adjective to describe the effectiveness of a word like "scant". "Although the verse be somewhat scant" 17. Herbert's words are richly evocative and as Stein notes, the words release meanings which represent "a train of psychological action" in ourselves and the speaker. Thus we see, time and again, personae give up, transform, remake, their responses in acts of submission and in symbolic surrendering of lines to God. God writes the end of the poem, "Loved", in answer to the speaker's request, and the very fact that he has made the request, surrendered as it were, the line, metaphorically, "makes th' action fine". The "something understood" of our journey as readers is that the scant compressed verse shapes our understanding so subtly that we come to see the resolution of paradox. Compressed, slow-releasing meaning weaving through thought and feeling-- i.e., "Loved" written on heart and in mind--does make both a better poem and a "true hymn". And again we are made to see the most passive action of surrender is really the most active, for it recharges thought and sensibility with the awareness of its immediacy and the consciousness that it must constantly be renewed.

Sometimes the renewed response of reader and speaker merge almost seamlessly into the writing and reading of the poem:

<sup>50</sup> Stein, p. 10.



Let the wonder of his pitie  
Be my dittie,  
And take up my lines and life:  
Hearken under pain of death,  
Hands and breath;  
Strive in this, and love the strife.<sup>51</sup>

(49-54)

For the speaker, lines and life, divine love and the offering of the poem are all one as he simultaneously partakes of Christ in communion and submits his will in the act of creating the poem. For the reader, the active response is the "striving", the interacting of thought and feeling.

Other times the renewed response does not "succeed" unambiguously to divest the verse of the trappings of individual will, the "sweet phrases, lovely metaphors".<sup>52</sup> (13). Professor Fish points to the difficulty the speaker of "The Forerunners" has in giving up "Lovely enchanting language" (19): "we hear the voice of someone who is exercising all his powers in a heartfelt attempt to avoid admitting that he must let them go".<sup>53</sup> This avoidance pattern is accentuated by the prominence of "Perhaps" at line thirty-three.<sup>54</sup>

Why one may ask is this particular speaker of a presumably late poem expressing reluctance to give up the very sort of poetic language that speakers of earlier poems—"Jordan (1)", "Love (1)", "Love (2)", etc.—have scorned? The answer to that question is quite simply that Herbert practiced what Professor Fish neatly terms "the aesthetic of the

<sup>51</sup> Works, "The Banquet", p. 182.

<sup>52</sup> Works, "The Forerunner", p. 176.

<sup>53</sup> Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, p. 220.

<sup>54</sup> cf. Fish, Ibid., p. 219-220.

unfinished".<sup>55</sup> I do not believe one can trace--as I argued in the Introduction--a linear procession from a "body of conflicts" to a "plateau of assurance" in "The Church". Consequently one finds early poems like "Jordan (1)" and late poems like "The Posie" confidently offering plainly spoken poetic truths as the active response, and late poems like "The Forerunners" expressing reluctant acquiescence. "The Forerunners" does conclude with the sort of action we have come to expect; its closing oxymoron of self-surrender mirrors the refined humble tasks performed "as for God" in "The Elixir".

The "bleak paleness" of self-abnegation that renders all within "livelier" (35-36), is reminiscent of Milton's angels in "The Nativity Ode" who "sit in order serviceable". The angels closest to God on the highest rung of the celestial hierarchy perform the least seemingly active yet paradoxically most active task of contemplating the divine majesty. Spiritual action does not necessarily imply physical movement. The speaker, through his surrender of that which is valuable to him--the beauty of his art--performs his "service" most actively; in attempting to give up all he has to purchase "one pearl of great price", he metaphorically brings himself closer to eternal "loveliness". The harbingers of winter and death cannot claim the "lively" heart dedicated to God. This spiritual and poetic surrender constitutes the active response, but as Professor Fish argues, the response is not given unreservedly.<sup>56</sup> Death is a near palpable presence in the mood of the poem and at times one almost feels the ability to create enchanted language stands in the speaker's

55 Fish, The Living Temple, p. 154.

56 cf. Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, p. 223.

mind for the security of the old familiar creative acts, the known things of life as opposed to the "bleak paleness" of winter to come, the unknown which God may recreate or make "livelier" as he sees fit. The speaker knows he will play no part in that act of transformation: "The rhythm of regret and renunciation is sustained until the very end; the values which compete in the poem are still competing when the last word is read."<sup>57</sup>

In my Introduction I outlined my reasons for saying that "The Church" does not end on a "plateau of assurance" as many critics would have us believe.<sup>58</sup> I also agree with Professor Fish who acknowledges that one wishes it were otherwise; one would like to feel that "Love (3)" resolves all conflicts.<sup>59</sup>

I am only going to discuss this last justly-celebrated poem<sup>60</sup> as a kind of summing up of points I have argued in this chapter and the two previous chapters. Arnold Stein's masterful reading of "Love (3)" concurs with some of the positions I have taken throughout this chapter although his emphasis and conclusion differ somewhat from mine.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Fish, *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>58</sup> See my Introduction and frequent citations to Martz, Lewalski and Vendler who all share this perspective.

<sup>59</sup> cf. Fish, The Living Temple, p. 136.

<sup>60</sup> Works, p. 188.

<sup>61</sup> I read Professor Stein's reading of "Love (3)" when this chapter was partially written. I differ with him on the issue of the transformed poem, which, as I've argued already, I see as the aesthetic embodiment of the active response and understanding. Stein says the poem is "consumed", p. 195.

Stein describes the fictive action of "Love (3)" as, "a dialogue in which symbolic questions, answers, gestures and silences are exchanged".<sup>62</sup> These exchanges are reminiscent of other debates as in say, "Dialogue", speakers stubbornly adhere to a variety of false responses each of which Christ refutes until the true response is understood. The speaker's discovery of the appropriate response is, in effect, an acknowledgement that Christ has already claimed him or superseded his response in some way: he has already written on his heart, granted his suit, prevented all grief, suffered all suffering, and subsumed even his capacity to love and express love as a separate act. Stein notes "The poem begins with an entrance already accomplished",<sup>63</sup> and it is not too farfetched to extrapolate and recall other actions Christ has pre-empted: lines "readie penn'd", grief "prevented", and "Lov'd" written almost before the speaker formulated the question.

When the speaker confesses he is "Guiltie of dust and sinne" (2), Christ doesn't, at that point, remind him of "who bore the blame" (15); instead he inquires after his needs like a good host. Stein says the fact that Christ specifically asks the speaker if he lacks anything (6), suggests the religious view that all creation lacks something. "If they know themselves they will recognize this longing [to be complete] as the true source of their desires".<sup>64</sup> But Herbert's speakers usually do not know themselves or are at least reluctant to know themselves until the knowledge is inexorably thrust upon them. A parallel paradox is found

<sup>62</sup> Stein, p. 191.

<sup>63</sup> Stein, p. 192,

<sup>64</sup> Stein, p. 192.

in the conflicting attitudes expressed toward suffering and grief I discussed in chapter one. Various personae attempt to respond to Christ's suffering without entirely surrendering their personalities; they yearn for the physician to make them well yet are reluctant to submit to the corrosive cure: the purgation of self-will.

The speaker of "Love (3)" clings to active responses he can perform without losing himself. But Christ will not let him serve without partaking of the love bond: he must accept his role, "You must sit down, says Love and taste my meat" (17). As he acquiesces, he remakes his response; the act of partaking of Christ's body is, at once, a symbol of self-surrender (and therefore passive) and a symbol of transformed understanding of his role in relation to God (and, therefore, most "serviceable" or most active). It resembles "The Elixir", in which the servant who sweeps "as for God's laws" merges with his action like the dancer in the dance.

The active response of taking communion is performed immediately, in time, but it is also timeless. "The particular fictive scene and debate are revealed as a ritual that re-enacts a religious mystery of timeless recurrence".<sup>65</sup> It is timeless in another sense too. The final resolved action of "Love (3)" completes the creative "ritual" and the poem as artifact of remade response and understanding is both silent and yet, like Eliot's chinese jar, "moves perpetually in its stillness".<sup>66</sup>

Stein describes this process differently: "When the union is consummated, so is the poem—not finished, not even transformed, but in

<sup>65</sup> Stein, p. 195.

<sup>66</sup> Eliot, "Burnt Norton", p. 194.

effect consumed".<sup>67</sup> I do not think the words so much disappear as they re-form metaphorically; in the mind of the reader they come to mean something new. We experience an awareness that the speaker's response is renewed even though we know it to be a momentary resting point.

Professor Fish argues that "Love (3)" is not a conclusive poem; other "doubts and questions"<sup>68</sup> may well follow he says, and I am in complete agreement with this statement. However he also argues that the sense of closure we are left with at the end of the poem is imposed rather than earned.<sup>69</sup> I think this is both true and untrue. It is certainly true insofar as Christ transforms the speaker's understanding of his role as he does in so many other poems; the speaker cannot reshape his response himself, this much is clear. But I think one feels at the same time an "earned silence"—transitory to be sure—that is derived from two opposed perspectives: on the ~~one~~ hand an awareness that the artifact has a discrete identity, on the other, the sense that for the poet, "poetry does not matter".<sup>70</sup> These antithetical viewpoints, the still completeness of the poem and the charged understanding of the metaphoric meaning that moves beyond the poem, are momentarily balanced in the reader's mind as the last word is read.

<sup>67</sup> Stein, p. 195.

<sup>68</sup> Fish, The Living Temple, p. 136.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>70</sup> Eliot, "East Coker", p. 198. Arnold Stein quotes Eliot in a similar context, in which he says he strives "To get beyond poetry", Stein, p. 195.

All the voices of response in "The Church" are what Eliot calls "ventures": "new beginnings and different kinds of failure".<sup>71</sup> For the speaker of any of Herbert's poems can never sustain the moment of stillness and the knowledge that this impermanence is ineluctable often weighs heavily upon him. Yet he strives: "Strive in this and love the strife".<sup>72</sup> He strives to recover the response that has been lost and found and lost again until he can say with Eliot, "For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business".<sup>73</sup>

✓ But there is one form of compensation. In grappling to accommodate words and their associated meanings to the truth and to express the painful process through which the truth is momentarily apprehended, sometimes the poet succeeds in perfectly reproducing the eternal moment in which "something is understood". The journey the reader makes through the poem yields a sudden glimpse of "that refining fire"—the live coal touched to the poet's lips that restores his movement, "in measure, like a dancer".<sup>74</sup>

71 Eliot, pp. 202-203.

72 Works, "The Banquet", l. 54, p. 188.

73 Eliot, "East Coker", p. 203.

74 Eliot, "Little Gidding", p. 219.

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