

THE PARADOX OF THE CHRISTIAN POET:
GEORGE HERBERT'S PROBLEMATICS

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The thesis examines the paradoxes in Herbert's poetry and attributes the many contradictions and vacillations within The Temple to Herbert's own "spiritual conflicts" as a Christian poet. The thesis explores the poems as interconnected expressions of Herbert's dual nature as Christian-Poet.

The thesis discusses over sixty of Herbert's poems, concentrating on close readings and intratextual connections. Chapter One reviews critical approaches to Herbert's poetry and outlines the study. Chapter Two examines Herbert's life and the expression of his struggles in poetry. Chapter Three discusses Herbert's poetry itself and comments on the deceptively simplistic style. Chapter Four explores the conflict between the worlds of the Christian and the poet. Chapter Five concludes that, more than merely an artistic exercise or catechistic tool, Herbert's poetry accurately records the duality of the poet's spiritual journey.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This thesis examines the characteristics of George Herbert as a Christian poet of the early modern period. Throughout, I explore the duality of Herbert's rhetorical art and his Christian sincerity. From this discussion I derive some conclusions about the relationship between these two aspects of the Christian artist and address whether great poetry and great faith must be, as critics such as Stanley Fish suggest, mutually exclusive.

I begin by addressing the inherent ambiguity of Herbert's poetry and the wildly varied criticism this uncertainty has generated. The poetry of George Herbert is striking in its complex simplicity, and this paradox has engendered a proliferation of contrary readings. Seemingly straightforward poems have produced a number of curiously opposed reactions and critics have constantly quibbled over the essential nature of Herbert's verse. Stanley Fish, in his article *Catechizing the Reader*, summarizes the major trends in modern criticism of Herbert by dividing the critical world into two camps. He notes,

The distance traveled by Herbert criticism in the past thirty-five years can be measured if we juxtapose two statements by Helen White and Helen Vendler. In 1936, Professor White wrote that "there is less of surprise in

[Herbert] than in most of the metaphysicals, more of inevitability.” In 1970, Mrs. Vendler opened her essay, “The Re-invented Poem” by declaring flatly that “one of the particular virtues of Herbert’s poetry is its extremely provisional quality; his poems are ready at any moment to change direction or to modify attitudes. (199)

The expanse between these two sides may be initially difficult to understand; many critics avoid the problem by discussing the surprise of Herbert and the comfortable anticipation of his poems all in one breath, perhaps not without justification. Herbert’s poetry seems to be at once static and changing, simple and complex, concise and rhetorical. It is, as the criticism suggests, both surprising and inevitable. Fish asks, “How is it that a Herbert poem can contain and communicate both?” His answer presents us with an interesting dilemma when attempting to read Herbert: he argues that “the surprise is staged; either it is a fiction designed to illustrate dramatically a truth known to the poet from the beginning, or it is a recreation, in verse, of a spiritual crisis he has successfully weathered” (200). He further notes that this realization influences our view of Herbert. The author becomes “that much less of a Christian as he is acknowledged to be that much more of a poet” (200). In his book *The Living Temple* Fish expands upon this idea and asserts that the interpretation of Herbert basically comes down to a question of “art and sincerity” (8).

Essentially then, we must decide how we read Herbert: many critics agree with Fish’s assertion that that he is either a good Christian and solidly dull, *or* a good poet and smoothly changing. A good Christian, Fish points out, would never in good conscience

dramatically manipulate a poem for effect, and a good poet would never hesitate to make a poem more effective by utilizing surprise and dramatic impact. Therefore, Fish reasons, Herbert must be one or the other.

To separate the artist and the verse, however, as has become common in most post-modern Herbert criticism, seems to eliminate the intense, intimate, personal voice that permeates Herbert's poetry. Fish acknowledges that, "The problem then is to find a way of talking that neither excludes Herbert from his poems (by emphasizing their order), nor makes them crudely autobiographical (by making them all surprise)" ("Catechizing" 200). He suggests a model wherein Herbert acts as a Socratic "Questionist-poet" (201), whose main goal is to educate his flock. For Fish, the problems of *The Temple* decrease when the entire work is viewed as a didactic or "catachistical model" (211).

This seems to be part of the solution to understanding Herbert. Yet it seems to me that life and faith are more complex than the rather simple dualistic system Fish initially submits. By removing Herbert from his poems, I would argue that many modern critics have excised the most important part of *The Temple*. In this thesis, I assert that George Herbert is both good Christian and good poet, who uses his poems not only to educate his congregation, but also to recount the confusing and often contradictory experiences of his life as a Christian.¹ As his poems contain both simplicity and complexity, so does his faith. Rather than begin with an either/or supposition as Fish does, I want to examine Herbert first as a Christian and then as a poet. I have explored both these subjects as independent yet interrelated to one another; each seems to complement and inform the other. I have divided my discussion into three main areas: the poet's life, his work, and

these two in conflict. Chapter 2 discusses the poet's life and his external exhibitions as evidence of his adherence to and vacillation from Christianity. I will draw on Izaak Walton's biography extensively, but I also plan to look at the poems themselves as an indication of what Herbert thought about the lot of the Christian and the vicissitudes of his life. Chapter 3 closely examines the various rhetorical and poetic conventions Herbert employs in his poems, focusing more on the work in relation to the man rather than the man in relation to the work. Chapter 4 brings these two elements together and comments on the complexity of Herbert and indeed the Christian poet in general. Finally, Chapter 5 offers a summation and some conclusions. Throughout this thesis I have tried to include major critical approaches to Herbert, but I have privileged more established, general criticism over books or articles with an admitted political or cultural bias. In doing so, I hope to present traditional readings of Herbert as they relate to the subject of his Christianity. There has been little dispute over the text of *The Living Temple* itself since an apparently authorized version was published shortly after Herbert's death. I have retained the original spelling and punctuation in an effort to relate Herbert's words as they originally appeared.

CHAPTER 2

THE CHRISTIAN'S LIFE

Izaak Walton's *Life of Herbert* gives witness to the claim that Herbert was a good Christian; in fact, Walton's account is so shining that one cannot help but wonder as to the veracity of his almost saint-like depiction of Herbert.² Yet however exaggerated Walton's account may seem, it is substantiated again and again by others. In 1681, for example, Richard Baxter wrote that "*Herbert speaks to God like one that really believeth a God*" (136). In fact, the evidence supporting the argument that Herbert was an exceptional Christian seems so certain that many critics simply take his faith for granted. Margaret Bottrall observes,

There is one straightforward sense in which all the poetry of Herbert can be described as metaphysical. Not a single lyric in the *Temple* is addressed to a human being or written in honor of one. The love that inspired him to poetry was in the primary meaning of the word metaphysical. . . . Herbert was constantly concerned with the relation between the finite and the infinite, the human and the divine; but his concern was practical. He wrote as a devoutly believing Christian, who strove for a closer knowledge of the God whom he worshiped and served. . . . It is the welfare of the soul that interests Herbert; he never tires of contemplating the ways in

which God deals with his creatures. . . . His consciousness of the interrelations of time and eternity, visible and invisible, mortal and immortal, differs from that of the genuine metaphysical poets in being founded on an extraordinarily assured and unquestioning faith. (134-36)

Perhaps Bottrall's description of Herbert's faith as "unquestioning" is not quite accurate. In both his poetry and his life, Herbert seems to question everything involving his faith. But I agree wholeheartedly that his beliefs oftentimes appear "extraordinarily assured." Herbert's life and poetry are permeated by his faith, so much so that Joseph H. Summers claims that Herbert's poetry and his religion are "intimately and inextricably interrelated in *The Temple*" (11). For Herbert, his faith dominates his life and his poetry alike; in both, we see his incredible trust in the will of God.³ At the same time, however, I would be reticent to claim that there is no element of surprise or modification in Herbert's poetry. As Aldous Huxley has observed in "Texts and Pretexts,"

The climate of [Herbert's] mind is positively English in its variableness and instability. Frost, sunshine, hopeless drought and refreshing rains succeed one another with bewildering rapidity. Herbert is the poet of this inner weather. Accurately, in a score of lyrics unexcelled for flawless purity of diction and appositeness of imagery, he has described its changes and interpreted, in terms of a mystical philosophy, their significance.

Within his limits he achieves a real perfection. (13)

"Variableness" and blessed assurance. How can we reconcile these two contrasting elements? Perhaps the answer lies in the duality of the human condition itself. As

Valerie Carnes states, “Although all things in the *Temple* originate with God and must return to Him, yet within the larger cycle leading to this predetermined end, there are vacillations, alternations, the ‘double motion’ of the soul that yearns simultaneously for heaven and earth” (385). Herbert’s devotion to Christ and fellow man is, it seems to me, undoubtedly genuine and intense; yet at the same time he is human – changing, fluctuating, growing. He is a man, subject to all the faults and failings that the flesh is heir to. Many of the problems encountered in Herbert’s poetry arise, in fact, not so much from his being a Christian artist, but from him being a Christian human. There is a built-in complexity and paradox in all he says or does.⁴

According to Walton’s *Life*, before Herbert died he charged Mr. Duncon to deliver his book *The Temple* to Mr. Ferrar, saying that he should “find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my Soul” (Walton 56-7).

Douglas Bush notes that Herbert, as opposed to Donne,

has a far more truly religious preoccupation with everyday fulfilment of the divine will here and now; the quiet Herbert is also a more subtle artist than the explosive Donne. If the modern reader sees inner tension as a prime essential of metaphysical poetry, no writer has more than [Herbert]. (142)

Herbert’s poems are not the pictures of his unerring piety, but rather the portrayals of his inner turmoil and his attempts to ameliorate the confrontation between God and his soul.

Chana Bloch comments on how Herbert sees the Bible as a “diligent collation of Scripture with Scripture” (229) and argues, “Herbert’s remarks about the collation of texts reveal how he himself read Scripture: what is more, they offer a glimpse, I believe,

of how he went about writing his poems” (53). His poems, whether consciously—as Bloch argues—or unconsciously, are interrelated and intertwined; in each, we are given a glimpse of the poet. When looked at collectively, we might hope to see his entire portrait.

In “Miserie,” Herbert contemplates the state of mankind.⁵ He sees the human as a foolish, dirty, blind, ignorant creature unworthy of praising God: “How can infection,” he asks, “Presume on thy perfection?” Once a priceless treasure, the human has diminished to no more than a useless wretch. Herbert observes,

Indeed at first Man was a treasure,
A box of jewels, shop of rarities,
A ring, whose posie was, *My pleasure*:
He was a garden in a Paradise:
Glorie and grace
Did crown his heart and face.

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 shelf:
My God, I mean my self.⁶

The shock of the last line relates something very important to our understanding of Herbert’s poetry. As Christopher Hodgkins notes, up until the final line of the poem, the

speaker has mercilessly enumerated the vices, deformities, and destructive tendencies of mankind. He constantly uses the third person, referring to mankind as “he” and “they.” But in the final line, the persona—Hodgkins imagines him as the preacher speaking of his filthy, uneducated flock—turns the criticism back on himself. “Here, in the final word,” Hodgkins says, “the indignant ‘Preacher’ turns the full force of his contempt on himself. Like Paul or Bunyan, he is ‘chief of sinners.’ He has nothing on the bumpkins” (196). In this, we see an aspect of Herbert that is significant to his poetry: his self-awareness. He is fully aware of his own mortal failings and human inadequacies; he knows that he is nothing without God except “a foolish thing” subject to “Folly and Sinne.” Richard Strier suggests that this denial of merit—theologically tied to the Protestant Reformation—represents an important theme in Herbert’s poetry (1-28). In addition, the omnipresent pall of death hangs over the poet and his fellow man, reminding us all that we are but flecks in Time’s hourglass and all we are, all we do, will someday pass away. “Mortification” relates the oppressive presence of death in man’s existence. As Sharon Cadman Seelig argues, the poem presents a striking

image of the perpetual movement of death within that which we call life.

In fact death is the secret pattern, the hidden reality of life. It operates as a kind of undertow through Herbert’s stanzas: the first part of each stanza announces a phase of man’s life; the second counters with an image of death. “Death,” which ends the seventh line of every stanza, rhymes with “breath,” which ends the third line of every stanza, thus suggesting the inseparability of the two and the movement of one towards the other. (33)

Herbert realizes the indissoluble link between life and death and, in the poem's title, puns on the word "mortification" to emphasize the motifs of the poem. Not only does he realize that this mortal flesh will mortify and decay, he is also mortified by his human condition. Finally, admitting his imperfections, he calls upon God to aid him, perhaps hoping to mortify his unruly passions and flaws:

Man, ere he is aware,
Hath put together a solemnity,
And drest his herse, while he has breath
As yet to spare:
Yet Lord, instruct us so to die,
That all these dyings may be life in death.

In the last two lines, we see Herbert's resolution to accept God's guidance in his life and recognize this as an attempt to deal with the double nature of his own existence. As a Christian, this duality is further complicated by the belief that he is not only dead in life and alive in death, but also perfect in imperfection and at peace in turmoil. Herbert comprehends this paradox and discusses it in his poetry. In "The Size," he says,

A Christians state and case
Is not a corpulent, but a thinne and spare,
Yet active strength: whose long and bonie face
Content and care
Do seem to equally divide,
Like a pretender, not a bride.

Unlike some of Herbert's other poems, "The Size" does not express the dissatisfied persona's complaint about his difficulties to God as much as it makes an observation about the duality of Christian life. Herbert knows that the Christian is equally divided between "Content and care." As Coburn Freer suggests,

in Herbert's view the simultaneity of oppression and power, sickness and health, weakness and strength, are not simply the identifying marks of his own poetry and life; they are those of every Christian. . . . The way in which Herbert's poems take him up to throw him down is nothing less than equal division, a Christian lot. (195)

Herbert recognizes that, despite his best intentions, he cannot live his life as an infallible Christian all the time. Regardless of the aspirations of his spirit, Herbert, like all men, suffers from the weakness of his human existence. When his brother Edward writes about him in his *Autobiography*, he describes Herbert's life as "most holy and exemplary; insomuch, that about Salisbury, where he lived, beneficed for many years, he was little less than sainted." He also admits that "He was not exempt from passion and choler, being infirmities to which all our race is subject" (Held 25). The Herbert that survives from the extant texts emerges as a multifaceted man, often depicted as saintly, and yet, just as often, portrayed in terms of palpable human fallibility.

Many critics speak of two Herberts, but not in the way of Margaret Fuller's fictional account of the two brothers, *The Two Herberts*; instead, they discuss the two Herberts within George Herbert himself. It is this dichotomous Herbert who creates the poetry of *The Temple*, and once the double nature of Herbert is understood, the difficulties

of understanding Herbert's works diminish. Herbert was a man drawn away from God by the affairs of the world, drawn back to God by his desire for purity and holiness. He lived as a man of the world and as a man of God. The resultant conflict within him—exacerbated by the pull of these two insistent desires—gave his poetry that particular, original aspect which we may call his signature. His works are studies in the paradox of the Christian artist and relate the condition of the believer-poet.

Throughout his life, Herbert felt pulled by the world away from the service of God by intellectual desires, personal inclinations, and courtly ambitions. His poetry reflects this struggle and becomes, in fact, enhanced by it. His intellectual pursuits in particular enrich his heartfelt verse. As Mary Rickey observes, there is no intimation in Herbert's verse that "writing from the heart necessitates writing without the head" (10). From a very early age, academics were an important part of Herbert's life. He was educated at Westminster School and Trinity College; he became known for his learning and scholarship and was well-respected by his contemporaries. In 1625, Sir Francis Bacon dedicated his *Translation of Certain Psalms into English* to Herbert, saying that "in respect of Divinitie, and Poesie . . . I could not make better choice" (57). In fact, Herbert was so highly esteemed, that in 1619, at age twenty-six, he was made Orator for Cambridge, a position of great potential promotion. Yet this passion for learning did not wholly satisfy him. Walton notes that he "often designed to leave the University" because he thought study "did impair his health," but his mother would "by no means allow him to leave the University, or to travel" (29).

The curious figure of Herbert's mother seems to loom over the actions of his early

life. Not only does she direct his scholarly pursuits, but she also influences his vocational decisions. Only after gaining her permission does Herbert embark on any course of action. She and the poet John Donne tower over Herbert in his youth. Donne and Herbert's mother were well acquainted (Donne wrote the poem "The Autumnal Beauty" for her, and even preached her funeral sermon); and, despite what some critics may argue, the indelible stamp of Donne's poetry seems distinguishable in much of the work of Herbert.⁷ As for Herbert's mother, Walton relates an instance when Herbert approaches his mother to ask her "to allow him to become an undutiful son" (32). In the episode, Herbert asks her permission to disobey her and continue to rebuild a church. One wonders what he would have done had she refused him permission.

From Walton's account, one infers that there was in the character of Herbert a certain softness, a certain lack of health and decisiveness. Although he has moments when he may be perceived as strong and resolute, throughout the biography Walton depicts Herbert as a man easily controlled by his mother, susceptible to illnesses, reclusive, almost inclined to laziness. As Ellrodt notes,

The only world the poet gladly inhabits must be solid and full, like the boxes and chests, like the cabinets "pack't" with sweets on which he dwells lovingly. He knows "the soul doth span the world," but *his* will only "hang content / From either pole unto the centre" when heaven shrinks to a local habitation: "Where in each room of the well-furnished tent / He lies warm, and without adventure." (14)

Twice in Walton, Herbert is described as attempting to remove an illness by a "change of

air”—once to his brother’s home and once to the home of Lord Danvers. During this time, the picture of Herbert seems to be, at best, indolent. He does little, declining all “perplexing studies” and pursuing nothing but personal pleasure and rest (Walton 36).

One senses in Herbert the desire to retire from the world and concern himself with his own personal pursuits and the enjoyment of his music. Nevertheless, there was a strong ambition in him as well, a yearning for the court. Charles Cotton wrote of him,

. . . *Herbert*: he, whose education,
Manners, and parts, by high applauses blown,
Was deeply tainted with Ambition;
And fitted for a Court, made that his aim. (133)

Herbert advocated reverence to earthly kings (White 145) and attempted to win favor in the court. Walton notes that, while serving as Orator, Herbert “grew more into the King’s favor” (28) and aspired to high position. As Orator, Herbert had excellent potential for advancement, and Walton claims that he not only had hopes to become the Secretary of State, but actually stood a good chance of realizing his ambition (29). The draw of these desires was very strong on Herbert, seductively luring him into the politics of the court. So strong was the temptation, in fact, that, as Walton observes, “ambitious desires, and the outward glory of this world [were] not easily laid aside” by Herbert (31). As a result of these attractions, Herbert’s poetry is charged by his ambivalent feelings toward the world, producing, as Nuttall puts it, a “world of warm connection and violent collision and a literature everywhere rent and energized by commerce with that world” (17). In “Content,” Herbert urges “Peace mutt’ring thoughts” to his ambitious ideas, advocating a

quiet, God-directed life over a grasping, man-directed existence. He points to the fire within the flint as his model of contentment:

Mark how the fire in flints doth quiet lie,
Content and warm t' it self alone:
But when it would appeare to others eye,
Without a knock it never shone.

Like the fire, Herbert should retire from the vain-glorious exercises of man and seek instead the thoughtful, private life. Diana Benet notes that there is more in the poem than just a personal admonition to the poet to avoid the vicissitudes of the public life; the poem offers an example of how the Christian might follow the call of God:

The “knock” signals a legitimate call to action and suggests that even the Christian’s proper ambitions cannot be fulfilled without external assistance—whether such help comes from men or from grace. Without the summoning knock, the frantically scurrying thoughts can accomplish nothing. They would do well to learn patience. (135)

Herbert’s word-choice of “knock” seems particularly effective. Benet suggests that the knock is a call to action for the Christian, but the word takes on even more significance and its implications are even better understood if we consider that in *Revelation 3:20*, Christ says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, then I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.”⁸ Contentment then is found in Christ. Just as we find in many of Herbert’s poems, however, this serenity is not necessarily achieved without affliction; in fact, often we find that the “knocks” and

adversities are what lead Herbert to God. As anyone would be, Herbert becomes constantly stretched by the eternal tug-of-war between God and human. The draw of secluded isolation and the draw of political action grind and pull at the *psyche* of Herbert, resulting in a creative friction that, coupled with his recondite wit, produces the distinctive, contradictory style so readily recognized as Herbert's. As Ellrodt says, "Homeliness and sophistication meet in his poems, enriched by his worldly experience" (4).

So why, one might ask, if Herbert knows the ways of the world and has found secular success, would he, as Walton says, take the "unforced choice to serve at God's altar" (40) and decline the world's ways for Christ? The cynic might answer that the only reason Herbert pursued holy orders was that his courtly ambition had been thwarted with the death of the king. This view seems to be not only uncharitable, but demonstrably untrue. Harold H. Kollmeier points out that not only did Herbert still have considerable power after the death of James, but that he actually moved to take orders *before* James' death (191). Walton claims that Herbert later tells Mr. Woodnot,

I now look back upon my aspiring thoughts, and think myself more happy than if I had attained what then I so ambitiously thirsted for. And I can now behold the court with an impartial eye, and see plainly that it is made up of fraud, and titles, and flattery, and many other such empty, imaginary, painted pleasures; pleasures that are so empty, as not to satisfy when they are enjoyed. (39)

Herbert sees his gravitation toward the spiritual life as a natural, foregone conclusion. As

he suggests in “The Pulley,” discontentment with the earthly life will naturally lead men to God. In the poem, he tells how God pours in all virtues into man, but when

. . . almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure
Rest in the bottom lay.

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this jewell also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts in stead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
So both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlesnesse:
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodnesse lead him not, yet weariness
May tosse him to my breast.

The image, Donne-like in its unusual violence and intensity, seems especially apt for our human state: hurled back to the bosom of the Lord by weariness and restlessness; it captures all the reluctance and stubbornness of our nature. Despite evidence to the contrary, it could be argued that Herbert planned to pursue religious vocation all along, not so much hurled at God as steadily walking in his direction. Bell tells us that “Herbert’s

own immersion in theology began long before he became a published poet or country parson. On March 18, 1617-18, he wrote from Cambridge to his step-father, Sir John Danvers: ‘You know Sir, how I am now setting foot into Divinity, to lay the platform of my future life . . .’” (“Setting Foot into Divinity” 65). Obviously, Herbert contemplated the religious life long before actually turning to it. When he finally did decide to pursue holy orders, it was a conscious decision over courtly life, not merely as a consolation prize.

Many critics have wondered about Herbert’s delay in entering the priesthood and have conjectured about his reasons for doing waiting. Benet suggests that Herbert was waiting for a sign from God (198); Amy Charles argues that the poet paused because of self-doubt, frustrated ambitions for secular advancement, and Herbert’s “own admitted tendency toward delay” (112-113); Christopher Hodgkins suggests that Herbert himself gives us the reason for his delay in “The Priesthood”: that he “dared not take holy orders until he was certain of an enabling divine call” (128). In 1662, Thomas Fuller said that Herbert “waving preferment, chose serving at Gods Altar before State-employment” (88). Regardless of the reasons for his delay, however, we see the dedication of Herbert to his choice in that the sanctity of his life while parson of Bemerton seems to have been universally accepted. We can further understand the willful sacrifice in Herbert’s decision if we look at his poem “The Pearl.” The speaker in the poem claims to know the ways of “Learning,” “Honour,” and “Pleasure,” and yet, he says to God, “I love thee.”

I know all of these, and have them in my hand:

Therefore not sealed, but with open eyes

I flie to thee, and fully understand

Both the main sale, and the commodities;
And at what rate and price I have thy love;
With all the circumstances that may move:
Yet through these labyrinths, not my groveling wit,
But thy silk twist let down from heav'n to me,
Did both conduct and teach me, how by it
To climbe to thee.

In this conscious decision, this willful tribute, Herbert expresses his commitment to selflessness. He has forsaken all the worldly treasures he previously possessed, like the merchant in the parable of the pearl (*Matthew* 13:45), in order to purchase something that has real, supreme value to him. Heather A.R. Asals observes that this marks an important spiritual victory for Herbert:

The “love-knot” on the world which pulls against the speaker’s determination and destination (“Yet I love thee,” “Yet I love thee,” “Yet I love thee”) is Augustinian “cupidity” at war with its opposite, “charity.” “I call *charity*,” Augustine explains in a passage which explicates the journey of “The Church” toward “Love,” “the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of *God for his own sake*, and the enjoyment of one’s self and one’s neighbor *for the sake of God*; but ‘cupidity’ is the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of one’s self, one’s neighbor, or any corporal thing for the sake of something other than God.” (60)

Herbert steers himself from his potential “cupidity” toward the “charity” of God. He can

never conquer his human weaknesses; but in his poetry he relates the clashes of his spiritual struggle and attempts to always point everything back to God. The result of this God-directed poetry is a kind of verse that always has style defer to substance. Henry Vaughan praises the skill of Herbert and asserts that, of all those who follow in this tradition, none possess his mastery; he suspects that this is because “they aimed more at verse, than *perfection*” (Vaughan 84). Herbert, although he has the capacity to produce classical allusions and elaborate conceits, opts instead to create a verse that is simple rather than scholarly. Bottrall observes that,

Had Herbert wished to do so, he could have loaded his poetry with recondite allusions. Though he clearly felt the impact of the new learning much less than Donne, he moved in the circles most concerned with it; and he was, besides, a distinguished student of the classics, of divinity and of the art of rhetoric. In spite of this he took pains to avoid all display of erudition in his writings. (118)

Although Herbert obviously felt attracted to erudition, ambition, and worldliness, he abandons these in his writing in favor of simplicity, humility, and sanctity. He was not forced into the unpretentious spiritual life but rather chose that life just as he chose a seemingly unsophisticated style for his poetry.

CHAPTER 3
THE CHRISTIAN'S POETRY

George Herbert may indeed have attempted to avoid “all display of erudition in his writing” as Bottrall insists (118), but it would be false to contend that Herbert wrote without wit or style. Although he strove to write simply and clearly, he could not resist using poetry as an exercise in wit as well as an exercise in praise. Both “The Altar” and “Easter-wings”—two of Herbert’s best-known poems—are pattern poems; they utilize the shape of what they represent for the shape of the poem itself. Pattern poems were considered poetic exercises in Herbert’s time and “The Altar” was typical of the form commonly attempted and discussed both before and after Herbert in works such as George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589):⁹

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant reares,
Made of a heart, and cemented with teares:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman’s tool hath touch’d the same.

A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow’r doth cut

Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy name:
That, if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine
And sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine.

This poem is witty not only in form but also in substance. A number of critics have noticed the applicability of this poem to the entire *Temple* and Herbert's clever architectural imagery holds the structure together in much the same way that the metaphysical conceits cement the entire work. Herbert's play on the "hard heart" that is "such a stone" but still learns to praise reminds us that not only can the stones of the earth be taught to sing God's praise, but so can the cold stones of our hearts.

George Herbert was a very visual poet, intentionally or coincidentally constructing poems remarkable for their unusual appearance. Often, Herbert integrates these physical irregularities with the actual words in such a way that, holistically, the poem expands beyond the achievements of either the verbal or visual aspects of the verse. Mark Taylor's *The Soul in Paraphrase* argues that Herbert combines auditory and visual meanings operating not only on the level of structure and hieroglyph, but also on the "physically less obvious but equally important level of synaesthetic imagery" (85-115). He notes that the physical presentation of the poem "Easter-wings" enhances not only the audio-visual

reading of the poem, but the themes as well. The rise and fall of the poem charts the “expansions and contractions” of man’s spirit—from poverty to wealth, from sickness to health. Additionally, the poem emblematically illustrates the Easter-wings themselves, emphasizing “the fact that ascent follows descent, for Christ and for man” (85). Herbert’s use of the pattern poem is significant not merely in the fact that he used the form, but that he used it so well. Herbert did not invent the pattern poem, nor was he the only Renaissance poet to write such poems (Wither, Quarles, Joseph Beaumont, Herrick and Traherne are among the many to write poems in the shapes of altars, pillars, lozenges, and the like); he was, however, one of the few to create pattern poems with intellectual as well as physical substance. As Joseph Summers notes,

Neither the conception of the pattern poem nor the two shapes which Herbert used were at all novel. The Greek Anthology had included six pattern poems (including a pair of wings and two altars), and those patterns were widely imitated in the sixteenth century. . . . After the appearance of *The Temple* patterns were published in profusion. . . . Both before and after 1633 the literary quality of most of these poems was notoriously low. The poets seemed usually to consider the shapes as a superficial or frivolous attraction for the reader. . . . Many of the patterns depended largely on wrenched typography, and it was a common practice to compose a poem in ordinary couplets, then chop the lines to fit the pattern. (140)

Herbert seems to have understood that he was writing pattern poems within an established

tradition and used not only the trick of the pattern, but fully employed the potential advantages of the form.¹⁰

These two poems are not the only poems we may designate as Herbert's witty poems. Others include the "Ana{MARY/ARMY}gram," which discusses the appropriateness of the anagram of army for Mary, as the Lord of Hosts "did pitch his tent" within the Virgin Mary; "Colossians 3.3.," which conceals the verse, "My Life Is Hid In Him, That Is My Treasure" in a kind of diagonal acrostic within the poem (cleverly hiding within the poem a verse which talks of hiding with Christ in God); "JESU," which plays on the similarities of the sound and appearance of Christ's name and the phrase, "I ease you"; "Heaven," which ingeniously answers all the questions of the persona in the poem through an echo of the last syllables of the speaker's question: "Who will show me those delights on high?" / *Echo*. "I"; and "Paradise," which not only has the witty reduction of the final word within each stanza, but also ties the visual image of the lines being pared away with the pruning imagery of the poem:

I bless thee, Lord, because I GROW
Among thy trees, which in a ROW
To thee both fruit and order OW.

What open force, or hidden CHARM
Can blast my fruit, or bring me HARM,
While the inclosure is thine ARM?

Inclose me still, for fear I START.

Be to me rather sharp and TART,

Then let me want thy hand & ART.

When thou dost greater judgements SPARE,

And with thy knife but prune and PARE,

Ev'n fruitfull trees more fruitfull ARE.

Such sharpnes shows the sweetest FRIEND:

Such cuttings rather heal then REND:

And such beginnings touch their END.

Herbert's poetry displays an undeniable "synaesthetic" appeal.¹¹ The visual aspects of his poems immediately establish an initial, hopeful rapport with the reader. We are drawn in by the look of his poetry, held by the sense. Herbert as a poet never seems to exhaust his creative and scholarly resources. He writes in many different types and forms, creating poems that are striking in their originality and variety. In his poetry he often adapts existing structures (as he does in his "love" poems with the Petrarchan sonnet, or in "Charms and Knots" with the couplet, or in "Easter-wings" with the pattern poem) or, when nothing suits his purposes, creates his own: he mixes rhythms, rhyme schemes, line lengths, orders, shapes, and sounds. In "Deniall," for example, Herbert creates a five-line verse of alternating rhymes and varied line length. He defers the rhyme of the final line until the last stanza, emphasizing the initial discord of his soul and the satisfaction of

ultimate resolution:

Therefore my soul lay out of sight,
Untun'd, unstrung:
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,
Like a nipt blossome, hung
Discontented.

O Cheer and tune my heartless breast,
Deferre no time;
That so thy favours granting my request,
They and my minde may chime,
And mend my ryme.

By combining the musical allusions with the unusual form, Herbert visually and aurally gives the reader a sense of the persona's hesitant, faltering music. The final rhyme resolves the poem not only on a thematic level, but also on the level of sound, much like the final chord would provide resolution and conclusion for a song.

Several critics have commented on the appearance of his verse, yet few can agree on what to call it. Coburn Freer talks about Herbert's "tentative form" (194-241);¹² Joseph Summers refers to much of Herbert's verse as "hieroglyphic" (123), stressing the religious connotations of the word;¹³ others discuss Herbert's verse as "metaphysical," "Donne-like," or tied to a certain "tradition." However, despite all the different appellations for Herbert's verse, most of these critics seem to agree on one thing: the form and meaning in

Herbert's poems are inextricably tied to one another.

Often in Herbert's poetry we see that his structure reflects his subject, especially in his pattern poems. Almost as often, however, his construction can contradict his commentary. His verse will often be strong and bold, but his line weak and hesitant; or his line might be determined and resolute, while his words are uncertain. This contrary juxtaposition of form and content seems to be a deliberate technique that Herbert uses to convey the Janus-like nature of mankind. He consciously juxtaposes a line that physically suggests one thing and words that imply the opposite.¹⁴ In other ways as well Herbert consistently deceives us; we expect to be led one direction and find that he has brought us entirely somewhere else. An example of this intentional misdirection can be seen when we look at the titles of his poems. Seemingly straightforward one-word titles such as "Life," "Death," "Man," "Peace," "Sinne," or "Affliction" surprise us with their poem's content again and again. In "Discipline," for example, one might expect an exhortation for Christian restraint or perhaps even punishment. Instead, Herbert begs God to "Throw away thy wrath." We have developed our own preconceived notions about the nature of the poem and are confused, shocked, perhaps dismayed when we find that the verses are not what we expected. Sharon Cadman Seelig suggests in *The Shadow of Eternity* that this is exactly what Herbert wants us to do. By presenting such usually self-explanatory titles, Herbert has all but guaranteed that we will misconstrue his final meaning. She argues that the simple, one-word titles

constitute a direct and probably irresistible provocation to the reader to guess at the subject or the content of a poem. Such titles suggest large

subjects grandly treated; they introduce particular lyrics and parables written in homely language. One is tempted to think that these brief poems must simplify or trivialize, but if Herbert's poems seem to ask easy questions, we should not mistake for the poet's own the quick and obvious answers to which we may be prompted. (8)

In this passage, Seelig gives us important insight into the difficult question of Herbert's simplicity/complexity. Although Herbert generally uses simple words, simple titles and purports to discuss simple themes, he does not provide us with simple answers. We find in many of Herbert's poems a saccharine, mindless Christianity shattered by the poet's relentless probing. Often, Herbert commences with a staid, conservative, orthodox position, only to flip the world upside down within the course of the poem. As Seelig notes, Herbert takes easy, often clichéd Christian ideas and convolutes them to relate the turmoil of the thoughtful, feeling Christian man:

It has been customary to emphasize the tendency of Herbert's poems to return to a stable religious and artistic base, but that is to overlook the very vigorous, indeed violent, athletic experience of reading *The Temple*.

Looking from without, one may say that Herbert always comes home to his Master, but reading through *The Temple* one is struck instead by how often the poet comes home only to be discontented there, to find it less secure, less blissful than expected, to find the emotions that gave meaning to his confident declarations suddenly altered. (11)

Herbert invariably returns to the same themes and questions, never satisfied with his initial

answer. We can see evidence that this recurrence in the poems is repetitive not only in subject but in title as well when we note how many of the poems repeat the titles of previous verses: “Affliction,” “Antiphon,” “H. Baptisme,” “Employment,” “Jordan,” “Justice,” “Love,” “Praise,” “Prayer,” “The H. Scriptures,” “Sinne,” “The Temper,” and “Vanie” are all examples of titles used more than once by Herbert.

Herbert’s desire to return continually to previous ideas may be seen not only in his recurring titles, but throughout the entirety of *The Temple*. For example, Herbert’s poems often conclude with a satisfying resolution; the resolution becomes strained, however, with the immediate return of his discontentment, often in the very next poem. The two “Temper” poems give a good example of how Herbert continually undermines his poems’ satisfied conclusions. “Temper (I)” ends with the typical Christian submission to God’s omniscience:

Yet take thy way; for sure thy way is best:

Stretch or contract me, thy poore debter:

This is but tuning of my breast,

To make the musick better.

Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust,

Thy hands made both, and I am there:

Thy power and love, my love and trust

Make one place ev’ry where.¹⁵

Man’s unruly temper becomes tempered by God’s benevolent “tuning”; dissatisfied man

acknowledges that God's "way is best." In the next poem, "Temper (II)," the speaker begins with the lament, "It cannot be. Where is that mightie joy, / Which just now took up all my heart?" Again and again we see this pattern of contentment lost, gained, and lost again by the next poem.

In conveying the unpredictable state of man, Herbert often uses these conflicting emotions or situations to portray his religious experience. He stresses not only that man's feelings, faith, and fortune can change abruptly and with little warning, but that man's internal landscape can be vast enough to encompass both sides of any conflict. Herbert's poems reflect this duality on a structural level. Most notably he uses formal simplicity and complexity to illustrate this point. The lot of mankind seems, on the surface, to be a simple venture: we are born, we live, we die. In truth, human existence is infinitely more complex than that. Like life, Herbert's poetry appears incredibly simple at first, but this appearance is an illusion. Despite what many critics such as Bottrall may suggest, Herbert was a master of rhetoric and skillfully utilized the schemes and tropes of classical rhetoric within his poetry. However, because of his objective, his audience, and his message, Herbert camouflaged his skill in simple, parochial language and form. As Chana Bloch notes,

Herbert's poetic style is so compressed and rhythmic that many of his lines have a proverbial ring. This tendency is reinforced at points by antithesis (*"Hard things are glorious; easie things good cheap"*), rhyme (*"Who wants the place where God doth dwell, / Partakes already half of hell"*), alliteration (*"Hearts have many holes"*), or enumeration (*"Angels must*

have their joy, / Devils their rod, the sea his shore, / The winds their stint”). Herbert’s maxims include sound practical observations of the world in which he lives:

Each beast his cure doth know.

A rose, besides his beautie, is a cure.

Where are poysons, antidotes are most.

and the penetrating notions of a man who has made human nature his study:

Cold hands are angry with the fire, / And mend it still.

The distance of the meek / Doth flatter power.

What is so shrill as silent tears?

Where proverbial wisdom is used as a figure of elaboration, as in most of these instances, it establishes the speaker as a shrewd, seasoned observer, a man of prudence and understanding, who dares to “*speak / Plainly and home*”—helpful qualities in one who presumes to teach. (188-89)

Herbert, a complex poet, always strives for simplicity. He demonstrated the knowledge and skill to write with erudition and sophistication but chooses not to. His “Jordan” poems advocate simple expression in poetry, and he gives the following example of good speaking in *A Priest to the Temple*: “. . . the character of [a parson’s] sermon is Holiness; he is not witty, or learned, or eloquent, but Holy” (233).

The urge for simplicity and lack of ornamentation seems twofold. First, Herbert speaks plainly because he is first and foremost a parson: he always has one eye fixed

firmly on his flock. Second, he writes as Arnold Stein says, “with the intention of being overheard by him” (160): he always has one eye fixed firmly on God. The language appropriate for both these audiences, for different reasons of course, is an uncomplicated, honest dialogue. The poetry is given too little credit if one assumes that, because the language is simple, the themes are simple. They are not. Because he is dealing with contradictory philosophical and theological ideas, Herbert’s poetry has a way of saying more than it seems to say.

CHAPTER 4

THE CHRISTIAN'S CONFLICT

The duality of George Herbert's poetry perfectly reflects the dichotomous existence of the Christian human. The verse explores numerous paradoxes without compromising the unique separateness of each experience. As Ellrodt states, "His most deeply-felt paradoxes bring together but never confuse contrary notions, indissolubly connected in human experience: the finite and the infinite, time and eternity, life and death" (12). We begin to understand in Herbert the notion of the double-sided man. One half of him aspires to heaven, while the other half feels the fire of hell and the tug of earth's seduction. Herbert understands that man can be a noble, God-seeking creature, as we see in "Man," and at the same time be an ungrateful, foolish wretch, as in "Miserie." Man is an unreliable, unpredictable force. As Herbert says in "The Temper (I)":

Although there were some fourtie heav'ns, or more,
Sometimes I peere above them all;
Sometimes I hardly reach a score,
Sometimes to hell I fall.

It is not entirely the human's fault that he cannot climb to God on a sunbeam, as the persona of "Mattens" wishes to do. Man's existence is not painted in the primary colors of happiness, struggle, and affliction; the colors are mixed as the experiences and feelings are

mixed. As Seelig observes, Herbert's notions of pain and delight are intermingled; in addition, he sees sin and punishment as one (32), such that in "Sinne (I)," we find "sorrow dogging sinne" as a natural occurrence. In *God's Courtier*, Marion White Singleton sees Herbert's vacillations as moments of strength and moments of "backsliding" (150), but I would argue that "backsliding" represents an oversimplification of Herbert's complex turmoil. The poet never seems to resolve his inner spiritual conflicts. He can achieve a small respite from the questions and concerns that are tearing at him, but he never reaches a point of contentment in God with nothing more to ask, nothing more that bothers him. He is constantly pulled from vice to virtue and back again, never able to anchor himself fully and finally on either side. These conflicts are compounded by the fact that Herbert encounters not only the paradoxes of the average human, but the paradoxes of the Christian artist as well. Joseph Summers contends that *The Temple* depicts the "symbolic record . . . of a 'typical' Christian life within the Church" (88). The Christian's life is one of turbulence and unrest, yet it can still be a life of devotion. As Herbert says in *Bittersweet*,

Ah My deare angrie Lord,
Since thou dost love, yet strike;
Cast down, yet help afford;
Sure I will do the like.

I will complain, yet praise;
I will bewail, approve:

And all my sowre-sweet dayes

I will lament, and love.

Throughout *The Temple*, Herbert complains to God about his state, but never turns away from the creator. He may lament, but he also loves.

Walton twice mentions that Herbert stated that he had endured terrible “spiritual conflicts” (38, 57), even contending that *The Temple* records those conflicts. How much better we come to comprehend the conflict in Herbert’s poetry when we come to realize that it reflects the conflict within himself. A.L. Clements contends that one of the traditions that Herbert draws upon was a book of sixteenth-century spiritual exercises written by Lorenzo Scupoli called *Spiritual Combat*. He suggests that Herbert’s use of the words “spiritual conflicts” is significant in that one English edition of the book was actually entitled *Spiritual Conflict*. He notes,

There can hardly be any question that Herbert was very aware of and knowledgeable about the central ideas and imagery of *Spiritual Combat*, if not the book itself. In his prose work *A Priest to the Temple, or, the Countrey Parson*, Herbert discusses the “double state of a Christian even in this life, the one military, the other peaceable.” (40)

Clements’ stresses the martial nature of the exercises but it also seems to me that the “double state” of the Christian as defined in *Spiritual Combat* consists of a duality in man similar to what I have been discussing, except on a purely spiritual level:

The military is, when we are assaulted with temptations either from within or from without. The Peaceable is, when the Devill for a time leaves us, as

he did our Savior, and the Angels minister to us their owne food, even joy,
and peace; and comfort in the Holy Ghost. (40)

This image of spiritual warfare permeates Herbert's poetry, as it did in the poetry of John Donne. "Like Donne," Clements notes, "Herbert is often 'at war' with God in his religious poetry, but unlike Donne, who seems usually to remain at the battlement demanding still that God batter his heart, Herbert, in 'Artillerie,' as in many of his poems, finally lays down his weapons, crosses over into God's camp, and surrenders unconditionally" (34). Herbert, through much of his poetry, fights adamantly against God, only to surrender to him wholly and completely in the last stanza. In this surrender, Herbert suffers not defeat, not disillusionment, but victory; through his inevitable and deliberate acceptance of his futility without God, Herbert enhances his own sense of value and self-worth, which, ironically, becomes heightened, not diminished, by his surrender to God. As he comes to understand that he cannot defeat God, Herbert instead attempts, as in "The Reprisall," to conquer his unruly self. Herbert quashes the contrary nature of his soul, and the peaceable half of his "double state" can resume rule over his person (Clements 35). In "Repentance," the Christian, being broken, arises even stronger than before.

But thou wilt sinne and grief destroy;
That so the broken bones may joy,
And tune together in a well-set song,
Full of his praises,
Who dead men raises.

Fractures well cur'd make us more strong.

The result of this skirmishing relationship with God is a poetry that actually becomes a battlefield itself. Herbert charges in with an idea; he is repelled and counter-attacks; reviewing his new position, he finds it inadequate and pulls a flanking maneuver; still unsatisfied, unable to get around the force of God, he retreats to plan his attack anew. Yet no matter how courageously he attacks, no matter how shrewdly he plans, Herbert finds himself no match for the military genius of God. Herbert's final command is for surrender—it must be. There is nothing trite or contrived about the surrender of Herbert. It is genuine, if temporary, and often only occurs after he has turned the sugary-sweet world of the complacent, unthinking Christian upside-down. As Helen Vendler notes,

Herbert's restless criticizing tendency coexists with an extreme readiness to begin with the cliché—roses are sweet, redeemed souls flock willingly to a heavenly banquet, sinners are swinish, Doomsday is awesome, past grief was really not too painful. On the cliché is applied the critique—roses are bitter and smarting, the soul would in reality draw back from Love's table, sinners are, in desire, indistinguishable from saints, Doomsday would in fact be agreeably social, past grief was, if truth be told, intolerable. (198)

Like Donne, Herbert is not a man who fears a quarrel with God. As a poet, he will tell God exactly what He is doing wrong. Perhaps Herbert can have his persona address the deity in such a shocking manner because he knows the truth, the inevitability of his own defeat. He knows—and trusts—in the final goodness of God. In his ranting and raving, we

see a man sincerely grappling with the complexities of his faith, but none the weaker spiritually for it. If anything, Herbert gains strength by his constant wrestling-match with God. In any case, the poet does not pull any punches in the fight; to do so would show a lack of respect for his opponent. Herbert gives God everything he has.

In “Affliction (I),” for example, Herbert rails at God for the misery he has brought him. Knowing the history of Herbert, one might wonder if the trials are not semi-autobiographical. The arrogance and effrontery of Herbert here are disturbing. Like Job, he dares to question the mind of God. He does not take on the role of the weak-willed, acquiescent Christian who grovels and whimpers, “Thy will be done,” nor does he dismiss his affliction by claiming, “It is God’s will.” Rather, he laments his state, wishing he “were a tree; / For sure then [he] should grow.” The poem can be seen as a kind of diary of his faith, tracing it from its inception through to Herbert’s present feeling of uselessness, chronicling all of the miseries that God has given him. Herbert tells that, when he was first “enticed” to God’s service, God showed him a “world of mirth” that was filled with “many joyes” and rewards. There was “No place for grief or fear.” But this was merely a trick to win the poet to God’s side. Once in the Lord’s service, Herbert complains that he has received nothing but woe.

At first thou gav’st me milk and sweetness;

I had my wish and way:

My dayes were straw’d with flow’rs and happinesse;

There was no moneth but May.

But with my yeares sorrow did twist and grow,

And made a partie unawares for wo.

Herbert relates how first he was assailed by sickness and “Consuming agues.” Then, when he had defeated his illness, God took away the lives of his friends and “blunted” his mirth. He was forced to suffer the loneliness of isolation “without a fence or friend.” Then God “betrayed” Herbert to “a lingring book” and, worse, made him like it. Herbert tells how he took the “sweetened pill” until he became powerless. Yet, lest he “should too happie be / In [his] unhappinesse,” God “throws” him into even more sicknesses. The poem imagines a truly miserable life and Herbert contemplates seeking another master. In the last two lines of the poem, however, inevitability creeps in and Herbert realizes that he is small and wrong and God is vast and right.

Well, I will change the service, and go seek

Some other master out.

Ah my deare God! though I am clean forgot,

Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.

Perhaps he has considered the sufferings of Job and has found his afflictions a mere pittance; perhaps he remembers the story told by Christ about the grain that must first die in order to produce much fruit (John 12:24); perhaps he realizes as he does in “The Thanksgiving” that there is no suffering he can endure which will repay the suffering of Christ’s passion. Whatever the case, Herbert once again surrenders, concluding the poem by admitting that he is nothing without God. If he should not love God, then—and he thinks of the worst punishment possible—then he should not be able to love God: “Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.” This odd and confusing line makes perfect sense when

one considers that, to the Christian, the worst possible fate would be the inability to love and worship God. As Clements observes, these seemingly arbitrary afflictions imposed upon the persona are not without cause; they serve to shape and mold the persona into a more perfect being: “The record throughout *The Temple* of Herbert’s own afflictions, sufferings and many spiritual conflicts is, then, a way of indicating the speaker’s movement toward Christ-likeness” (43-44).

This process is not as painless and easy as one might hope. Again and again, Herbert rebels against this restrictive manacle of God. His poem “The Collar” relates perfectly his adamant resolution to shirk the collar of his responsibilities to God and to go “abroad” not only in the sense of a physical odyssey but also in terms of his spiritual journey. The title puns on the man’s anger (*choler*) as well as relating his feelings of discontent at being harnessed like an unthinkingly obedient animal.¹⁶ As Joseph Summers notes, the poem appears to have been written in free verse (“My lines and life are free”), symbolizing the new-found freedom of the speaker. “But the poem is not written in ‘vers libres,’” Summers states; “it is one of Herbert’s most deliberate ventures in ‘hieroglyphic form’” (90). The poem, he argues, uses form and content to express the two different messages of the poem. We are at once aware of the tribulations that the persona has undergone, and we understand his desire to abandon his seemingly unrewarding vocation. We eventually realize, however, that two different voices emerge from the poem. Ilona Bell reasonably suggests that the words of the speaker are “tailor-made for Christ” (“The Double Pleasures of Herbert’s ‘Collar’” 81). When she argues that Christ actually speaks

to the persona within the poem (“Not so, my heart . . .”), it seems to me that she misses the point of the poet’s monologue. The voices, I would argue, are the speaker’s own. They relate the inner conflict between the two sides of his whole. Again, this demonstrates the complexity of the human being, the duality of our nature. Looking at the way the rest of the poem sets up and supports the image, the “rope of sands” conveys this idea especially well, succeeding on both a physical and allegorical level. Because of the implications of restraint that the title conjures, the physical rope invariably twists in one’s mind into a noose, strangling the poor persona. Perhaps because a collar tightens around the wearer’s neck, the rope seems to fit comfortably there also. Yet it is merely made of sand; if he wished, Herbert could escape its confinement. So then the rope—like the collar—becomes a symbol of submission, suggesting that it cannot be worn unwillingly; that it is a badge of loyalty that binds and chafes yet has been created by the persona himself through “petty thoughts” and weak acquiescence. Herbert sustains the rope image by suggesting that, freed from the constraints of his fealty, he would “tie up” his heart’s fears. He effectively uses this physical image of the rope throughout the poem to relate concretely an incorporeal idea. The image has even greater strength on a metaphorical level. Because of the subject matter of the poem, instances from the Bible involving sand immediately spring to mind; these allusions seem to add immeasurably to the impact and levels of the poem. Sand is essentially weathered and decomposed rocks. The Bible refers to the “rock” not only as God himself (II Sam. 22:2), but as the thing upon which Truth and God’s church is to be built on (Matt. 16:18). If the rock of faith upon which the persona has built his life has decomposed to sand—which in the Bible denotes instability (Matt.

7:26)—and that noose of sand is now choking him, then why should he not forsake it, especially when it brings him pain and no reward, weighing on him, as on Job, as “the sands of the sea” (Job 6:3)?

But what exactly is the nature of this rope of sands? Is it composed of the powdered remains of a man’s once great faith? Or is it the uncountable minute reasons for his belief—his “petty thoughts?” The poem suggests that despite Herbert’s violent denials, he remains chained to his God, and contentedly so. In Herbert’s battle to reconcile his “petty thoughts” to those of God, then, we see the conflict of the poem. Herbert’s knowledge of God shackles him and forces him to consider “what is fit, and not”; if he had never heard of God, then he would be free, unfettered, and his own. Now that he has discovered God, however, he has bound himself to Him and based his entire life on faith; on something as seemingly insubstantial and fragile as a “rope of sands.” He has added up those countless sands of thought to reach the only conclusion acceptable: a conclusion that says, however resignedly, “My Lord.” Freer argues that

the poem’s conclusion is, stylistically, an inevitable and necessary evolution of what has preceded; but theologically, the conclusion is neither inevitable nor necessary. (199)

He makes an important point here: Herbert is in no way *predestined* to reconcile with God. He makes the decision on his own, of his own volition.

In “The Collar,” however, as in all of Herbert’s poetry, we are faced with a disturbing question. In the poem, Herbert suggests that this “rope of sands,” this “collar,” can be shirked at any time—after all, man does have free will. Or does he? A.D. Nuttall in

Overheard by God argues that perhaps Herbert does not. If we suppose that God formed us, Nuttall argues, that He fashioned our most integral parts, then we must also suppose that He has shaped our inclinations as well. Herbert suggests many times in his writing that God himself forms our proclivities, that God gives us our very character. If this is so, then are we really free to choose anything? If God has implanted in us our responses, then we can no longer claim to be acting out of any pretense of free will. We are merely *choosing* what God has programmed us to *choose*. A will directed or pushed by some extrinsic force simply cannot be described as “free.” What, then, is the alternative? Exactly what the collar image suggests: a *bound* will.

Moving into such precarious theological ground, one might become more and more disturbed by the various ideological problems arising in Herbert. If nothing is good nor bad, but *God* makes it so, then, as A.D. Nuttall observes, morality becomes extinguished (40). All at once, the inevitability of Herbert is seen, not as something warm and comforting, but as something dark and menacing. Under such a pretext, even the most basic precepts of Christianity begin to produce problems in the interpretation of Herbert’s poetry. God is good and all good things come from God, yet as Augustine says in his commentary on the Gospel of John,

Let no man flatter himself; *of himself he is Satan*. His blessing comes

from God alone. For what do you have of your own but sin? (Nuttall 24)

Operating under this view, Juan de Valdes (a man Herbert read and made notes on), in his *One Hundred and Ten Considerations*, suggested that even if man were to rebel, he would still be operating as a tool of God. He further states that “Neither Pharaoh nor Judas, nor

those who are *vessels of wrath* could cease to be such” (Nuttall 28). I would suggest, however, that even if Herbert agreed with the substance of the argument, he would have been disturbed by the implications. If all men are directed by God, if no men have free will, and if all act as God’s agents, then evil humans are just as “holy” as good ones. If humans are bound to the roles that God assigns them, then they are incapable of doing good or bad—they do only as God directs them. This position becomes especially problematic in respect to poetry: if all good comes from God, then the poet cannot be said to be creating something good when he produces a poem to God. He merely dictates from God. God is the one doing good. If this is true, then, we come to a ridiculous conclusion: poetry praising God is good; therefore God has created it; therefore we have God writing praises to God. Is God so narcissistic to write praises, through Herbert, to Himself? Does Herbert think that God is whispering the words of his poetry in his ear? Finally, should we believe that Herbert thinks of man as having no free will? Perhaps. Despite A.D. Nuttall’s interesting argument, however, I would suggest that the opposite seems to be the case.

Herbert does seem to believe that man has a free will of his own. Otherwise he would not have needed to write a didactic work telling a parson how best to lead or proverbs telling any man how best to live (especially if he believed that God would make men behave exactly as he wished anyway). In Herbert’s poetry there is always a choice. The persona can always turn away from God—that would just be a poor choice. Herbert knows God’s rewards and regardless of his incessant complaints recognizes the ultimate value of his earthly privation.

We can also see in Herbert evidence that he believes he is responsible for his poetry. Although God may have given him the skill he has, the work is his alone. In “Praise (I),” Herbert says,

To write a verse or two is all the praise,

That I can raise:

Mend my estate in any wayes,

Thou shalt have more.

Meager and insufficient as they may seem, Herbert’s verses are his own creation. He demonstrates his belief that the poems, and indeed his life, are possessions to be bequeathed to another when he gives them to God as in “Obedience”:

My God, if writings may

Convey a Lordship any way

Whither the buyer and the seller please;

Let it not thee displease,

If this poore paper do as much as they.

On it my heart doth bleed

As many lines, as there doth need

To passe it self and all it hath to thee.

To which I do agree,

And here present it as my speciall Deed.

If the poems were God’s alone and intended only for God, then the entire act of giving them

up becomes not only superfluous, but laughable.

Thomas White's "Youth's Alphabet" takes many of Herbert's words and puts them under alphabetical headings to be learned by school-children. Under Y he has taken from Herbert,

Your prudent workmen never do refuse

The *meanest* Tool they may chance to use. (White 148)

Herbert appears to view his poetry as such a "Tool," and though it be "mean," tries to use it to glorify his God. When he gives *The Temple* to Mr. Ferrar, he tells him to publish it if he finds it good and useful. If not, he should burn it. If Herbert believed that the poetry came from God, he would have never questioned its goodness and definitely would not have endorsed its destruction. It seems clear, then, that the poetry denotes a gift from Herbert to his maker.

The problems of the Christian poet do not diminish. There remains a basic question about religious poetry itself: why write it at all? Why create something imperfect in praise of a perfect being? Why not remove all the euphuisms and simply say, "*My God, My King?*" If Jesus has told us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven," why pray otherwise? After all, God "knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8). Herbert never seems to come to grips with this question. His uncertainty seems most obvious in the two poems titled "Jordan (I)" and "Jordan (II)." Both of these poems are denunciations of poetry, implicit recognitions of their own futility. They advocate simple, honest language, like that of simple, honest people. As "Jordan (I)" says,

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing:

Riddle who list, for me, and pull for Prime:

I envie no mans nightingale or spring;

Nor let them punish me with losse of rime,

Who plainly say, *My God, My King*.

A complex contradiction arises from the fact that, although advocating simple language and directness, Herbert uses poetry, with all its artifice and rhetorical tricks, to do so.¹⁷ As a poet, he is stuck. In order to censure the excesses of poetic expression, he himself must use poetic expression. As Barbara Leah Harman notes,

Both ["Jordan"] poems . . . point to the dangers inherent in practicing the verbal arts: one risks getting lost in language, losing one's self or one's purpose or both.

They suggest, in other words, that speech and writing are problematic activities and their conclusions emphasize the virtue of relinquishing the literary enterprise altogether. (44)

Indeed, it would appear that Herbert not only stresses the virtue of abandoning poetry, but promises to do so himself. There is a problem in this farewell to poetry, however, in that he does it *twice*. As Nuttall observes,

The "Jordan" poems have the same title because they are at bottom the same poem. In these poems Herbert is not saying that some sorts of poetry are nicer than others; he is saying that poetry itself must be burned away by truth. Why are the poems called "Jordan"? Because the poet is crossing the river beyond which nothing less than the most perfect simplicity is tolerated. . . . And, of course, this mid-river poetry is

crucified by inconsistency. It is, necessarily, poetically parasitic upon the devices it so austere renounces. I say 'necessarily' because that which is renounced is finally poetry, *simpliciter*. The poem tells us that all we need to say is 'My God, My King,' but *that* is not a poem, and Herbert the artist must needs leave us more. . . . To read the "Jordan" poems in succession is to experience the contradiction all the more poignantly. For even the pretext of a valediction, a last venial farewell to poetry, can scarcely be sustained when the exercise is *repeated*. (15)

Does Herbert really mean that poetry is useless or does he merely say so because it is an effective and useful literary convention? If he really did believe that poetry was of no use, then why did he continue to write it? Must we then conclude, by the fact that he continued to write and even expressed a desire to see his work published, that these two poems' arguments against poetry are merely specious exercises and that Herbert does not really believe in the futility of poetry? I would argue the opposite: that he does believe in the inefficacy of poetry, and as an artist, is torn. He wants to forsake poetry and he wants to praise God through it at the same time. After all, he cannot help but sing; "The shepherds sing," he cries out in "Christmas," "and shall I silent be?" Understanding this need to praise and this concomitant desire to abandon artifice seems an important element to the appreciation of conflicting themes within Herbert's poems. His poetry always probes, questions, debates within itself the issues roiling in Herbert's mind. As Rosemond Tuve has often been quoted as saying, Herbert's "Jordans never stay crossed" (*A Reading of George Herbert* 196). Herbert constantly reevaluates, constantly crosses the Jordans of his

mind. Looking at these two poems, we realize that he has crossed the river Jordan twice and ended on the same shore from which he began, still writing his poetry.

The question remains: if God knows our very thoughts, then why write poetry to Him at all? Heather A.R. Asals suggests that there is a kind of “obsession” for Herbert in the physical act of writing a poem (19). Perhaps this might account for Herbert’s repeated exercise of praise. But we can also see Herbert’s own examination of his motivation to write poetry if we look no farther than “The Quidditie”:

My God, a verse is not a crown,
No point of honour, or gay suit,
No hawk, or banquet, or reknown,
Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute:

It cannot vault, or dance, or play;
It never was in *France* or *Spain*;
Nor can it entertain the day
With my great and stable demain:

It is no office, art, or news,
Nor in the Exchange, or busie Hall;
But it is that which while I use
I am with thee, and *most take all*.

Poetry offers a kind of communion with God. To Herbert, it is an opportunity, not only to

lay all his “invention” on God’s altar, as he suggests in his “Love” poems, but also to get close to the Immortal Love. Clements suggests that Herbert writes “to woo” God (38). Indeed, when Herbert was young, he wrote a poem and gave it to his mother, wondering why no one composes love-poems to God. He asks,

. . . . Doth poetry
Wear Venus livery? only serve her turn?
Why are not sonnets made of thee? and lays
Upon thine altar burnt? Cannot thy love
Heighten a spirit to sound out thy praise
As well as any she? Cannot thy dove
Out-strip their Cupid easily in flight?

Later in his life, Herbert seems to do exactly what he laments here that no one else has done: he writes love-poems to God. Often, he uses Petrarchan conceits and conventions typical to love-poetry in *The Temple*, as Donne did in the Holy Sonnets. Rosemond Tuve shows that Herbert obviously models many of his poems on the love-poems of his contemporaries, parodying their works with his sacred verse (“Sacred ‘Parody’ of Love Poetry and Herbert” 129-33).¹⁸ Through this imitative love-poetry, Herbert—as a suitor would his lady—shows God how much he loves him.

This aggressive demonstration of love illuminates an important aspect of Herbert’s verse. Throughout his poetry, we get the impression that Herbert engages in a kind of moral competition with God, a contest to see who can love the other the most, as evidenced most clearly in “The Thanksgiving.” For every good deed that God has done,

every boon he has given Herbert, the poet vows to, in a sense, “better” it. Eventually, however, as in all his wars with God, Herbert must submit; for God, he admits, has done far more than he can repay.

Then for thy passion—I will do for that—

Alas, my God, I know not what.

Nevertheless, he continues to try, and I think that this perseverance exemplifies an important aspect of Herbert’s character. No matter how futile his efforts, how inadequate his poetry, how otiose his very life, Herbert keeps trying to please God, hoping that someday he may be a virtuous soul, steadfast and strong, “like season’d timber” (“Vertue”). In this stubborn resolve, we see the strength of his faith, his closeness to God. And in Herbert we see a confidence in the strength of God that is overwhelming, a trust in His inevitable victory.

In this relationship, however, we notice things that make many distinctly uncomfortable. Again and again, Herbert has the audacity to criticize his good friend God. This boldness arises from the intimacy he shares with his Lord, but to an outsider it appears arrogant and presumptuous. Often, it appears as if Herbert were instructing God how to be a better god. He has no less than five poems entitled “Affliction,” complaining about how God has treated him, and often he comments on God’s works with a critical eye. Frequently, as Nuttall notes, Herbert appears to be scripting for God, telling him what he ought to say (2-3). In “The Quip,” for example, when persecuted and attacked by Beauty, Glory, Money and Wit, Herbert says that God will answer for him. In the last stanza, however, he abandons his faith in God’s ability to speak for Himself and actually

In “Judgement,” Herbert relates his version of the last judgement, when God asks each man to produce a kind of spiritual ledger, accounting for his life. The persona, realizing that his books are inadequate, instead intends to disobey the Almighty and give Him, not his own book, but the New Testament. As Sister Thekla notes, such an action is “at its most explicit, carrying the imputation of Righteousness into death” (68). Herbert, in effect, states that he intends to hold God to his word (Word). He implies that, if God wants to be a good god, then He will stick to His promise and do what the New Testament says He will. He attempts then, intentionally or inadvertently, to bind God. The collar has been shifted; God now bears the responsibility to Herbert. This seems unbelievably impudent. Herbert essentially demands to be allowed into heaven. In “Temper (I),” he says that he would be pleased “Whether [he] flie with angels, fall with dust,” and yet, in “Judgement,” he suggests his salvation ought to be ensured with the clever handing over of both the New Testament and his sins:

But I resolve, when thou shalt call for mine [book],

That to decline,

And thrust a Testament into thy hand:

Let that be scann’d.

There thou shalt finde my faults are thine.

The smugness of this verse—especially “Let that be scann’d,” I think—seems incompatible with the meekness one expects in Christian devotion to God. Once again, this contradiction seems not to arise so much from Herbert himself, but from the paradox of Christianity itself. Herbert is human, thus imperfect, but also a Christian, thus perfect

in Christ. Swimming in this duality, Herbert can claim himself as a lowly sinner and at the same time cry, “Man is ev’ry thing, / And more” (“Man”). This dual-nature of man provides several problems in Herbert’s work, but once we understand the critical nature of this intentional yet contradictory aspect of Herbert’s poetry, the creative tension of his art becomes that much more clear. In “Affliction (IV),” Herbert laments his fate as a “creature” pulled between this world and the world of eternal grace.

Broken in pieces all asunder,
Lord, hunt me not,
A thing forgot,
Once a poore creature, now a wonder,
A wonder tortur’d in the space
Betwixt this world and that of grace.

The common Renaissance idea of man as a creature suspended between earthly weakness and heavenly perfection reinforces not only the despair of the poet’s misery but the promise of heavenly re-creation.²⁰ Similarly, although Herbert knows his poetry to be flawed like himself, he continues in the hope that one day, like himself, it may be perfected. As he says in the “Church-Porch 56,” “who aimeth at the sky, / Shoots higher much then he that means a tree.” He remains a hopeful poet, I think; one who challenges his God constantly, but one who trusts in Him completely. Herbert is the poet of the soul; he chronicles the vacillations, the turmoil, the duality of man. As he experiences these conflicts, he grows and comes to recognize the double nature of his very existence. As Ilona Bell states in her article, “The Double Pleasures of Herbert’s ‘Collar,’”

Even as he continues to err, he learns to recognize the innate duplicities, the psychological distortions and logical contradictions of the human psyche. Hence, Herbert's poems are continually circling back upon themselves. Indeed, in moments of special insight the complications disclosed by Herbert and discovered by the speaker are capped by an ultimate, miraculously fresh perspective that jolts poet and speaker alike, checking their common human imperfections, perfecting their ambiguous human language, turning their natural duplicity into a divine simplicity.

(77-78)

The fact that Herbert's poems "are continually circling back upon themselves" causes some readers to mistakenly associate this cyclical movement as a lack of progress in Herbert's life and faith. The circular motion represents not a regression, however, but rather a process of constant reevaluation and revision. Herbert constantly reexamines his religious beliefs not because he lacks faith but because the endeavor strengthens him.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

For the Christian-poet, for Herbert, life can be seen as a journey, not a destination. The soul travels down the winding road of life, sometimes advancing, often doubling back, but there is no place at which we find him at rest, no place where he believes he has finished his journey. Sharon Seelig says that the very essence of *The Temple* “is frustration; perhaps the most astonishing aspect . . . is its lack of progress, its absence of order, its chaotic indirection” (8). Herbert’s apparent lack of progress should not frustrate the reader. We must understand that his poetic journey is more realistic, more accurate, more lifelike as it is. The conflicts and fluctuations within his work simply reflect the many myriad aspects of a soul stretched between this world and the next. The order of Herbert’s poetry reflects the order of his life. There is order in the seeming chaos.

Furthermore, Herbert does not become “less of a Christian” because he strives to write well as a poet; the worlds need not be mutually exclusive. If one’s faith becomes diminished, as Fish suggests, by aspirations to poetry, then what of David? What of any of the poets of the Bible? Poetic manipulation should not be equated with falsehood, but seen rather as a tool for unearthing truth. Herbert does not seem to use poetry to misrepresent the truth of his spiritual quest as much as he seems to use it to get at truth. Even if his poetry did represent some moral culpability on Herbert’s part, I still would disagree that his fault mitigates his faith. For Herbert and the rest of the Christians, sin

and purity constantly war within. This contradiction makes Herbert not less Christian, but more human. His poetry represents the struggle of a human striving to be a good Christian but trapped in a corporeal existence which necessarily makes perfection unattainable. The triumph of Herbert's poetry, I would argue, is precisely what Fish criticizes. Herbert's poems are not the straightforward, unquestioning, perhaps boring expressions of a perfect soul but rather the tumultuous, self-contradicting, compelling articulation of an imperfect soul striving for that unattainable perfection.

ENDNOTES

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1. Herbert's faith reflects a Christianity particularly formed and informed by the Protestantism of the Seventeenth Century and the debates surrounding Christianity during that time; for discussions of the nature of Herbert's Christianity, see especially Bell, Seelig, Strier, and Summers.
 2. Many critics have pointed out the historical inaccuracies of Walton; none, however, has questioned the honesty of his actual depiction of Herbert himself. See Amy Charles' *A Life of George Herbert* for examples of Walton's errors and possible explanations for them.
 3. Terry G. Sherwood argues in *Herbert's Prayerful Art* that "The constant interplay between prayer and praise in *The Temple* has deep roots in Christian spirituality. Unlike secular modern readers, Herbert's contemporaries would not have had to stop and note just how thoroughly the conventions of prayer and praise engrain *The Temple*" (7). For modern readers unlikely to catch all the Biblical allusions, Chana Bloch has recorded Herbert's many direct Biblical references in a useful index in the back of her book, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (307-314).
 4. Any Christian represents a paradox: powerful in God yet powerless alone, an imperfect creature yet perfected in Christ, meek and humble yet assured of God's providence. Is it possible, for example, for the Christian to say, "I am humble," or is this self-contradictory? See especially Nuttall 1-9.
 5. Herbert uses his persona in *The Temple* to perform exercises of praise to God. Although an exact biographical parallel would be impossible to establish, Herbert nevertheless consistently uses the persona as an extension of himself. As a result, the persona in the poems is specifically gendered and religiously oriented as Herbert's mirror representative.
 6. I use the F.E. Hutcheson edition of Herbert throughout this thesis.
 7. Donne gave Herbert a poem once entitled, "To Mr George Herbert," sending him his seal as well (Donne 55); Herbert's answer is interesting in how alike, yet different, the two poems are.
 8. This and all subsequent quotations are from the King James Version (1611).
 9. Puttenham gives examples of the "piller," describing it as "of the Geometricall most beautifull, in respect that he is tall and vpright" (100-1).
 10. For a brief introduction to the pattern poem tradition, discussing both English and

foreign pattern poetry, see Dick Higgins' *George Herbert's Pattern Poems: In Their Tradition*.

11. When Taylor discusses the synaesthesia, or "intersensorial transfer," of Herbert's verse he is primarily concerned with the intersection of visual and auditory sensation (85-115).

12. Freer uses the word "tentative" not so much in the sense of "hesitant," but as "ambivalent/ambiguous"; essentially, he suggests that Herbert uses the shape and structure of the poem either to reinforce or contradict the message of the piece.

13. Gr. *hieros*, sacred; *glyph*, what is carved.

14. For a discussion of Herbert's contrasting shape and substance, see especially Joseph Summer's chapter on "hieroglyphic verse" in *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* and Coburn Freer's chapter entitled "Tentative Form" in his *Music for a King*.

15. These lines echo Donne's "The Good-morrow": "For love, all love of other sights controls, / And makes one little room, an everywhere"; John Donne, *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne*, ed. Theodore Redpath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983). Whereas Donne speaks of an earthly love, however, Herbert's poem refers to a divine love.

16. The poem contains many puns, perhaps the most important ones being tied to the idea of the collar itself (shackle, clerical collar, *choler*, perhaps even "caller").

17. Both "Jordan" poems, in fact, exist within poetic convention: "Jordan (I)" mocks Petrarchan love poetry; "Jordan (II)" alludes to the initial sonnet of Sidney's "Astrophil and Stella."

18. Tuve notes that "parody" here means merely to model or copy, as in the musical sense in his day, and for Herbert, does not stress the mockery or dysphemistic connotation often associated with the word.

19. Bell notes that Herbert's usual mode is interrogative ("The Double Pleasures of Herbert's 'Collar'" 78); however, sometimes in Herbert we see a commanding, demanding persona who speaks with God more in a tone that we associate with John Donne.

20. Hamlet, for example, questions, "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" (3.1.126-27); William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Susanne L. Wolford (Boston and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

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