

*ALEMBIC*

Alembic  
The Literary Magazine of  
Providence College  
Vol. 52 No. 2  
December 1972  
Editors  
Charles O'Neil Jr.  
Patricia Slonina  
Advisor  
Jane Lunin

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Picture

Thomas F. Maguire, Jr.



*The first moment in love is the fact that I do not want to be, for myself, an independent person and that I, were this the case, would feel defective and incomplete. The second moment is that I win my independence in another person, that I am affirmed in that person, and vice versa. Thus, love is the most formidable contradiction, which the mind cannot resolve. For there exists nothing as unyielding as the singularity of my self-awareness—which must be negated and which yet I need to have affirmed. Love is both the creation and the resolution of this contradiction; as its resolution it is moral communion.*

*Hegel, Philosophy of Law*

*I to my Beloved, and my Beloved to me.*

*Canticle of Canticles*

## Babci

I.

I couldn't understand on Christmas Eve  
why we never had a baby—  
it was always the crucified Jesus  
laying on tin foil  
in the center of the table,  
with candles on both sides.  
I remember we knelt  
on the kitchen floor  
and said grace.  
Father helped you  
get off your knees  
and sat you in your chair,  
and I was so little—  
I wanted to blow the candles out.

It was like *you* were the priest  
since Djadzu died;  
beginning with your oldest son  
you'd give us hosts in honey  
with your old country hands—  
even the babies got some.  
I hugged you tightly each year  
as if it were the last.  
You always kissed me  
and wished me to "be a good girl"  
and I secretly hoped  
that you thought me special.

You went to the cemetery with my father  
to put flowers on your husband's grave.  
You knelt for a few minutes, blessed yourself  
then brushed away the dead leaves  
that covered up your names.  
Leaving, you would pat the stone  
and say to him,  
"Next year, maybe, I will be with you."

II.

I went with my father to your house  
when he checked the water pipes  
and re-lit the small fire.  
He wound the clock,  
tried the kitchen lights,  
and ran the water.  
There was no medicated smell  
that used to tingle my nose  
when I bent to kiss you.  
I would have liked to find  
some trace of it lingering in your chair.

III.

The Christmas before you left,  
my parents gave me an angel  
with a blue robe  
that played a Brahm's lullaby.  
I showed it to you  
and you loved it as I did.  
You told me how lucky I was  
and to save it for my children.

Last night, a week before Christmas,  
I missed you.  
I shut off the radio  
and took the angel  
from the top-shelf in my bedroom,  
wound it, and watched her turn slowly.  
I wanted to send it to you  
like my prayers,  
but I was afraid  
the wings might break.

Patricia Slonina

## On Christmas Eve

At Newport the winter night gets to my bones.  
The pound of surf against the cliff walk  
sounds like tanks, rumbling  
over the frozen ground at Buchenwald.  
I think of my father,  
a tank sergeant in the war,  
his binoculars hanging  
earning the Bronze Star for efficiency.

The year after the war  
he guarded the iron gates  
of the deserted Electric Company,  
even on Christmas Eve  
so there was food enough and presents.

One night I shoveled snow for him,  
but he came home and yelled  
about the shovel left out.  
I felt bad.  
That night I dreamed  
of the green-ribbed Braga bridge,  
of falling down the black air—  
smacking the river with my back.  
I could not scream,  
but a voice beyond my voice cried,  
“My God, My God!”  
I jumped up in bed—  
a sharp December morning  
with the sound of shovels scraping the walks . . . .

I listen to the surf a minute more.  
A barge chugs toward the far shore  
where dockworkers wait to secure the lines.

I go back to the car feeling bad  
for their children opening presents  
on Christmas without father.  
I catch myself like my father  
pumping the gas  
to keep it from stalling.

Joseph Osborne

## for Carl

We played Hi-Lo-Jack  
for a nickel a point  
on the sidewalk  
near St. Peter's School.

You shuffled and dealt  
like an expert mechanic,  
even after the gloss  
was scratched off the cards.

In the eighth grade  
your name was inscribed  
on the American Legion plaque  
in the hallway of St. Peter's,  
hung next to the statue of the Blessed Mother  
because you had the best marks  
of all the boys . . . .

You were first in math at college.  
Christmas vacation you were home  
for a New Year's party—  
we planned to get drunk together.  
We knelt behind a rack of paperbacks  
in the drugstore,  
as you figured liquor-prices on a napkin.

After that, I saw less and less of you.  
For your grandmother's funeral  
you came home,  
wearing a baggy gray suit.  
You looked under weight  
and jerked your head  
to keep the hair out of your eyes.  
In the drugstore after the wake  
I went up to you  
and you said you were doing O.K.,  
so I left you at the counter  
poking at the ice  
in an empty soda glass.

I saw you for the last time  
in the summer,  
in an old Dodge  
parked outside Friendly's.  
You shifted in the seat  
and wanted to deal me some dope.



That Christmas,  
my father called and said  
you shot yourself at the police station  
with a patrolman's gun.  
All I could think of  
was the time you were nine  
and had a new BB gun,  
and how you were too scared  
to tell your father  
you shot out the kitchen window.

Paul McNeil

### **Priests' House**

This stone house was my home  
where I drew the floor-shadows  
from the latticed windows  
and learned to stand motionless  
when bumblebees came into my room.

My father sold our house to the priests.  
Now the latticed windows are hidden  
by an overgrown hedge,  
and there's a Dominican in my room.  
I met him once,  
while shuffling through a path  
of unraked leaves.  
He told me he didn't know I was a girl  
until he heard me laugh.  
We talked about fish meals on Wednesdays  
and about the green vase  
he found in his closet.

He doesn't know  
the vase is charred because  
I burned my love poems in it  
when my father found them.

I know more secrets than this priest.  
I know that under the cement slabs  
beneath the drainpipes  
are the same toads and lizards  
I found when I was eight.

Christine Altieri

## **Song to the David**

for my father

From the heavens, white  
as the milk from Jersey cows  
tiny stars drift alone  
to join upon the earth,  
to insulate the ground against  
that sub-zero Goliath which kills  
the life within my bosom.

David, David,  
your calm repose belies your strength  
the pallor of your skin,  
a marble snow.

Ana Margarita Cabrera

### **of human leaving**

in late October  
creatures clad in gaudy suits  
revolt  
cut the umbilical cord,  
swan dive from the trees in legions  
to cartwheel on the lawns  
and dance like tiny demons.  
I am pursued  
by little bodies crackling  
the uniqueness, they enjoy  
a brief interlude  
until, dead and brown,  
I rake them into bushels  
and cremate all the corpses.

Ana Margarita Cabrera

## Making Something Happen

*The Poems of Mao Tse-tung*, translated and edited by Willis Barnstone in collaboration with Ko Ching-Po. Harper and Row, 1972. 149 pp. 4.95.

The number of good political poems in the English-speaking world during the last hundred years has been small. In a former time, Chaucer's for example, the idea of a private, continuously tormented poet would have seemed alien, possibly ludicrous—Absolom in *The Miller's Tale* is perhaps a satirical instance. But after the Renaissance, the poet's own consciousness becomes more and more a value in itself; and less and less does that consciousness feel obliged to side with traditional "Authority," "Nature," or even with the party currently in power. In the case of some Romantic writers such as Wordsworth and Shelley, there is as yet no *assumed* gap between the personal consciousness and a public commitment (though a gap has been read back into them by some later commentators); but with the rise of Industrialism, with its mechanistic and economic assumptions of mass, and the growth of Utilitarianism, with its shallow moral criteria of 'usefulness' and wide public benefit, the personal vision of the poet appears much more suspect, now merely "private."

At first the poets are nonplussed, then apparently disdainful, and finally aggressively nonpolitical. Tennyson has enough public criticisms to make but he uses the oblique form of the dramatic monologue spoken by an ancient and familiar character such as Ulysses. In *Maud* he allows his Utilitarian reader the stupid pleasure of shrugging the poem off as idle if somewhat regrettable psychosis. Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater, operating on the principle of art for art's sake, have little difficulty in eschewing politics. Into the twentieth century and up to the present time the assumption lingers, possibly in reaction to Utilitarian standards, that art is autonomous, governed by its own rules and answerable to itself. To make poems public, political, and even partisan is somehow to make them less autonomous and less poetic. "Poetry makes nothing happen," Auden writes; Yeats is asking an evidently rhetorical question of the new Helen-Maud Gonne: "Was there another Troy for her to burn?" Even the very political Robert Lowell tends to see himself as "frizzled, stale, and small"; and Robert Bly, in a recent attempt at political poetry, turns ultimately from the cruel ineptitudes of the Johnson administration, from the body politic, to the light around the human body.

At first glance Mao Tse-tung does not fare much better. On their simplest level his poems would strike a Westerner as propagandistic. "Militia Women" is an example. Written in 1961, it is a boyish hooray for Women's Lib, new China style:

Early rays of sun illumine the parade grounds,  
and these handsome girls heroic in the wind,  
with rifles five feet long.

Daughters of China with a marvellous will,  
You prefer hardy uniforms to colorful silk.

This is the entire poem. A similar instance is the "Poem for Liu-Ya-tzu," celebrating the founding of the People's Republic in 1950. Four other poems of the 1960s, written while conflicts developed between Russia and China, are somewhat more disguised in their imagery; but references to the Russians as "insects" and "houseflies" are obvious enough.

Admittedly these poems come at the end of Mao's career and may not be representative. After all, he has now *won*; where else in the book will you find poems in which mountain-climbing is mere exercise, where even swimming across the Yangtze, Chairman Mao ruminates, he might dam the river upstream and make "a calm lake" here?

On the contrary, more and better poems appear earlier in the book, especially during the months of the Long March (October 1934-October 1935). Here images of rugged hills and mountains recur often; the trails are wearying, a constant challenge, but the soldier-poet accepts the challenge. He is rewarded, on the peaks, with embracing visions of the China landscape, resplendent blue-green slopes and valleys. This is essentially prophecy: to see his own future (the far hills he must still scale) is to see the future of China—and the vision occurs in the present. At times he believes that he and his men are the mountains holding up the heavens—"the sky is three feet away"; they are durable as the rock all around them and piercing as the cold.

"Snow" is surely the most interesting of these poems and, as the Notes tell us, Mao's most popular work. The first section is striking as a celebration of nature which is ambivalent. The poet sings of the apparent splendor of these "north lands" with their mountains dancing in his vision like snakes and their hills galloping like elephants; but images of cold, white, and non-living things also abound in the ice and snow, the "vast tundra," the frozen Yellow River, and even the metaphorical snakes and elephants are described as "silver" and "wax." The second part of the poem is still more striking. The poet now reflects on the past, as Mao often does in his writing; but here not with the reverential attitude of the young Chinese towards his elders. Rather, the emperors Shih Huang and Wu Ti "were barely able to write," the poet tells us, others were "crude," and Genghis Khan himself, though "favored of heaven," could only "hunt the great eagle." The poem ends with a confident affirmation of the politics of the present: "They are all gone. / Only today are we men of feeling." Possibly a light on this striking turn of poetic events is the remark by Willis Barnstone in the Introduction that the emperor Shih Huang "systematically gathered and burned earlier books," since he "wished time and history to begin with him." In his own poem Mao has succeeded in associating, by juxtaposition, the frigid and lifeless aspects of the landscape with the inert political systems of an earlier time. "Snow" is a burning of the books—and of ancient imperialism—poetically.

Perhaps Mao succeeds most, therefore, as a political poet when he works with the continuum of time and space, allowing these many-colored noumena to symbolize the political and personal past and present. "Capture of Nanking" is another example. The poet contrasts his present sense of elation and power, symbolized by the rain and windstorm, the "spinning" sky and "the earth upside down," with the lost opportunities of the past, represented by the overlord Hsiang Yu, who idealistically gave too much power to a defeated rival. The poems of Robert Lowell have also been cited as examples of this technique: the paintings and cathedrals of Europe go down before a simple saturation bombing; King Philip's War is a distant and ineffectual shadow upon today's tourism in Massachusetts. Another of Mao's poems in a similar vein is "Region of the Great Pines." It contains one of Mao's best brief passages:

That year the battle was hot at its peak.  
Bullet holes pit all the front village walls.  
Today they are decorations  
and the hills and passes are beautiful.

But although foreshortening of the temporal perspective here is a technical achievement, the implications of the contrast between past and present are somewhat elusive. Whereas Lowell habitually finds the present politically disastrous, and sometimes the past no better, Mao frequently leaves the reader to conclude that political hopes are now possible. Singing of living and growing things, finding in his enemies the stuff of comedy, he often leaves room for no other conclusion.

That Mao should be sanguine and Lowell anguished may be no more, at this juncture, than the difference between East and West. And both may be deluded; it is possible to argue, in Mao's case, that his persona seems ignorant of the eventual doom of all political absolutism, and that the triumph of his "culture" is Western-based, impersonal, crudely technological, and militaristic.

But as a *poet* Mao is characteristically immersed in nature and the traditions of Chinese verse. As Barnstone and Ko Ching-po make admirably clear, Mao is always "filling in" some centuries-old poetic structure—much as he would advise younger poets against this procedure—and much as he himself criticizes rulers of the past. It is also difficult to find a great deal of "technology"—or of the West at all—in his poetry. The poems of the Long March are a record of a struggle for survival against all odds, natural and human as well as political and military. In fact it seems closer to the truth to say that a victory for the KMT, with its armies led by Chiang Kai-shek and eventually force-fed with American money and supplies, would have represented a much more "Western" turn for China than the founding of the People's Republic.

Mao does not make claim much for himself—his works "are not much as poetry," he writes to a friend in 1957. And in truth, many of his early poems have a restrained but unoriginal nostal-

gia; poems later in life are marked with unoriginal joy at his own successes—though again the restraint is usually there. But a collection of his poems still has considerable value, not only for the useful remarks on Chinese versification and history by the editors, and not only because Mao Tse-tung is the principal figure of recent Chinese history. His poems also prove, at their best, that literary style and political forces can work together. His poems, to paraphrase Auden, do make something “happen”: they open the doors again of imaginative possibility. They do this best, it seems to me, when the personal life of the poet grows out of his political life, and vice versa; when the continuities and even discontinuities of the past and present are pulled together in the grip of his imagination.

“The Gods” may serve as a final example. Mao’s wife, Yang Kai-hui, had been beheaded in 1930 by the KMT for not renouncing Mao as her husband. Nearly thirty years later Mao published this fanciful, mildly ironic, and finally touching poem, which runs in its entirety as follows (according to the editors, the tiger is probably Chiang Kai-shek):

I lost my proud poplar and you your willow.  
As poplar and willow they soar straight up  
into the ninth heaven  
and ask the prisoner of the moon, Wu Kang,  
what is there.  
He offers them wine from the cassia tree.  
The lonely lady on the moon, Chang O,  
spreads her vast sleeves  
and dances for these good souls in the unending sky.  
Down on earth a sudden report of the tiger’s defeat.  
Tears fly down from a great upturned bowl of rain.

Edward Mc Crorie

You dragged your feet when you went out.  
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,  
Too deep to clear away!  
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.  
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August  
Over the grass in the West garden;  
They hurt me. I grow older.  
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,  
Please let me know beforehand,  
And I will come out to meet you  
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

**pastoral, for paula**

I race over each night  
wild with fright a sleek black  
horse looking to hide  
under your impetuous covers, love

I catch for a breathless moment  
your butterfly arms they soothe  
my heaving back before you're off  
again in every direction

and I, knowing better than to follow,  
turn back to my own pastures  
arriving with the sun

Gene Gousie

**"By thus shall you know the last winter . . ."**

g.g. 10:16

She entered, laying the evening out,  
wall to wall grey  
to sink our feet in, to bathe in.

Apostle of the cold, gone away  
three seasons, now back in our bones.

No apologies, no explanations.  
Light the fire, heat the stew.

The meat for the stew? She  
brought it along, dragging it  
from the city whence she came,  
more than enough to see  
us through, I'm afraid.

She may not have to go  
back for more. What do they say?  
Everyone's moving to the country?

Gene Gousie

## The Well, Salamanca

Grey clouds form a dome  
over the courtyard of the House of Shells.  
I scuff the stone patio  
to the old well, past Diego the Dominican bishop,  
a statue in the over-grown weeds.

I lift the iron lid.  
It wakes Diego from his sleep.  
I hear him whisper, "leave here."  
He's afraid I'll disturb  
this cup of blood,  
this well where he lost his family  
in wedding after wedding  
to the brides of the House of Shells.

But I scan the girth of the well  
and climb down the scales  
to satisfy my gypsy curiosity.  
On the bottom is a moss-bed,  
a damp chamber  
where devils nibble at any vow I make.

I knew if I stayed down here  
they would kill my love poems;  
I went back up  
because my hands were cold.  
On my way out  
I look over my shoulder  
and see for the first time  
Diego has no hands.

Gary Bortolot



**from**  
**History of the World as Name Calling**

part IV, The Source

I would tap the mountain  
at its source. The birds  
know it is the peak.

The arms of the sun are  
brown; a wrestler's arms, thighs  
locked in a boulder's daze;

as I have loved you down-  
ward to the very earth which is  
terrible in its brownness, always  
the bottom of singing.

And we are alone with our feet  
where we began from is  
a grin, mere  
theory concerning bone, but I

    tell you we started from the top  
    of things, of words that knew  
    us from the beginning and tell us

never let go.

Jane Lunin

## Closets

I

I open mine—there's a girl in a heap on the floor.  
She's been hiding a long time, sitting, hugging  
her knees pretending to be a blueberry  
(to make sense out of the darkness.)

She wanted someone to come and scold her out  
but I'm too late. So I cry and kiss her ivory forehead.

II

Oh I admire your closet! The meditational  
excellence of your sleeves suspended  
on your personalized hangers.  
The absence of children in a closet

makes for a tidy one. Your shoes stand  
as leather equations or sturdy commas

attending appropriate spaces. Also the belts  
are the hands of monks pressed into  
the posture of prayer. Sweet smelling.  
Everything is and you have never tripped

over stones that you saved that fell  
out of your pockets. Will you ever  
understand how I adore you or why  
when you're gone I stare longingly into it  
or why I go painting those conch shells  
silver and leave them like candy between the pairs of shoes.

Jane Lunin

In reading Father Coskren's article, "The King's Good Servant,"  
the page sequence is as follows:

I, IV, V, II, III, VI

Please make allowances in reading this article.

Thank you.

## The King's Good Servant: Tone in George Herbert's *The Temple*

While Izaak Walton's *The Life of Mr. George Herbert* reads, at times, as if it had been lifted from the hagiography typical of the Roman breviary, and thus strains credulity, there is an important passage in the work which provides a key to identifying the tone of *The Temple*. And, strangely enough, the passage is somewhat less than complimentary to Herbert "the saint," for it points to the quality of worldly ambition in the poet. Yet it is not merely playing with words to say that this description of worldly ambition characterizes the spiritual achievement recorded in *The Temple* more accurately than any of the other passages in Walton's biography. For the poet of *The Temple*, more than the George Herbert of Cambridge, is one who had "the love of a Court-conversation mixt with a laudable ambition to be something more than he . . . was," and who "seldom look'd towards (the world), unless the King were there, but then he never fail'd." It is a sign of the validity of Herbert's Christian ascetical-meditative experience, and thus of the accuracy of his poems as expressions of this experience, that he remains essentially the same person before and after the experience. For such is the central paradox of authentic Christian life, that what is worst in a man in his mundane pursuits generally is transformed into what is best in him in his spiritual achievement. Basically, *The Temple* exemplifies the cardinal principle of all Christian living, as stated by St. Thomas Aquinas: "grace perfects nature according to the mode of the nature, since every perfection is received in a subject capable of perfection according to its own mode." And the specific nature revealed in the poems of *The Temple* is the nature of the courtier.

That *The Temple* is a record of Christian asceticism is obvious both from the poems themselves and from Herbert's description of the work (reported by Walton) as "a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master." That the work is also a result of Christian meditation has been ably demonstrated in Louis L. Martz's *The Poetry of Meditation*, in which work Martz clearly indicates the intimate connection between the poems and the method of meditation formulated by St. Francis de Sales. And it should be noticed that the asceticism revealed in *The Temple* is itself Salesian. This Salesian aspect lends a particularly gentle quality to the spiritual conflicts and struggles as they are captured in Herbert's verse, however wrenching the experience of conflict may have been for him personally. For example, the potentially despairing stanzas of a poem like "Misericordie" end gently in a quiet moment of self-assessment:

But sinne hath fool'd him. Now he is  
A lump of flesh, without a foot or wing  
To raise him to a glimpse of blisse:  
A sick toss'd vessel, dashing on each thing;  
Nay, his own self:  
My God, I mean my self.

There will I lie, until my Maker seek  
For some mean stuffe whereon to show his skill:  
Then is my time. The distance of the meek  
Doth flatter power.

Herbert has taken one of the acts in the ritual of ordination, when the candidate for priesthood prostrates himself full-length in the sanctuary, and used it to show the infinite distance that separates a man from God. But rather than concentrate on the distance as such, he uses it to suggest that God is flattered into showing His infinite power when, through the bishop, He *raises* a man to the sacerdotal office. He sees the whole situation as something like the risk of personal abnegation in an earthly court which allows a king to demonstrate this power by elevating one to a position of glory, even though that person must be unworthy.

The tone of *The Temple*, however, indicates that the risk taken by the courtier must always be within the parameters of courteous behavior and speech. The courtier must be, in the full sense of the word, a gentleman. Probably this quality is most apparent in a poem like "The Collar." The opening lines of the poem are rude, indeed blasphemous, if the full sense of the word "board" is understood:

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more.  
I will abroad.  
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?  
My lines and life are free; free as the rode,  
Loose as the winde, as large as store.

Within the context of *The Temple*, there can be no doubt that the "board" is the altar of sacrifice and communion. Here the courtier has taken the risk, not only of discourteous speech at his Lord's table, but has also announced that he is a totally free agent—something utterly inconceivable in the vassal-lord relationship. But the risk is taken in language only to highlight the exquisitely balanced affirmation of dependence in the submerged apology of the last lines:

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde  
At every word,  
Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*  
And I reply'd, *My Lord.*

Another aspect of the courteous tone of *The Temple* can be seen in the poet's humor, which is the humor of the perfect gentleman:

Whither away delight?  
Thou cam'st but now; wilt thou so soon depart,  
And give me up to night?  
For many weeks of lingering pain and smart  
But one half houre of comfort to my heart?  
  
Me thinks delight should have  
More skill in musick, and keep better time.

This humor, moreover, is an intelligent humor, or better, a *knowing* humor. It implies a state of security with the King, a sense of safety. The courtier need never fear that his presence is unwanted; only he himself can bring about banishment from the court. The courtier understands that the King enjoys his presence. The beautiful rendering by Herbert of "The 23rd Psalme" conveys this awareness of the King's good pleasure more per-

factly perhaps than any poem in the work, except for "Love (III)," in which the Lord Himself presses the total gift of Himself in the Eucharist upon the abashed courtier, who understands his unworthiness:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sinne.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
    If I lack'd any thing.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:  
    Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
    I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
    Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?  
    My deare, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:  
    So I did sit and eat.

It is perhaps in the word "Eucharist," moreover, that we can discover the essential serenity of *The Temple*. The word means "thanksgiving," and there can be no doubt that George Herbert is aware of the meaning. I think it would be wrong to view the poems as a kind of chronological sequence, attesting to growth in the spiritual life. Indeed, chronology is not apparent in the poems. What is apparent, however, is an attempt to sum up the total experience of prayer, particularly the prayer of thanksgiving and praise, in which a human life is offered as sacrifice on the altar of the human heart within the human body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, the deepest tone of *The Temple* sounds in the depths of a human being who realizes that God has offered Himself as gift in the identity of friendship. The courtier is thus allowed to become identified with the King in a mysterious relation of grace; their wills are one. And *The Temple* is one long hymn of thanksgiving, in which the rhythm of this friendship is celebrated. The laments, the longings, the afflictions, the searching, the grief, even the sins, are not so much present realities as they are remembered experience, which now provide a topic of conversation between inseparable friends.

I should say, therefore, that George Herbert's *The Temple* expresses not so much a search for the presence of God, but rather a continual awareness of that presence. But at all times, it is the presence of a God who is both King and Friend to His courtier. Thus, the tone of the work is one of affectionate reverence, of loving security, of joyful serenity; and such a tone serves to link Herbert with a spiritual tradition, exemplified best in the early modern period with St. Francis de Sales, but which, in fact, is much older in the Western world: Herbert's tone is remarkably like that which we discover in the writings of the German mystic, Henry Suso, although Suso, a true son of his own country and century, presents the portrait of the knight conversing with Divine Wisdom.

Moreover, the opening section of *The Temple*, "The Church-Porch" (which is basically a kind of ascetical guide-book in verse), suggests a rather fully developed index to St. Francis de Sales's *Introduction to the Devout Life*: an examination of the chapter headings alone to this great spiritual manual reveals Herbert's affinity for the topics discussed and the Salesian manner of treatment.

Having recognized the importance of the Salesian spirituality in *The Temple*, however, in both the meditative and ascetical aspects of the work, we have not yet isolated the essential character of Herbert's genius, which reveals most fully the poet's tone: his attitude towards the material structured in language and his attitude towards the Person addressed in the major section of the work, "The Church." The Salesian tonality is undoubtedly best summed up, as Martz suggests, in the line from "Prayer (I)": "Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse"; but, in *The Temple*, it is Herbert's softness, peace, joy, love, and bliss which matter.

In this regard, I think that it is important to recognize—especially in "The Church"—that the poet, while still echoing the Salesian method of meditation, has gone beyond it; indeed, he has achieved the central purpose of this method, *viz.*, to abandon method. In this transcending of a particular method of meditation, however valuable it may be, he reveals his own voice; or, in terms of the theological principle quoted above regarding grace perfecting nature, he reveals his own inner being which has been elevated by divine aid according to his own individuality, his own personhood.

This individuality is announced, unmistakably it seems to me, in the first stanza of "The Church-Porch":

Thou, whose sweet youth and early hopes inance  
Thy rate and price, and mark thee for a treasure;  
Hearken unto a Verser, who may chance  
Ryme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure.  
A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies,  
And turn delight into a sacrifice.

The "sweet youth and early hopes" which "mark (one) for a treasure" certainly apply to Herbert himself, to the young man whose talents attracted the attention of a king and pointed him out for secular advancement. The poet seems to be recalling his own former condition, and he addresses his poem to one with similar prospects. But such prospects are surely those of the fledgling courtier. In this regard, the opening line of the fifty-ninth stanza is revealing: "Scorn no man love, though of a mean degree." Such a line makes little sense, unless it is directed towards one of the nobility, or at least towards a man whose education makes him equal to the nobility. And the divisions in this section of the poem, as they treat of the courtier's duties towards himself, his neighbors and his God, echo, however faintly, the discussions of Castiglione's humanists.

It is not, however, in this section of the poem that Herbert reveals his individual tone fully; "The Church" finds him speaking to his King in a manner conformable to one who possesses "the love of a Court-conversation." He is a courtier perfectly at home in the formal ceremonies of the heavenly court, insofar as this court is imaged in its earthly reflection, the Church. Thus, while the opening poems of this section of *The Temple* are most certainly sacramental in character, the poet's attitude towards the spiritual

communion he celebrates is essentially that of a nobleman in the presence of his Lord. His function is not only to attend the royal procession and banquet; as an accepted friend, as well as servant in the sense of vassal, he feels obliged to entertain his King. I do not mean to press this point too far, but such lines as

My musick shall finde thee, and ev'ry string  
Shall have his attribute to sing;  
That all together may accord in thee,  
And prove one God, one harmonie,

suggest that the poet has never really abandoned his position as Orator: he will continue to praise his King for the gifts He has given, but no longer can the accusation of flattery be brought against him. In the words of St. Francis de Sales: "That mortal who does not desire to love the divine Goodness more loves Him not enough; sufficiency in this divine exercise is not sufficient." One has only to examine a poem like "Prayer (I)" to notice how the language of "curteisie" has been used to express the most delicate form of praise, describing the kind of conversation which obtains between a vassal and his Lord; what would be denominated as extravagant flattery in the merely human situation of an earthly court here takes on its just proportions as accurate assessment of the courtier-heart in conversation with God.

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,  
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,  
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;  
Engine against th' Almightye, sinners towre,  
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,  
The six-daies world transposing in an houre,  
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;  
Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,  
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,  
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,  
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,  
Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls  
bloud,  
The land of spices; something understood.

This quality of the nobleman speaking to his King and praising Him is Herbert's kind of softness, peace, joy, love and bliss: all of these attributes pertain to one who is at home in a court, who knows the language of the court. And the reason that the language does not seem forced or extravagant is that Herbert pays attendance at the court whose Lord is the Prince of Peace, whose name is Love.

One objection that comes immediately to mind opposing the view of *The Temple* as the dialogue of nobleman and King, however, is the marked liturgical character of the poems. Are not the poems in *The Temple*, especially those of "The Church," really prayers? To answer this question one must say "Yes." And having admitted this fact, one must then say that prayer transcends any such superficialities as usually attend frivolous court conversation. But, the objection is easily answered: these are the prayers of a nobleman. Even in the poem "The Priesthood," we find a kind of holy calculation, which suggests the courtier awaiting the favor of the King:



Since this essay began with a suggestion that Walton's *Life of George Herbert* resembles a story from the Roman breviary, it may be well to conclude with a passage from the breviary, recounting the life of another nobleman, another courtier, who had devoted his life to celebrating the gift of the Eucharist, in poetry as well as in prose. This courtier is St. Thomas Aquinas. We read of one episode in his life during which the King engaged him in courtly conversation:

While he (Aquinas) was in Naples praying fervently before the image of the Crucified Lord, he heard these words: Thomas, you have written well of Me. Therefore, what reward will you accept? To which he answered: Nothing else, Lord, except Thyself.

Although the languages are different, as are the centuries, the total simplicity expressed in Aquinas's reply, with its own softness, peace, joy, love and bliss, prefigures the quiet conclusions to many of George Herbert's poems. The poems of *The Temple* give ample proof that Herbert and Aquinas served gratefully in the same court.

Thomas M. Coskren, O.P.

## Memorial

### 1. Dominican Cemetery

Snow collects  
on the arms of the memorial cross  
in the Dominican cemetery.  
The gray-stone lines of crosses  
do not shiver  
with their wet faces.

Under slush  
a tipped-over pot of old flowers  
refuses to speak,  
like the statue of Mary  
the priest carried off  
the day he set up the new one  
they liked in the art department.

I remember some of the buried.  
Sometimes, when they were sick,  
I'd bring breakfast trays to their rooms  
along the flat tan corridor.  
They sat in yellow robes  
resigned as Buddhists,  
their rosaries cupped in their laps.  
One of them gave me a gray suit,  
it was too tight—I felt sorry  
I had to give it back.

Before the stroke I used to see him  
in the long line of priest faces  
saying grace in the dining room—  
with a basket of bread every sixth space  
and milk in tall silver pitchers.

Three weeks after he died  
his hand-carved napkin-holder  
was still in place  
on the table near the coffee urn,  
with a fresh napkin in it.

## 2. Grotto

The three tall pines in the Grotto  
sag with snow.  
Always on their knees  
the winged angels  
look like they need gloves  
and hot coffee.  
The pulpit stands in a drift.  
The snow smudges  
the letters a little  
on the plaque near the Infant  
where it reads:

*"The more you honor Me  
the more I will bless you."*

No one remembers very well  
why the Grotto was built.  
It had something to do  
with the soldiers we lost  
in the Second World War.  
No one remembers very well  
but it's always there,  
like an old hymn  
nobody sings anymore.

On cold October evenings  
back in the fifties, I heard,  
the chaplain's voice boomed  
down Eaton Street on the loudspeakers  
as he led the Rosary from the pulpit.

Now, once or twice a year, it's filled.  
At graduation, the year of Kent State,  
the name-plaques honoring the dead  
were draped with long black streamers  
that covered the Rosary statue.  
There was a twisted tree  
in the center where a year later  
the skinny lead singer of a rock band  
screamed with guitar and drums  
at a voter-registration rally.  
It didn't shake the Infant  
nor the globe of the world,  
firm in His left hand  
and pulled in close to His shoulder.

The Grotto's empty now.  
Even the bulbs are gone  
from the large bronze torches  
in front of the kneeling angels.  
The Angelus sounds from St. Pius  
as a priest in a heavy cape  
cuts across the Grotto for the wake  
at the President's house,  
where somebody is laid out.

Snow is falling on the five crosses  
carved in the altar top,  
drifting over the globe  
in the Infant's hand.  
He is used to winters  
and the empty pews.  
He waits there  
like a kid with a gift,  
looking down the back of Aquinas  
for somebody small to give it to.  
The globe is frosted  
like a birthday-cake.

Charles O'Neil Jr.

