THE "MOURNING CHILD": DIVINE AND MORTAL ABSENCE IN GEORGE

HERBERT'S ENGLISH AND CLASSICAL VERSE

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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The period of tumultuous religious reformation during which George Herbert lived demanded of people a strict adherence to the paradigmatic structures that prescribed the ways in which public displays of religious conviction were to be manifested. The freedom, indeed the necessity, to doubt is taken for granted by the modern reader, but for Herbert it was a matter of spiritual life and death. As country parson, he diligently labored to guide his parishioners, administer the sacraments, and exemplify the "right path." This persona—reinforced by necessarily performative, faith-demonstrating actions—is continually destabilized by the experience of doubt, which leads Herbert to address his own persistent despair at the absence of God through poetry. His masterful use of the structural and thematic patterns of the Psalms in many of the poems of *The Temple* draws on the rich tradition of lament in contrast to the prescriptive, ideological agendas of the Book of Common Prayer and the Common Lectionary which privilege faith. The poems demonstrate an extensive knowledge of the epistemological foundations and history of both official Church doctrine *and* of medieval mystical thought and become a tool for exploring the paradoxes of human existence. His philosophical and rhetorical engagement with the Christological and ecclesiastical

theology specific to Dionysian mysticism demonstrates the intensity of Herbert's

preoccupation with Divine absence and his near obsessive search for the ideal apophatic

presence, that silent, knowing-unknowing that defines oneness with God. Nowhere are

Herbert's existential dilemmas more evident than in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum,* a

sequence of poems written immediately following the death of his beloved mother, which

reveals an inner life of the poet that his more controlled poetic voice of *The Temple* often

conceals. These elegiac poems, written in Latin and Greek, show the poet as a

"mourning child" and lay bare his most intimate fears about the constancy of his own

faith and the uncertain terms of Christian death and resurrection embodied in the sacred

ritual of the Eucharist. The poetic closure often ascribed to Herbert's poems in fact

disguises the nature of spiritual and psychological dilemmas which remain for Herbert

persistent and unresolved.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I'll begin with a passage from St Augustine:

> … the most peaceful and most profitable procedure was for
>
> me to question and answer myself, and so, with God's help,
>
> search for what is true. So, if you have committed yourself
>
> too quickly anywhere, there is no reason for you to be
>
> afraid of retreating and setting yourself free; there's no way
>
> out otherwise.
>
> Augustine, *Soliloquies*
>
> 2.7.14.[1]

This passage from *Soliloquies* illustrates a particularly fascinating aspect of

Augustine's legacy that is especially relevant to my interest in George Herbert—the

notion that in searching for transcendental truth, it is acceptable and even necessary to

change one's mind, to retreat from one point of view in order to be free to radically

modify a way of thinking, a pattern of logic, or a vision of oneself at a particular stage in

an evolving search. Indeed, George Herbert, in his vernacular and religious verse reveals

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[1] Augustine. *Soliloquies and Immortality of the Soul.* Trans. Gerard Watson.
Warminister: Aris & Phillips, 1990.

a vision of individual subjectivity that is at once self-declaring and self-consuming.[2] Most importantly, this vision is dynamic and represents the poet's capacity both to commit and to retreat.[3] For Herbert, even knowledge of one's own self is sometimes unavailable; instead, the self vanishes beyond the ever-receding horizon of an impossible standard of sincerity, or disappears before the searching gaze of an imagined all-knowing Other — forced by implacable theological logic into an existential and epistemological crisis. Herbert's poetry is therefore a reasoned dialogue with the self—a theology of evolving perspectives that represents the poet's capacity to advance towards and then retreat from mistaken ideas or perspectives on experience.

In this dissertation I will trace how Herbert worked to establish a notion of the self in relation to Christian narratives that are fraught through and through with anxiety about our separation from divine presence. I will also show how both his religious and secular verse can and should be viewed not as soliloquies or dramatic monologues but rather as inner dialogues within which the perspective of any given "speaker" is always subject to qualification and change (whether that is a sudden awareness of having adopted an erroneous attitude, as in the final line of "Misery," or a more subtle ambivalence, as in the reluctant farewell to rhetoric expressed in "The Forerunners.")

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[2] All references to *The Temple* correspond to pagination and line numbers in the edition. Of Helen Wilcox, ed., *The English Poems of George Herbert*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[3] Whether the concept of self-fashioning implies the agency or the objectification of the self is a source of disagreement, from Burckhardt to Greenblatt; what does not seem in dispute is the notion that the period of the Renaissance is marked by a hyper-awareness of the general malleability of selves. On this, see Richard Strier, "Introduction," *The Unrepentant Renaissance: from Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002.

What is more, I will show that these dialogues are more often than not directed towards the discernment of what language can and cannot expressly represent in spiritual terms — exploring the limits of what can be said about God in the moments where writing encounters the divine and where it retracts from the divine.

My interest in these aspects of Herbert's poetry was piqued when I happened upon an article in *Time* magazine that provided a retrospective of the life of Mother Teresa. When Mother Teresa's private letters were published in the late 20th century, many readers were shocked at the degree of doubt and despair that she often expressed.

[…] this untold darkness—this loneliness—this continual longing for God—which gives me that pain deep down in my heart.—Darkness is such that I really do not see—neither with my mind nor with my reason.— The place of God in my soul is blank.—There is no God in me […] He does not want me—He is not there […] The torture and pain I can't explain.— [4]

Aggressively atheistic commentators such as Christopher Hitchens seized on moments such as this as evidence of Teresa's hypocrisy. In an article by David Van Biema for *Time* magazine, Hitchens seems almost exultant in his discovery of Teresa's despair: "[S]he was no more exempt from the realization that religion is a human fabrication than any other person, and that her attempted cure was more and more

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[4] Brian Kolodiejchuk, *Mother Teresa, Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta,"* New York: Doubleday, 2007, (1-2).

3

professions of faith could only have deepened the pit that she had dug for herself."[5] Even

Van Biema himself, reporting on "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith," sounds crudely

tongue and cheek in his comments about the possible reception of the book among the

U.S's "increasingly assertive cadre of atheists": "They will see the book's Teresa more

like the woman in the archetypal country-and-western song who holds a torch for her

husband 30 years after he left to buy a pack of cigarettes and never returned."[6]

Curiously, the rhetoric of Hitchens and Van Biema is similar in both tone and

theme to Stanley Fish's notoriously hostile reading of Donne's Holy Sonnet "Oh, to vex

me, contraries meet in one."[7] Fish dismisses the authenticity of Donne's devotion,

reducing the last stanza of the poem to an uncomfortable, incompatible clamor of "a bang

and a whimper."[8] The devotion cannot be genuine, Fish claims, because of the speaker's

own obvious attention-seeking rhetorical skill in his poetic representation of his faith as

"Devout fitts" that "come and go away."[9] For Fish, the intolerable paradox is that the

"skillful rhetorician" will always become the "victim/casualty of his own skill," because

his very skill as a rhetorician inevitably inspires skepticism as to whether any statement

he makes can be granted the weight of genuine conviction. Simply put, if you appear

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[5] David Van Biema, "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith," *Time* 23 Aug. 2007: N.pag.
time.com. Web. 2 Feb. 2013, (3).

[6] Van Biema, (3).

[7] Stanley Fish, "Masculine Persuasive Force: Donne and Verbal Power," *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth Century English Poetry,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, (248).

[8] Fish, 1990, (248).

[9] Fish, 1990, (249).

willing to say anything, you can say nothing authentically. This is the "lesson of

masculine persuasive force"—a lesson based on the logic that the more "forceful" Donne

is, the less he is "anything like 'himself'."[10] Thus, Fish claims, we cannot distinguish

between Donne's 'real' surrender to God and a 'false' act of contrition, between a Donne

who acknowledges weakness and fear and a perversely assertive Donne whose "strength"

resides precisely in the poet's ability to feign weakness — to (re)produce it as a rhetorical

performance.

One response to Fish — and by extension to Hitchens and his ilk — might be to

ask: Is it then impossible to experience genuine and heartfelt spiritual impulses that are

also contradictory? Does a poem that engages the complexity of such an ontotheological

dilemma have to fail on the grounds that it is also a "rhetorical" or "theatrical production"

and thence a false representation of existential fear and spiritual longing? Why should

we insist that Donne's "devout fitts" are not in fact devout unless they originate from a

privileged and fixed, authentic identity? Can a poet desire the capacity for true prayer in

moment of doubt? Might "flattering speeches" composed to "court God" be reminiscent

of an Augustinian "soliloquy"—an inner dialogue that is a reflection of genuine or

reasoned faith?[11] After all, it is Fish's rhetoric that mockingly replaces the line "Those

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[10] Fish, 1990, (248).

[11] The line from Donne's "Oh, to vex me, contraryes meete in one" reads "In prayers, and
flattering speaches I court God" (10). Fish (1990) remarks that " '[P]rayers' seems
innocent enough until 'flattering speaches' retroactively questions the sincerity of the
gesture" (248).

are my best days, when I shake with fear" with "look at how good I am at shaking with fear."[12]

Curiously, while Fish dismisses Donne's spiritual and psychological conflicts due to capacity of Donne's masculine, persuasive (rhetorical) force to undermine the possibility of authenticity, he attributes a similar persuasive force to George Herbert. However, he considers Herbert's persuasive force genuine and appropriate. Building on Arnold Stein's observation that Herbert's "'plain intention'" (in "The Temper I") is "to transform its initial attitude into its concluding one," Fish suggests that the "transformation" is the result of "exchanging one way of looking at the world with another."[13] The "initial attitude" is "one of complaint" and indicates that Herbert's "inability to praise God" is a condition of his "inability to sustain the occasional moment of perfect joy" and both are the "condition of God's fitful presence." The first way of looking at the world, according to Fish, is a perspective "committed to the divided worlds of the opening stanza"—Herbert cannot praise God because God's presence, at least in terms of the logic and imagery of the poem, is limited to "times and places." The concluding point of view that replaces the initial complaint is articulated in the final stanza:

Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust

   Thy hands made both, and I am there:

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[12] Fish, 1990, (249).

[13] Arnold Stein, *George Herbert's Lyrics,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968, (28), and Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts:The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature*, Berkley:University of California Press, 1972, (160).

Thy power and love, my love and trust

Make one place ev'ry where. (25-28)

The speaker's dilemma, Fish explains, "exists only in his formulation of it, and its
solution is effected when that formulation is abandoned or let go."[14]   Noting the
universal problem of "thinking and talking about God in terms whose frame of reference
he transcends," Fish explains that the Christian "solution" is one that "uses the terms (no
others are available), but simultaneously acknowledges their insufficiency"—a strategy
that Herbert employs in the "concluding and, in view of his earlier complaint, triumphant,
stanza of this poem."   Recalling Fish's dissatisfaction with Donne's repeated "triumph of
rhetorical flourish" we might wonder at a certain element of inconsistency when Fish
uses the word "triumphant" to describe Herbert's solutions.

Fish's preferred rhetoric is based on a flawed estimation of sincerity. Fish
acknowledges Herbert's spiritual authenticity in his observation that "often the case in a
Herbert poem, the resolution of the spiritual or psychological problem also effects the
resolution of the poetic problem."[15] It is obvious that Fish prefers Herbert's lyrical force
and persona over that of Donne; yet, a comparative examination of the critical texts
reveals Fish's proclivity to equate the authenticity of the poet's spiritual dilemma with
the quality of the poet's rhetorical "performance." In so doing, he fails to acknowledge

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[14] Fish, 1972, (160).

[15] Fish, 1972, (161).

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the powerful force that is the *motivation* for writing, ultimately adopting a reductive view of the spiritual problem and its apparent solution.

Like Fish, who discovers pretense in Donne's "verbal power" that can "make any proposition seem plausible" or any first-person voice appear unified and integrated, Hitchens discovers hypocrisy in Teresa's public performance of faith, which he sees as undermined by her private acknowledgements of doubt.[16] It seems that Hitchens is willing to believe wholeheartedly in Teresa's *weakness*—her torments, longing and spiritual emptiness — because those particular "devout fits" serve Hitchens' own political agenda, but he is skeptical of her feigned strength—her public posture of faith—which he regards as a performance in service of a politically problematic Catholic agenda.[17] Hitchens' critique of Teresa's "professions of faith" thus takes issue with her outward persona, which he sees as contrived; but what she has written/confided in secret (to her male superiors) is declared an expression of a centered, stable and un-deceived self.[18] The inner self, for Hitchens, the self that *must* be transcribed in order to be known, is the self that is authentic. For Hitchens and others who share his atheistic views, Teresa's doubting self is her *real* self.

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[16] Fish, 1990, (247, 231).

[17] See Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position*, London: Verso, 1995, for a detailed polemic against Mother Teresa's political and religious agendas, in particular her relationship to the Vatican and her commitment to the prevention of abortion and birth control. For a contrasting opinion see Kolodiejchuk's admission that Teresa's mission was both material and evangelist (4).

[18] However, Teresa readily acknowledges the discrepancy between her inward and outward states: In one letter she self-consciously observes that her "smile" is "a mask," a "cloak that covers everything" (Van Biema 2).

But surely it is possible to discuss faith, doubt and religious identity in terms that do not essentialize metaphysical negotiations as evidence that one is either in possession of faith or not, or that one is an authentic self or not.[19] I believe that the answer is yes, and I intend to show, through this project, that early modern representations of such crises of faith not only open up the possibility of such discussions more than is usually recognized, but — as such — they retain relevance for readers, both to the extent that they can speak to us in our own moments of crisis, and to the degree that they offer a more complex conception of subjectivity, and a more subtle response to uncertainty and unknowing, than some supposedly more sophisticated "moderns" can manage.

There is more to be learned from the unexpected parallel I am suggesting between Mother Teresa and George Herbert, however. Both the modern saint and the early modern poet recognized the paradoxical requirements of creaturely dependence on the divine.[20] Both were performers of faith and both were, for the most part, unpublished authors until after their deaths—and both have now passed into the hands of admirers as well as critics who have and continue to become immersed in the delicate curiosities of

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[19] Brian Kolodiejchuk, Mother Teresa's postulator—the person responsible for petitioning for her sainthood—compiled her letters as evidence of her spiritual perseverance and genuine faith. The absence of Christ, feelings of pain, longing, even torture expressed in Teresa's writings are viewed by Kolodiejchuk as a divine gift that allowed her to accomplish the great work of service to the poor (2). Martin of *America* calls Teresa's letters "a written ministry of her interior life . . . just as important as her ministry to the poor" (3).

[20] See Hitchens; "Mother Teresa has a theory of poverty, which is also a theory of submission and gratitude. She has also a theory of power, which derives from St Paul's neglected words about 'the powers that be', which are 'ordained of God'. She is, finally, the emissary of a very determined and very politicized papacy" (14).

Herbert's and Teresa's respective inner landscapes.[21] Above all, for my purposes, the

apparent co-existence of doubt and faith in both of their writings may suggest something

more interesting (and complex) than mere hypocrisy.

Emotionally, doubt and faith appear to be mutually exclusive; one cannot feel that

he or she is in possession of faith at the same moment that one is in the throes of feeling

apprehensive or doubtful regarding the conditions of faith. However, it is possible to

rationally address the mutual dependence of one feeling upon the other retrospectively.

Often, Herbert relies on a rational retrospective approach in his poetry—writing *after* a

feeling has passed—for it is obviously much more difficult to write *about* a feeling or

emotional state *while* one is having the experience. By recreating representations of faith

or doubt, or representations that show the fluctuations—and so the relationship—

between faith *and* doubt, Herbert's writing can be viewed as rational employment in the

Augustinian sense, a dialogue between conflicting perspectives. However, at other times

even the poet himself seems to be unaware of his own "true" position; at these moments

the poems become something even more interesting in their refusal to decisively settle

the question of faith or doubt on either side.

Consider, for example, "New Year Sonnet I" — one of Herbert's earliest poems,

but a text that can be read as a prefiguring the more sophisticated versing of *Memoriae*

Matris Sacrum and *The Temple*. The poem is an early instance of the author's

employment of poetry as an epistemological tool for examining the paradoxes of human

existence — paradoxes that will perplex him throughout his life. My examination of this

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[21] Yet, while confiding her doubts in secret letters to her superiors, Teresa also often
expressed an urgent wish that those very letters be destroyed (Van Biema 2).

poem will show how Herbert's creative approach to these problems evolved in his subsequent returns to questions about his own emotional and intellectual life that are never fully resolved. It will also serve as a springboard from which I will delineate my larger project as a whole.

Before beginning my explication, a brief synopsis of the poem's critical reception may be helpful. There is much dispute among critics about the agenda and audience of the "New Year Sonnets." Written by Herbert when he was a seventeen-year old Cambridge scholar and included in Walton's *Life* as part of a letter that Herbert sent to his mother, the two sonnets are embedded within the poet's own commentary on the purpose of the work; "*to reprove the vanity of those many Love-poems, that are daily writ and consecrated to* Venus." Consequently, the letter and the sonnets are also woven into the rich cultural context of coterie poetry during the sonnet mania of late 16th and early 17th century England —initiated by Sidney and redefined by Shakespeare. One common analysis is that Herbert, writing in the form of upper-class epistolary and poetic idea-exchange, intended to probe the tension between poetic depictions of secular love and the growing debate about the proper role of verse as it related to religious ideals. Thus, Herbert announces in his letter that his sonnets are meant "*to bewail that so few [sonnets] are writ, that look towards* God *and* Heaven."[22] Arguing that the "New Year Sonnets" were revised to become "Love I" and "Love II" in *The Temple*, Rosemond Tuve contrasts the poet's boyish "self-righteous" tone to the "complete absence of self-deceit" in the more temperate and mature Herbert who *must* have cast an "eye of mirth upon these fiery

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[22] Izaak Walton, *Life of Herbert*, in *Lives*. London, 1670, (10-21).

and arrogant compositions as he rejected them for his *Temple*.[23]" Others follow Tuve in assuming that the "New Year Sonnets" are generally inferior to Herbert's later poetry in their structure, tone and execution.[24] But is this assessment fair? Let us consider the first poem of the pair:

> My God, where is that ancient heat towards thee,
>
>> Wherewith whole showls of *Martyrs* once did burn,
>>
>> Besides their other flames. Doth Poetry
>
> Wear *Venus* Livery? only serve her turn?
>
> Why are not *Sonnets* made of thee? and layes
>
>> 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?
>
>> Or, since thy wayes are deep, and still the same,
>>
>> Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name!
>
> Why doth that fire, which by thy power and might

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[23] Rosemond Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert.* London: Faber & Faber, 1952, (191-92).

[24] Coburn Freer, in *Music for a King: George Herbert's Style and the Metrical Psalms*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972, (133) while discussing Herbert's doubtful authorship of some pieces, uses as evidence these sonnets, bluntly referring to them as "early knotted Donnean poems." Herbert himself, in the letter to his mother that accompanied the sonnets, deprecating his versing as usual, declared that "my poor Abilities in Poetry, shall be all, and ever consecrated to Gods glory." (Amy Charles, *A Life of George Herbert*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977, (72).

Each breast does feel, no braver fuel choose

Than that, which one day, Worms, may chance and refuse.

I think this text cries out to be read not as a self-righteous spiritually-minded

redirection of the sonnet form from secular to sacred content, but rather as a rhetorical-

linguistic series of hypotheses.[25] What can poetry do for one's relationship with God?

How can it best be employed? Can poetry *be* theology ("discourse about God", "Divine

discourse")? Might it even be a rhetorical safe haven for the expression of the

ambiguities of faith? Read with an eye to these questions, "New Year Sonnet I" provides

a point of entry into my larger reading of Herbert's relationship to the divine and to the

relationship between poetry as an epistemological mode and his vexed relationship with

the transcendent realm, an absent God, and an ineffable divine being.

The first line, "My God, where is that ancient heat toward thee" (1), positions the

poet squarely in an early modern cultural moment. This cultural moment —the moment

of the amorous sonnet and of those courtiers who thrive therein — is separated by time

and devotions from an "ancient" communion with the divine. This communion has been

severed, tempered by detached preoccupation with secular pursuits. We might also read

the line as more personally directed and intended, to suggest that it is not so much the era

as the speaker himself who has been dispossessed of "that ancient heat" and longs to

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[25] See Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, for an alternate interpretation: The poems "deploy the terminology of carnal heat and heightened spirits" and "sexuality is not imagined as the repressed source of a religious feeling but rather as the outgrowth of suppressed religious urges." Schoenfeldt acknowledges that the lyrics "painstakingly oppose" the traditional content of the sonnet, yet in so doing, they express "this pious opposition" by engaging in "bawdy word-play which blurs its apparent borders" (237).

reestablish for himself a more earnestly faithful speech-relation with God. But in either

case, the speaker's longing for that which is "ancient" evokes a specifically biblical

understanding of history—*that ancient time* is the time of the Old and New Testament.

Many of Herbert's later poems will similarly evoke this prior time, when God spoke

directly to his servants without the need of intercessory forms such as liturgy and

scripture.[26] For example, "Decay," elaborates on Herbert's particular expression of

biblical time; "Sweet were the days, when thou didst lodge with Lot, / Struggle with

Jacob, sit with Gideon, / Advise with Abraham" (1-3). Here, God is depicted as presence

in the world and his Old Testament persona goes so far as to struggle with and to give

advice to His human creatures.

        In chapter two of this project, I consider Herbert's adaptation and manipulation of

the Psalms—particularly those of disorientation— to both lament those "sweet days" and

to deal with their absence. It is precisely this absence of personal intimacy and speech-

relation with the divine that engenders decay—a loss of the heat that enlivens faith—both

in the world and in the speaker. As the speaker contemplates those past, sweet days, the

tone of mournful sadness is heightened. Reacting to the inevitability of time moving

closer, and more rapidly toward the resurrection, the speaker laments; "I see the world

grows old, when as the heat/ of thy great love once spread, as in an urn/ Doth closet up

itself, and still retreat" ("Decay" 16-18). Thus, anticipated in the 1610 sonnet, the theme

of "old" or ancient "heat" reappears in *The Temple*.

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[26] As we have seen in several instances, Herbert longs for the direct and "ancient" forms
of divine-human communications that are expressly represented in the Old and New
Testaments. In this longing, the poet, perhaps somewhat unwittingly, points to his own
difference from his predecessors; he does not have the status or the access to merit, nor
does he participate in direct speech with God.

Returning to the second question of "New Year Sonnet I," "Why are not sonnets made of thee?" — here Herbert evokes the dilemma of representation of divinity. Can any sonnet signify the divine? Is there any degree of translation and exchange between the creator of the *logos* and the creature who enjoys or uses language —in the Augustinian sense—to explore and test the limits of signification as a means of understanding God and thereby affirming faith in God? Writing after such figures as Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, Herbert struggles to understand the relation of the *logos*--pure scripture and its intercessory function to inspire and delight the faithful, prayerful reader—to human words (presumably also given by God). If God is to be known positively (cataphatically), then the poet and the poet's words are immanent—that is, *logos* can be understood as having descended to fill all things with divine presence—and the use of lesser things (poetry, rhetoric), lays the groundwork for enjoyment (closeness to the divine presence). If, on the other hand, God is to be known according to the premises of negative theology (apophatically), the *logos* is emanationist—issuing forth from the creator, but not dwelling within the created. The tension between these two approaches to understanding the divine being illuminates the urgency of the speaker's concern about whether or not sonnets can "be made of thee": can sonnets, strange experiments of creaturely, all-too-human rhetoric, contain elements of the *logos*, be infused with *logos*? In my third chapter I will explore Herbert's handling of these questions in his later versing in *The Temple*.

The third question, "Cannot thy love/ Heighten a spirit to sound out thy praise/ As well as any she? (6-8), naturally begs to be answered with an enthusiastic and slightly optimistic (given that, at the time of this particular composition, *The Temple* was still

unformed), "Why yes, sonnets can sound thy praise." The major significance of these lines lies in the speaker's contemplative comparison of the subjective experience of the religious servant and the secular lover. In terms of my argument, two related themes stand out in the poem: (1) God's grace infuses the poet with desire to speak, to praise and to be properly employed; (2) the implied silence of the recipient of praise—the beloved's denial of a reciprocation —a trope common in secular love poetry. For *this* speaker, the poet, the devoted son, the future parson--offering praise and receiving no "sound" in return, will become especially personal in future experience, in future poems and in religious life.

The speaker of this 1610 sonnet is tentative. We see this clearly in Herbert's careful use of questions that carry a sense of hopefulness; this hope, however, is constantly qualified by a tone of doubt. Instead of positively asserting that a Dove *can* "outstrip" Cupid in flight, Herbert uses his poetic skill to craft lines that are infused with doubt; the fourth question demonstrates a mode of rhetorical qualification, undermining what could have been the voice of a speaker confident in his position of faithful resistance to secular sonnets. Instead, Herbert puts the common tropes of the secular sonnet to good use, posing complicated rhetorical questions that mimic the saddened, rejected, and *doubtful* tone of the spurned, unrequited lover. The speaker tentatively asks, "Cannot thy *Dove*/ Out-strip their *Cupid* easily in flight?" We see a similar qualification in question five; "Or, since thy ways are deep, and still the same, / Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name?" A mixed tone combined with the qualifying question reveal the speaker's hope about the efficacy of sacred versing while simultaneously exposing the speaker's nagging feeling that his verse may not, in fact,

"run smooth." In other words, these lines also suggest the complexity of Herbert's theology—even at this very early stage in his career—by acknowledging the "deep ways" that make verse and faith everlastingly uneven.

The final question appears to equate divine love with earthly love and describes the central conflicts to which Herbert will return in both *The Temple* and in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*, the central text of my fourth chapter:

> Why doth that fire, which by thy power and might
>
>> Each breast does feel, no braver fuel choose
>>
>> Than that, which one day, Worms, may chance and refuse.

All "lovers" feel desire in the breast and these closing lines indicate that both secular and divine manifestations of Eros originate with "that fire"—sanctioned, and sent forth from God by "power and might." In the context of sacred love, it is possible to interpret the speaker's humble, yet uncomfortable status in relation to God; the image of God's fire in the poet's body depicts the inadequacy of the vehicle itself (the corrupt human body) and the medium of expression (the sonnet) as "no braver fuel." The closing lines also establish a pattern of complaint regarding how the creature is best able not only to *"feel"* sacred fire, but also to use that fire in divinely sanctioned employment. How, specifically, the employment of versing will be judged is an ongoing preoccupation for Herbert. The concern, as expressed here, is that God has provided the flaming impulse in the poet's breast, but the poet, rather than directing that impulse to holy employment, instead squanders the gifts of "power and might" in choosing a "lesser fuel"—the inferior

employment of poetry. The ultimate irony lies in an ambiguity of reference; for the "fire" may also refer to God who has similarly chosen an inferior fuel by choosing *this* subject; in choosing Herbert, God has wasted his infinite fire on that which is finite and corruptible. Both the poet's flesh and verse will die and decay, and in this death are rejected by both transcendent God and terrestrial worms.

Having now gestured towards the larger issues that exercise and subtend this project — the subjective experiences of faith and doubt, and the limits of language when it comes to the representation of divinity — I will bring this introduction to a close with a more detailed summary of my arguments in each subsequent chapter.

Chapter II

I begin by raising the question of why Herbert is so consistently read and represented as a poet of supreme faith, or what I call the "unified master-subject" of his discursive world. This critical vision of Herbert is found in nearly all of our most compelling arguments about him — even arguments that draw ostensibly quite different critical conclusions share a presumption about the self-consistence of Herbert's overarching poetic authority, and always assume that authority to be on the side of religious orthodoxy. Frequently, however, throughout the larger sequence of poems that make up *The Temple*, Herbert's God is chillingly silent. I then move to consider Herbert's poetry as both a place of doubt's concealment *and* of its exposure. The tension between the performance of faith and a countervailing undercurrent of doubt, and the impact of both on the way in which spiritual messages are received and interpreted,

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emerge as central to the experience of Herbert's poetry in ways that the critical tradition still struggles to acknowledge and articulate.

Framing my perspective on George Herbert as a double persona—the parson and the poet—I argue for an interpretive procedure that takes into account the powerful impacts of a tumultuous and evolving religious climate on both his daily, public practice of faith and his more introspective questioning of that faith. The highly prescriptive day-to-day liturgy of the church meant that both cleric and parishioner were familiar with the Bible, and in both his priestly duties and in his poetry Herbert's utilization of the Psalms was paramount. I draw on Chana Bloch's extensive analysis of the influence of the Bible on Herbert's verse, but also make use of Walter Breuggemann's more comprehensive focus on the Psalms to frame my argument within a broader analytic perspective, examining the influence of the Psalms in the context of Herbert's concerns about the employment of verse as a tool for working through the his own religious and existential dilemmas. [27]

Chapter III

In chapter III, I examine a relatively new approach to Herbert's work — through the lens of the mystical Dionysian Theology. As in Chapter II, I build on the arguments of prior Herbert scholars (in particular that of Hillary Kelleher) to inform my reading of Herbert's poems of "The Church" in light of seminal thinking on Christian Mysticism. My primary access to the foundations of Dionysian thought is through the work of Denys

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[27] Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, and Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984.

Turner, Bernard McGinn, Paul Rorem, and Andrew Louth, as well as a recent collection of essays entitled *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, edited by Sarah Coakley and Charles Stang.

I argue that Herbert's ambivalent stance toward poetry as a medium for properly affirming or praising God can be traced back to the paradoxical nature of the precepts of the symbolic or cataphatic church, which exist in productive tension with those of a more obviously mystical or apophatic tradition. For Herbert, polarities of seemingly opposing spaces cause him the greatest consternation, and these paradoxes, generally overlooked by the lay Christian, become for him the prompt to a nearly obsessive search for resolution. In Chapter II, the conflation of both concealment and exposure of disorienting doubt defied reconciliation. Here the concern is framed by the poet's desire to achieve oneness with God, or to be in the presence of the Divine; the process is complicated for Herbert by his realization that despite his own rhetorical excellence his attempts for achieving that oneness through both the verbal expressions of poetry and prayer result in the polar opposite—silence and absence. Yet in his versing he continues the search by engaging with mysticism, providing a unique poetic experience for the reader. Through close readings of poems –"Prayer (I)," "Grace," "Aaron," "Clasping of Hands," "The H. Communion," and "Miserie" – I show how Herbert blends the many familiar verbal and non-verbal elements of the symbolic or cataphatic theology of the church with apophatic notions of the ineffability of God and the apparent contradictions of a divine absent presence in which even praise becomes inexpressible.

Chapter IV

Chapter IV examines *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*, Herbert's highly personal

sequence of poems written on the occasion of Magdalene Herbert Danvers' death.[28]

Poetic expression is the medium of lament and praise for a devoted son whose bond with

his mother was perhaps stronger than his faith in God—and this disconcerting reality is a

central feature of the sequence.   Composed in Latin and Greek, the poems of *Memoriae*

Matris Sacrum strategically employ classical verse forms and pagan mythology to

navigate and express the unpredictable—and deeply personal—experience of grief.   As

Deborah Rubin suggests, the world of "pagan allusion," although "utterly excluded from

[Herbert's] English poetry," serves as a mediating system for the poet's grief in these

elegies for his mother—granting that grief a necessary and secular context, and thereby

rendering what might have otherwise been inexpressible feelings expressible.[29] As with

the poems of *The Temple*, themes of a paradoxical absent presence abound.

In this chapter I will show how these borders become sites of crisis that are

involved with the complex process that Henry Staten has described as the "dialectic of

mourning."[30] The outcomes of mourning are unpredictable, and for Herbert that

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[28] *Memoriae Matris Sacrum, A Critical Text, Translation and Commentary,* edited by Catherine Freis, Richard Freis, and Greg Miller, Fairfield, CT: George Herbert Journal, 2012, (also referred to here as *MMS*).

[29] Deborah Rubin, "*'Let your death be my Iliad*'": Classical Allusion and Latin in George Herbert's *Memoriae Matris Sacrum." Reconsidering the Renaissance: Papers from the Twenty-first Annual Conference. Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies.* Ed. Mario A. Di Cesare. 1992 (93).

[30] Henry Staten, *Eros in Mourning: Homer to Lacan*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, (xi).

unpredictability is exacerbated by the inconsolable nature of his loss. His "cathexis of longing" for his mother ("hetero-mourning," or mourning another) brings up fears about his own spiritual death and loss of self-possession that are characteristic of what Staten calls "auto-mourning."[31]

Referencing Augustine, Staten observes that it is not merely the thought of *mortal* death that causes "ultimate psychic pain," it is a continual lack of assurance that the body and soul will, in fact, be exempt from death. Death is the "limit term in the series of affronts to the soul's self-possession."[32] Within the set of social, historical, and religious contexts that impacted Herbert's notion of his mother's soul and his own soul, Augustine's articulation of death's all-encompassing affront to self-possession is especially relevant. For Augustine, As Staten suggests, death is the "illimitable gap" that prevents the "circle of the self from closing against the intrusion of the not-self." This gap – the psychic wound that never closes – is the cause of "auto-mourning" which, as Staten explains, is an "aggressive reaction to the thought of one's own death."[33] Herbert's aggressive reaction to the experience of auto-mourning takes the form of writing, but at times, the products of his imagination constitute a very real threat to his self-possession; his verse expresses doubt about the promises of Christian death and resurrection as well as doubt about his own capacity to receive these promises. Ultimately, it is not simply the loss of a beloved or the disintegration of the mortal body that Herbert fears; it is also the realization of the absolute necessity of his own religious

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[31] Staten, (8).

[32] Staten, (9).

[33] Staten, (9).

faith as a condition of his reunion with the absent presence (mother and God) he so urgently desires.

CHAPTER II

BEARING THE LONGEST PART: GEORGE HERBERT AND THE

DISORIENTION OF DOUBT

The whole time smiling.—Sisters & people pass such remarks.—They think my faith, trust & love are filling my very being & that the intimacy with God and union to His will must be absorbing my heart.—Could they but know— and how my cheerfulness is the cloak by which I cover the emptiness & misery. (Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*).[34]

…therefore the Parson is very strict in keeping his word, though it be to his own hindrance, as knowing, that if he be not so, he will quickly be discovered, and disregarded: neither will they believe him in the pulpit, whom they cannot trust in his Conversation. As for oaths, and apparel, the disorders thereof are also very manifest. The Parson's yea is yea, and nay nay: and his apparel plain, but reverend, and clean, without spots, or dust, or smell; the purity of his mind

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[34] Brian Kolodiejchuk, M. C., Ed., *Mother Teresa Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta,"* New York: Image, 2007, (182).

breaking out, and dilating itself even to his body, clothes,

and his habitation. ("The Parson's Life").[35]

       I begin this chapter with two selections of prose that illustrate a vital distinction

between the outward, social performance of faith, and the more private interior workings

of that faith. In both examples, the pro forma of outward practice is the result of socio-

cultural expectations that are imposed on persons of faith who assume the role of

religious leadership. Performative markers —Mother Teresa's smile and gestures of

cheerfulness, George Herbert's oaths and his plain reverend apparel—demonstrate

conformity to social and moral religious practice and provide clear indices that the Nun

or the Parson in question possesses the necessary requirements of her or his position as a

religious leader and role-model. One might think that these requirements would include,

perhaps above all, a devout and unwavering faith. But while both passages suggest the

feasibility of *performing* faith, upon closer examination, the outward demonstration of

piety actually directs our attention to the more doubt-filled interior regions of the subject.

       Indeed, the disjunction between the inner and outer persona is quite obvious in the

example of Teresa's "cloak" of cheerfulness, which she employs to "cover the emptiness

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[35] *George Herbert: The Country Parson, The Temple*, ed. John N. Wall. Jr., New York: Paulist Press, 1981, (57). All references to *The Country Parson* correspond to pagination and line numbers in this edition. Louis Martz, "The Author to the Reader," *George Herbert and Henry Vaughn*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, points out that exactly when Herbert was writing *The Country Parson* is not clear, but we do know that based on Herbert's own prefatory letter to the work, it was completed in 1632 (190). Cristina Malcolmson, *Heart-Work: George Herbert and the Protestant Ethic*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, assigns 1630 as the year Herbert began work on the manual (26-27). Wall argues that "the tone of Herbert's introduction suggests the work was composed in *anticipation* of taking up the duties outlined in the work, and not written while those duties were actually being carried out" (15).

and misery"; her statements about her unhappiness and her alienation from God are strikingly explicit and free of pretense. Writing to her confessor and thus within a context of sacred privacy, Teresa's words were protected by the Catholic practice of confession and as such were kept secret from the public until after her death. During her lifetime, the power of her public performance and faithful actions were never at risk of being undermined by the rhetoric of doubt expressed in her private letters. The evidence of religious uncertainty is less obvious in the example from Herbert — drawn as it is from a document designed for the consumption of other professional Parsons— but his "very strict" insistence that the Parson must keep his word, as a protection against the possibility of being "discovered, and disregarded," or not believed in the pulpit, indicates that he was no less aware than Teresa of the pressure on spiritual leaders to keep up appearances.[36] Herbert's posture in fact raises the specter of a crisis of faith in a more indirect way; what he fears is that the Parson's own protestations of belief will not be believed — will not be regarded as sincere — by others.

The hyperbolic quality of Herbert's performative description of the assumed relation between inward and outward evidences of faith is interesting. The Parson's clean unspotted attire is directly correlated with the spontaneous, unperformed "purity of his mind breaking out, and dilating itself even to his body, clothes and his habitation." Conceptually and rhetorically, the final lines of "The Parson's Life" hint at the Parson's

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[36] Malcolmson makes a persuasive argument regarding Herbert's intention for writing the manual as he transitioned into his duties at Bemerton; she sees *The Country Parson* as a text of self-transformation which "distinguishes Herbert from the 'Court-stile' of his earlier years" (27). "Herbert used the prose manual and the doctrine of vocation to transform his genteel lifestyle into a mode of self-presentation appropriate to his role as rural minister" (13).

wish that outward practices, religious decorum—and perhaps even a dash of superstition—will prevent *doubt* from becoming ever-larger, from dilating itself, and thus, from diluting his performative capacity and credibility. These tensions between the performance of faith and a countervailing undercurrent of doubt, and the impact of both upon the way in which spiritual messages are received and interpreted, are central to this chapter.

"The Parson's Life" can be read in at least two ways. First, it can be interpreted as confined by the interpretive context of the prose document containing it. The intention of the larger work is to outline the particulars of social performance and priestly conduct. But we can also consider it as part of the much more comprehensive context of Herbert's larger oeuvre —a context that reaches far beyond the concerns of the professional man-of-God in the pulpit. Read according to such lights we may ask whether the text grants access to the parson's conflicts with the poet — author of the high peaks and low plains of that "church" of verse that, unlike *The Country Parson* (a text of exteriority and obvious directionality), does not "run smooth."[37] *The Temple*, unlike the Preacher's ideal social posturing, does not shy from "disorder." On the contrary, this poetry performs and records the rise and fall of inner spiritual experience rather than the outer forms of professional devotion, making "disorder" often a more satisfying choice of theme, both intellectually and psychologically. Indeed, where the preface to the 1632 volume of *The Country Parson* describes the author's endeavor: "to set down the Form and Character of

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[37] From "New Year Sonnet I". Recorded in Walton's *Lives* as part of a letter written by George Herbert to his mother Magdalene Herbert, the line, presumably addressed to God reads, "Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name!" (line 11).

a true Pastor, that [he] may have *a mark to aim at*,"[38] by significant contrast, *The Temple*
— and more specifically, the lyric poems gathered under the sub-heading of "The
Church*"* — repeatedly portrays a Christian speaker worrying that he has quite missed the
mark. This missing of the mark of perfect faith is sometimes described in the sequence
as the result of an inherent sinfulness; but more often it is presented as a consequence of
doubt. Doubt, in Herbert's poetry includes both self-doubt and a more radical crisis of
faith: doubt in God.

      Nevertheless, it can be said with relative confidence that Herbert understood that
his poetry would be read by fellow Christians, and to that extent *The Temple* resembles
The Country Parson in its potential as a work of what we might call "spiritual utility."
Certainly, many members of the Christian faith have read his work not "merely" as
poetry but as an aid or adjunct to their own spiritual development. And it is perhaps due
to the persistence of this interpretive paradigm of presumed "spiritual utility" that
whatever doubts Herbert's personae may express, the controlling authorial subject is
always finally presupposed to be secure in his faith. Herbert's expressions of doubt are
thus safely contained within this larger context.

      I want to suggest that this more or less naively Christian way of reading Herbert's
work persists in many of the dominant (and more putatively sophisticated) literary-
critical approaches to the poet. The tendency to adopt pietistic containment strategies is
often seen in arguments that focus on the "self-cancelling" arrangements of the poems
that make up "The Church"— critical readings that typically claim that the mood or

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[38] This statement is located in Herbert's preliminary comments to *The Country Parson*,
"The Author to the Reader" (54, Emphasis mine).

inward state expressed by Herbert's speaker at a particular location in the sequence is complicated or even negated by previous or subsequent poems. In many of these prior interpretations, poems that openly express doubt or lay questions before a conspicuously unresponsive God are often re-contextualized within a grand over-arching narrative of faith and Christian conversion.

The arrangement of the text encourages such interpretive moves, of course.[39] Consider, for example, the way "Matins" is strategically placed at the end of a series of poems that cry out for divine acknowledgment; these poems include "Grace," "Praise," and "Affliction II". Its strategic, performative placement thus works to negate the poems that came before. It is a Damascus-like representation—where the speaker is suddenly acutely aware of his doubt and is jolted back to a position of faith ("this new light which now I see"), in contrast to the hourly death of unworthiness where the speaker dies continually "over each hour of Methusalem's stay" ("Affliction (II)"). Thus, after reading "Matins", audiences are lulled into a similar state of exuberant morning praise, and encouraged to diminish the significance of the darker tone in the preceding poems. The very title of "Matins" ties itself to the poetic trope of awakening that always marks a transitional moment in the sequence—from doubt to faith.

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[39] We know from the Williams manuscript that even as early as 1615, Herbert was thinking about the structure and organization of his work; more specifically, this early manuscript demonstrates the poet's self-conscious preoccupation with the public perception of his writing—a preoccupation that, as we have seen, is also clearly present in *The Country Parson*. There is great difficulty in assigning dates to Herbert's poems, though most scholars agree that the poems of the Williams Manuscript were probably written somewhere between 1615 and 1625. "Affliction (I)" comes closest to having an identifiable date, probably having been written in 1617, or perhaps 1618 (see Amy Charles, *A Life of George Herbert*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977. (84-5 and 224).

This and similar structural elements of the sequence are regularly invoked by

critics to sustain a vision of "Herbert" the unified master-subject, confident in his faith,

and always detached from the more angst-ridden and unhappy speakers of his individual

poems, carefully orchestrating their voices from the "outside" — that is, through the

larger arrangement of "The Church. The consistency of this view of Herbert is notable,

even when the critical conclusions about particular poems may vary significantly.

Reading after reading maps the trajectory of a poet who piously labors through the

troubled fluctuations of spiritual life to return ultimately to a position of spiritual

reconciliation.[40] For the most part, in our criticism, Herbert is brought back, sometimes

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[40] 20th century criticism, regardless of approach, is surprisingly consistent in its
insistence on spiritual reconciliation. Arnold Stein, *George Herbert's Lyrics*, Baltimore:
Johns Hopkins Press, 1968, generalizes that "the most triumphant resolutions are
effortless at the moment they are achieved" (134). Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert:
His Religion and Art*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954, acknowledges
Herbert's "moments of paralyzing doubt" but immediately follows with the qualification
that "such moments seem to have been rare for Herbert" (62-63). Rosemond Tuve, in
"George Herbert and *Caritas," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*" 22
(1959), writes "Herbert knows quite as much about joy as about affliction. Firm doctrinal
positions are as typically the substructure of his gay poems as of his analytical ones, and
when he sees through man's incorrigible folly the wit and the mirth come not from
obscuring the seriousness of it but from confidence in the remedy for it" (316). Chana
Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible.* Berkeley: University of
California Press, 1985, reinforces the structural drive of the sequence with forthright
resolution: "I believe that the random order of *The Temple* is deliberate, and that even if
he had lived to revise the volume, Herbert would not have imposed on it a more
systematic arrangement. If he regarded his poems as a kind of psalmody, it is entirely
possible that he intended the 'fluctuations between sorrow and joy, doubt and assurance'
as analogous to the order of the Book of Psalms" (240); and, the Psalms "reveal the
essential temper of Herbert's poetry in their loving dialogue with God, their truth to the
emotions, their stubborn expression of faith and, above all, their intent to praise" (6).
Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press,
1975, offers a secular assessment; "a poem, begun in something less than perfect clarity,
emerges possessing the strength of tempered metal and the lightness of silk twist" (8). In
regard to "Love (III)", there is a similar trend of critical consensus. Gene Veith,
Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert, Lewisburg: Bucknell
University Press, 1985, points out that "critics seem unanimous in attesting to the sense

gently and sometimes forcefully, by rigorous close reading and critical argumentation, to

Christ's banquet table — compliant, faithful and humble ("Love (III)").[41]

My point is not that these prior readings should be dismissed. On the contrary,

the critical trend I have identified is historically attuned with the spirit of conversion that

dominated the early modern consciousness, and commendably attempts to understand the

epistemological project of devotional poetry and how Herbert employs style and theme

within that tradition. Such criticism has also demonstrated how the demands of massive

cultural, political and spiritual transitions necessitated self-fashioning as a means of

adapting to the vicissitudes of early modern existence. [42] And as I have noted, Herbert is

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of 'closure' that the poem gives to 'The Church'" (172). For Barbara Lewalski,
Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric, Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 1979, "the speaker as Christian everyman thus experiences the
complete transformation of his stony heart" (315). T.S Eliot, "Whispers of Immortality",
Poems, London: Hogarth Press, 1919, sees the poem as indicative of "the serenity finally
attained by this proud and humble man" (34). Richard Strier, *Love Known*, Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1983, points out that the "contest of 'Love' (III) is
ultimately no contest: the outcome is never for a moment in doubt. . . . God is a host Who
will not take no for an answer" (82-83). Harold Bloom, *Till I End My Song: A Gathering
of Last Poems,* New York: Harper, 2010, resolutely states that "Love (III) is the true
conclusion to *The Temple*" (47).

[41] The fact that the word "finis" was placed immediately after "Love III" in the Williams
Manuscript has always been taken to signify its position as the concluding poem and a
clear statement of closure for "The Church". This was evidently Herbert's intent from the
earliest organizational framework—that the poem's location was unchanged from the
Williams Manuscript has never seriously been questioned. See John Drury, *Music at
Midnight: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
2013, (149).

[42] The conversion narratives of St. Paul and St. Augustine, cornerstones of early modern
and contemporary understandings of the transition from doubt to faith, and used to justify
various points of doctrine, can also help us to imagine Herbert's longing for an distinct,
recognizable and intimate and lasting intervention. Molly Murray in *The Poetics of
Conversion in Early Modern English Literature: Verse and Change from Donne to
Dryden.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, examines first-person
conversion narratives and observes that they "generally follow a neat structure of before

entirely complicit in encouraging the critical tendency to view the authorial master-

subject of *The Temple* as always, finally, "faithful"; after all, it was he who structured the

text in a powerfully compelling sequential way that takes advantage of the reader's desire

for poetic closure, leading us towards the ultimate spiritual reconciliation that many

critics have found in the final poem of the sequence, "Love (III)." But in critical terms

this has often meant that the Herbertian persona of that final poem, communing with and

in harmony with his God, is read as the genuine Herbert — the most authorized,

authentic, and authoritative voice of the sequence. We are encouraged to think of this

Herbert as the "real" Herbert, in other words: a man whose doubts are ultimately

overturned, a man who hears the voice of God as clearly and undeniably as he hears the

voice of a gracious — or perhaps even over-insistent — host at table. But in utilizing the

logic of poetic sequence and closure in this way, Pious George has perhaps performed his

most majestic rhetorical conjuring trick— rendering his prior expressions of doubt

somehow secondary, and the many poems in which his God appears chillingly silent, of

diminished importance.

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and after" (28). Murray, demonstrates how this model, generally used to describe
conversions to Christianity from some other non-Christian belief system, is also adopted
as a model for describing conversion from one Christian sect to another in early modern
England. In these particular narratives the "inadequacy of one church is juxtaposed with
the persuasiveness of the other. In seeking to contrast their current convictions with their
former errors, authors of such accounts generally do not represent the indecision,
ambivalence, terror, and doubt that might have accompanied any shift from one system of
belief, and one community of believers, to another. The inherent teleology of narrative
underscores this idealized notion of conversion as singular and conclusive; I was blind,
but now I see" (28). Stephen Greenblatt. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to
Shakespeare.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

There are many instances in *The Temple* when God seems to speak directly to His creature—and these instances are often cited as some of the most powerfully moving elements of Herbert's poetry.[43] However, it may be that even the best critics reveal their own idealistic tendencies, here; simply put, we don't want to admit the possibility that even in the best devotional poetry despair and darkness could prevail. But the reeling, tempestuous and quite exhausting mental exertion experienced by the speaker of "The Collar," strains the heart of the reader as well. In much of Herbert's poetry the reader is led to react first in an emotional way, which, as in "The Collar," is then overshadowed by the assurance and the incantational quality of the speaker's final resolution:[44]

> But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wild
>
> At every word.

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[43] A.D. Nuttall, *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante and St. John*. London: Methuen and Co., 1980, explains in less sentimental terms, that moments like this are a kind of "logical knot"; "Herbert, a mere man, explains on God's behalf the things which man is incapable of seeing for himself; but since it is a man who does this explaining, it cannot after all be true that man is thus incapable" (4).

[44] The lines I have referred to as "incantational"—crafted with such precision as to be perfectly suited for both conscious and unconscious repetition—are reminiscent of the Lord's Prayer; an integral part of Anglican services, it is both powerful and memorable, communal and personal. David Curry "Something Understood," *The Book of Common Prayer: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Prudence Dailey, London: Continuum, 2011, makes a similar observation; "The Language of the Book of Common Prayer is memorable. As such it speaks to the faculty of memory in the soul. . . . The rhythms and refrains of the Prayer Book complement its doctrinal minimalism and inculcate a sense of spiritual identity and belonging. In this sense, the Book of Common Prayer is more than a book. Through its language it becomes the spiritual *lingua franca* of the people" and "stands out for the quality of its memorable lines" (67).

Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child:*

And I replied, *My Lord*. (32-35)

Although qualified by the conditionality of the words "me thoughts", there is some comfort in an intimacy of this magnitude (be it real or imagined); it is something shared between human and God or between and among beings, and this something lies at the center of our relationships.   We yearn for authenticity and intimacy, and given that we are social creatures we also desire to please, to have power, to "not be discovered" as we fashion representations of our inner and outer selves.

But what if one possible way to understand the powerfully moving moments when God seems to speak in *The Temple* is not as statements of an "authentic" Herbertian experience but as closer in spirit to those moments in *The Country Parson* where Herbert urges the Parson to put the best face on for the public performance of his role? If nothing else, The Country Parson shows a man who was acutely aware of the tension between his duties to his flock and his duties to himself. Both Herbert's prose and poetry show the tension between the public and the private; both demonstrate the need for exploratory forms to wrestle with the ambiguities of experience. My own sense is that the "The Church" is a private (and sometimes subversive) testing ground for Herbert's deepest concerns, and while carefully fashioned so as to conceal its more radical spiritual interrogations, musings and conclusions, those radical moments are nevertheless there, and demand our attention.[45]

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[45] John Tobin, ed., *George Herbert The Complete English Poems*, New York: Penguin, 2005, generally seems to support this position; "Herbert, by church affiliation, by social status, by religious belief, was always already in the middle of a paradoxical universe . . .

Indeed, I would argue that more often than we realize, the most problematic and profoundly personal ambiguities of Herbert's religious experience in *The Temple* are mitigated by the socially and politically conscious perspective we associate with the religious professional of *The Country Parson*. As A. D. Nuttall points out, by imagining the speech of God, Herbert the poet-parson "is merely doing what Christians, as part of a dynamic religious tradition, have always done, that is, rephrase and re-point the eternal truths of the faith."[46] This is, in fact, what Herbert does both in the parish church and in his poetry ("The Church"). The section of *The Temple* known as "The Church" is a collection of verse that has generously contributed to the early modern epistemological experiment that Helen Wilcox describes as the "reclamation of poetry for spiritual purposes."[47] Accompanying this spirit of reclamation, however, is also a feeling of fear bordering on paranoia about the worldly and otherworldly consequences of using signs to convey religious truth, or, conversely, to explore and explicate the very real problem of doubt. In the next section of this chapter I will attempt to recover some of his fearful

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It is not surprising with all this integrating of doubleness, not double binds but twofold natures, that Herbert should be as a writer so intriguing a punster, finding in non-comic wordplay a device to illustrate the fused unions of so many of the truths he believed in." I approach Herbert's conflicts in a slightly different vein; that is, the poet often calls our attention to how difficult it actually is to believe in so many truths at once. I do think Tobin is correct in his opinion on the epistemological nature of writing poetry; "We know that some gifted critics seem to need to pun in order to think. Herbert seems equally to need wordplay in order to allow him to ring the changes on the basic score of the Christian story" (xv).

[46] Curry, (4)

[47] Wilcox, (xxiii).

doubt, building on, but also qualifying important arguments by Chana Bloch and others about the impact of the Psalms on Herbert's work.

Religious life during the reformation was fraught with the anxieties that come with rapid and disorienting change—change that often involved following a new set of liturgical precepts arbitrarily imposed or even renouncing one's own religious practice. In some the institutional changes in the early modern church and the resulting spiritual turbulence felt by individual believers is similar to the experiences described in the Old Testament. The psalms in particular, as Walter Brueggemann observes, depict the "troubles" associated with the paradoxical requirement that one's "faith speech" should be uplifting and that lament ultimately ends in praise and spiritual resolution.[48] Many of the poems of *The Temple* draw on the psalms' rich tradition of lament and disorientation that were common to Herbert's experience. What I venture to show is that although Herbert's psalm-inspired poems have offered comfort to the faithful for centuries, his appropriation of the mode and structure of the psalms demonstrates the complexity and persistence of doubt that is never fully resolved.

Appropriating the Psalmic Model: Framing and Legitimizing Darkness

Herbert was obviously well versed in the Bible and would have regularly used material from the scriptures in his sermons and in his work with parishioners. Indeed, the Anglican liturgy itself was a compendium of biblical passages, collects and other readings that were prescribed by the common lectionary in the Book of Common Prayer.

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[48]Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984, (19).

Biblical passages, including many from of the Book of Psalms, and other prescribed

readings, were part of all official church services. Chana Bloch helpfully situates the use-

value of the Book of Psalms in the context of the early modern Protestant church:

> From the first, it was accorded a significant role in the
>
> worship of the Church because, more than any other book
>
> in the Old Testament, it invited Christian interpretation.
>
> Jesus himself quoted from it in his ministry, applied its
>
> words to his own sorrows and let it speak for him on the
>
> cross. Beginning with the apostles, Christians saw in the
>
> Psalms a prophecy of, and a witness to, Christ's suffering
>
> and exaltation. And in the sixteenth and seventeenth
>
> centuries, Protestants discerned in it the very image of their
>
> own spiritual lives.[49]

In his poems, Herbert draws upon the Psalms more than any other book of the

Bible (although his other Biblical references and allusions from both the Old and New

Testament were very broad in their use), but as Bloch's work shows, his knowledge,

though comprehensive, would not have been unusual for the time. What sets him apart is

how he used the psalms in his poetry. Herbert's creative and innovative verse technique

is widely acknowledged, but the subtlety of meaning, sound, and phrasing that he applies

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[49] Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, (232-233).

to his use of the psalms is particularly notable in this context. There is also a strong

element of adherence to the spirit and form of the psalms. As Bloch writes, "like the

Psalmist, Herbert writes of wonder, frustration, despair, longing and joy, and like the

Psalmist he insists on turning every motion of the heart into a song of *praise.*"[50]

I heartily agree with the first part of this statement, as would most critics and

readers of Herbert's poetry; but the second part partakes of that critical tendency that I

have identified above to always orient our interpretation of Herbert's work towards the

assumption of an untroubled and pious master-subject behind the text. The equation of

"every motion" to a "song of praise" reinforces the primacy of spiritual resolution. But

there are other ways of thinking about how the Psalms might have been appropriated by

Herbert.

In contrast to Bloch's analytical approach to the psalms—an approach that falls

into the category of literary criticism and interpretation — Walter Brueggemann, a highly

regarded biblical scholar, provides a system for classifying the Psalms that elucidates the

tension between "*our life experience of disorientation* and our *faith speech of*

orientation."[51] Brueggemann's discussion of the psalms is organized around the general

themes of "orientation" (well-being and gratitude), "disorientation" (hurt, alienation,

suffering, rage and self-pity), and new orientation" ("turns of surprise" from despair to

joy, a renewed feeling of gratitude). This organizational model intends to demonstrate

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[50] As the final sentence of *Spelling the Word*, this statement takes on added significance, as it clearly establishes the view of Herbert as a unified master subject (305, emphasis mine).

[51] Brueggemann, (19).

the "seasons" of religious life in a realistic or essentially practical way; the psalms

correspond roughly to the "flow of human life" located in the "actual experience of one

of these settings or in movement from one to another."[52] In Herbert's poetry, too, this

"seasonal" approach to the ebb and flow of *lived* religious experience is quite obvious.

However, this observation suggests a significant interpretive problem; even though

devotional poetry can and does express these "seasons," we tend to read Herbert's poetry

with an attitude of religious orthodoxy that naturally assumes that a final resolution of

belief is inevitable and by doing so, risk undervaluing the experience of doubt, fear and

ambivalence.[53]

Brueggemann adds a qualifying element to the fairly commonplace application of

the Psalms to the circumstances of daily life:

> It is a curious fact that the church has, by and large, continued to sing
>
> songs of orientation in a world increasingly experienced as disoriented…It
>
> could be that such relentlessness is an act of bold defiance in which these
>
> psalms of order and reliability are flung in the face of the disorder…But at
>
> best, this is only partly true. It is my judgment that this action of the
>
> church is less an evangelical defiance guided by faith, and much more a

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[52] Brueggemann refers to "seasons" in the broad sense of a natural flow of ups and downs in human life: for example "seasons of well-being" interspersed with "anguished seasons." The Psalms "correspond to seasons of human life and bring those seasons to speech" (19).

[53] Undervaluing these experiences excludes the possibility of acknowledging that a fledgling concept of agnosticism may have been a very real spiritual position for early modern scholars, poets and religious leaders.

frightened, numb denial and deception that does not want to acknowledge

or experience the disorientation of life.[54]

Brueggemann's post-enlightenment critique resonates with Thomas Cranmer's Preface to

the first editions of the *Book of Common Prayer*.[55] The prayer book was prepared and

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[54] Brueggemann, (51). Brueggemann's work, referenced in this chapter and published in 1984, is not included in Chana Bloch's extensive study of Herbert and the Psalms (*Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible*, published in the following year). Brueggemann's commentary on the use and misuse of the Psalms in Modern churches as well as his original categories of classification are particularly relevant to Herbert's poetry--even though his book never mentions the poet; he is after all, an expert in the Old Testament. Bloch on the other hand, a poet and translator (Judaic studies) undoubtedly familiar with the Bible, cannot help but approach her subject from that perspective: "I am interested not only in tracking down Herbert's materials but also in understanding how he succeeds in making them speak with his own voice—that process by which the past is recovered and put to use. . . it is possible to glimpse the mind of the poet in the very act of creation, choosing among alternatives, elaborating or excluding, making something out of something" (6-7).

[55] This Preface was part of the first *Book of Common Prayer* which Cranmer put together in 1549 (under Edward VI), about which T.A. Drury, in *How We Got Our Prayer Book, 1901(44)* writes, "*Cranmer's Preface. Aims of the Reformers*. The best guide to the principles which aided Cranmer in compiling the first Prayer-Book is his own Preface, which we find in the two chapters now called 'Concerning the Service of the Church,' and 'Of Ceremonies.' These reflect exactly the temper of the reformers, the aims set in view, and the principles on which they were carried out." Cranmer's preface was used in the 2nd Edition (also under Edward VI) in 1552, as well as in the 1604 edition (under James I). In the 1662 version (under Charles II), a new preface was written by Bishop Sanderson and Cranmer's original preface was incorporated into the sections (cited above) where they remain today. David Cressy & Lori Anne Ferrell, *Religion and Society in Early Modern England: a Sourcebook,* explain that several versions of *The Book of Common Prayer* appeared in the middle period of 16th century, culminating in a more conservative prayer book that "familiarized generations of English worshippers to an idiosyncratic form of Protestantism that was reformed in doctrine but traditional in liturgy" (40). Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) was the primary architect of the first *Book of Common Prayer* (1549). Cranmer, as the Archbishop of Canterbury is well known for his role in the annulment of Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. During the reign of Edward VI, Cranmer was instrumental in the development of *The Book of Common Prayer*, the Church of England's first full liturgy. With the death of Edward and the controversial accession of the Catholic Mary I, in 1553, Cranmer's reforms fell out of

circulated at least in part as a corrective to the practice in which only "a fewe of [the

psalms] have beene daily saide, and oft repeated, and the rest utterly omitted." Cranmer's

expansion of the Psalter, while including a greater variety of psalms, did not give equal

time to the darker psalms of disorientation. Herbert's familiarity with the Psalms would

therefore include those of Disorientation, which he would have considered integral to the

very personal "experiential church". [56] However, even though psalms of disorientation

were included in the Book of Common Prayer, they were not generally included in the

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favor and he was eventually executed. When Elizabeth I took the throne, there was
significant factionalism regarding the Prayer Book, which despite dissension resulted in a
return to the more Protestant Second Book of Edward (1552), with some alterations,
among which were concessions to the Puritan conservatives. The 1604 version of the
Prayer book under James I also resulted in alterations, but the more notable upshot of the
conference to revise the book was the so-called "Authorized Version" of the English
Bible, commonly known as the King James Bible (T.W. Drury 42 -91). Additional
modifications occurred as a result of the Civil War, where a Directory for Public Worship
replaced the Book of Common Prayer (Cressy & Ferrell 186). "Further changes were
made in subsequent reigns, but the main positions won in 1552 were essentially the same
and still remain as the cardinal characteristics of our Prayer-Book" (Drury 77). The 1662
version (based on the 1552 edition) is essentially the same as today's English *Book of
Common Prayer*. It is interesting to note regarding the 1789 Prayer Book of the
American Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments
and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, Together with The Psalter or Psalms of
David,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, as pointed out by Drury, that the
American version "has many variations from [the English] prayer book" (125). One
might speculate that the recently independent Americans' desire for differentiation from
their former parent country extended to the liturgical as well as the political. This is
confirmed in the Preface of the 1789 American version: "when . . . these American States
became independent with respect to civil government, their ecclesiastical independence
was necessarily included" (10).

[56] Bloch points out that what the churchgoer and Parson heard repeated every month was
a collection of Psalms, a "sequence without a predictable pattern," and that one "can see
how, month after month and year after year, the apparent disorder of the Psalms might
begin to seem a significant order, one that reflects the inevitable 'deaths' and 'returns' of
the spirit" (239-240). She is referring here to the lack of a coherent order in the Psalms
themselves, which she relates to Herbert's work; "There is no clearly defined principle of
organization in The Temple" (240). This randomness appears to be continued in the way
the Psalms are organized for daily use in the Book of Common Prayer.

daily offices, collects, or special liturgies and so, would have remained "unperformed" by

the country parson in many of his congregational duties.[57]   This category of psalms

ranges in tone from a detailed outcry of troubling disorientation in the life of the speaker,

especially in regards to his relationship with God; these include 13, 86, and 35, which

Brueggemann describes as Psalms of Personal Lament.[58]   Other Psalms of disorientation

or "Problem Psalms" (88 and 109) express unbridled rage against an unresponsive God.

In his poetry, Herbert readily draws on Psalms of disorientation, and his adaptation and

manipulation of these darker-themed texts are in many ways more accessible to the

Christian reader than the corresponding Biblical versions.[59]

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[57] Wilcox (2007), posits the primacy of *The Book of Common Prayer* in Herbert's poetry: "It is clear that this presence of the sacred 'word' in the Temple is derived, not simply from Herbert's private study of the Bible, but primarily from the experience of regular liturgical readings from scripture. This is confirmed by the fact that, where his poetry makes use of Psalms, it is almost invariably in the language of the Book of Common Prayer" (xxvii).

[58] Brueggemann categorizes Psalms of Disorientation into three groups, Psalms of personal lament, Communal Laments, and Problem Psalms (51-88). Communal laments have at their root the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, and in that sense are tied to the Old Testament experience of the Jews, and are not addressed in this chapter. Many scholars, while acknowledging the vast diversity of forms in the Psalms of the Old Testament, tend to settle on three primary categories of classification. Bloch outlines essentially the same categories; celebration (hymns), affliction (complaint), and thanksgiving.   Bloch's classification is commonly accepted by Herbert scholars. For her, use of this classification in a discussion of the Psalms "brings into focus three groups of lyrics in *The Temple*: poems of celebration that glorify God; poems of affliction that end in faith, and poems of thanksgiving that rejoice in pain overcome (242-243).

[59] Though Brueggemann does make use of the term "darkness" when discussing these Psalms (the "voice of darkness and disorientation", "the dark night of the soul", "the darkness of abandonment"), I will use his term "disorientation" to avoid confusion about the concept of darkness as it is used in other sections of this dissertation in relation to apophatic or negative theology (78).

Take for example, Psalm 88. Brueggemann describes this Psalm as "an embarrassment to conventional faith." "It is the cry of a believer (who sounds like Job) whose life has gone awry, who desperately seeks contact with Yahweh, but who is unable to evoke a response from God. This is indeed 'the dark night of the soul,' when the troubled person must be and must stay in the darkness of abandonment, utterly alone."[60] The first verses read as follows:

O Lord God of my salvation,

I have cried day *and* night before thee:

Incline thine ear unto my cry;

For my soul is full of troubles:

And my life draweth nigh unto the grave.

I am counted with them that go down into the pit:

I am as a man *that hath* no strength:

Free among the dead,

Like the slain that lie in the grave,

Whom thou rememberest no more:

And they are cut off from thy hand. (88:1-5)

The extreme pathos of the psalm with its intimations of an unresponsive God who has abandoned the petitioner to a despairing and hellish existence, though over-stated, clearly finds its poetic counterpart in Herbert's "Deniall." However, the poet's verse moderates

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[60] Brueggemann, (78).

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the complaint, personalizing through metaphor the calling out to God and giving the reader a still powerful, but less abrasive, experience.

When my devotions could not pierce
      Thy silent ears;
Then was my heart broken, as was my verse:
      My breast was full of fears
        And disorder.

My bent thoughts, like a brittle bow,
      Did flie asunder:
Each took his way; some would to pleasures go,
      Some to the warres and thunder
        Of alarms.

As good go any where, they say,
      As to benumme
Both knees and heart, in crying night and day,
      Come, come, my God, O come,
        But no hearing.

O that thou shouldst give dust a tounge
      To crie to thee,

And then not heare it crying! all the day long

      My heart was in my knee,

        But no hearing.

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 heartlesse breast,

      Deferre no time;

That so thy favours granting my request,

      They and my mind may chime,

        And mend my ryme.

Herbert's adaptation of the Psalm's first lines, "O Lord God of my salvation, / I have cried day *and* night before thee: / Let my prayer come before thee/ Incline thine ear unto my cry" is interesting because of its subtlety. The speaker in the Psalm asks God to "incline" His ear; in "Deniall," by contrast, the speaker's devotions and verse are blocked by God's "silent ears," an oddly evocative mixed metaphor. It is also interesting that instead of requesting the inclination of God's hearing appendage, the speaker merely comments that his devotions have found "silent ears." Herbert is using the subtlety of

sound to establish a chain of complaints. The speaker's voice cannot pierce *thy silence*, or *thy ears*. Ears is, of course, part of the word "hears"—we can hear ears in hears, one might say—and the aural association suggests that God has in fact, heard the speaker's devotions, but has not acted.[61] It might not be too fanciful to hear another homonymic pun in the odd locution of "Thy silent ears" which could itself fall on the ear of a listener as "Thy silent years,"—and be interpreted as a reference to God's indifference to his creatures in the modern era, an oft-iterated theme elsewhere in the poems of "The Church."

With his "devotions" in the past having received no response from God, Herbert catalogs both the despair ("my heart broken") and the consequences of God's silence as they play out in spiritual and earthly life. The language is strongly evocative of what can only be described as a crisis of faith. Hinting at an ongoing and dedicated effort to get God's attention, his "devotions," sharp and well-aimed, are still unable to "pierce" God's "silent ears," and demonstrate not only God's failure to *respond* and to *reveal*, but also an indifference—even a refusal—to *listen* or to *hear*. The speaker's obsessive pleas occurring "Night and day" and "all day long" leave his body and soul are numb with the effort.

Much like Psalm 88, the silence that pervades "Deniall" shows God as indifferent to the speaker's persistent requests. However, the Psalm reveals God's indifference and absence in words that are hard, harsh and at times, frightening in their cruelty. The Psalm

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[61] For a detailed discussion of Herbert's use of paronomasia see R. V. Young, Jr., "George Herbert and divine Paronomasia," *George Herbert: Sacred and Profane*, Helen Wilcox and Richard Todd, eds., Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995. Tobin points out that Herbert's puns are "not only English puns but also macaronic, that is they involve wordplay between two languages" (xv).

expresses a fear of death directly, starkly, in explicit references: "my life draweth nigh unto the grave," the Psalmist tells us, and he must go "down into the pit."

Psalm 88 also offers no hope of reunion. The final lines read:

> Thy fierce wrath goeth over me;
>
> Thy terrors have cut me off.
>
> They came round about me daily like water;
>
> They compassed me about together.
>
> Lover and Friend has thou put far from me,
>
> *And* mine acquaintance *into* darkness. (88:16-18)

"Deniall" at least appears to admit to the possibility that God will break His silence, and bring the speaker back from disorientation to reorientation—from self-doubt, to protestations, and eventually, back to faith. God's "favours" will grant the speaker's request. The speaker's hoped for "answer" would, theoretically, unite mind (soul) and rhyme (heart) in a way that only God can—and in a way that is inaccessible to human beings and human words, regardless of how skillfully they are wrought and rendered. Richard Strier eloquently sums up Herbert's dilemma:

> The poet is asking that God do something to him analogous to what he has
>
> done in the poem—but not identical with it. 'My ryme' in the final line is
>
> metaphorical and existential; it refers to a state of harmony ('chiming') between
>
> God's will and the poet's ('They and my minde'). The poet cannot, in this sense,

mend his 'rhyme' himself. He cannot mend his spiritual state by mending his

representation of it. [62]

Strier's more secularly oriented, but nevertheless accurate observation suggests that the

inward state can only be mended *as* representation. Language cannot adequately

represent the desired state of the soul for Herbert's speakers. Linguistic limitations,

therefore, make way for the interpretive possibility that the many disordered souls and

personae in *The Temple* will remain disordered despite the poet's ordered poetic

representations. In a number of Herbert's poems, the metaphor of the broken rhyme is

also a metaphor for the broken self. However, "Deniall" does not substitute for the

darkness of the Psalm with a simple move toward reorientation. Herbert takes advantage

of the resources of poetic form to suggest that for the speaker of the poem, the

disorientation of silence may in fact be interminable. God continually refrains from pure

disclosure, or indeed, from any disclosure at all. In the lines, "They and my mind may

chime, / And mend my ryme," the poet *performs* reorientation "of his spiritual state" for

his audience by representing faith in a seemingly inevitable reunion; but it's important to

note that this act of reunion with God remains conditional, and is therefore grammatically

postponed—*if* the request is granted, it *may* bring about spiritual reorientation. God's

indifference, then, is a serious matter; the request that the speaker desires, the

"metaphorical and existential" mending of his rhyme, is infinitely denied by the cyclical

nature of re-reading. The rhyme that has been superficially and performatively "mended"

in the similar sounds of "chime," "mind," and "ryme" in the final stanza ends where it

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[62] Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, (190-1).

began—with God's unspoken "Deniall" of the speaker's request. The reader is brought

back to the title of the poem, which provides a crucial key to understanding the

movement from "disorientation" to "new orientation" as a performance of poetic

closure.[63] The speaker's breast is again "full of fears / And disorder"; he reasserts his

otherness in relation to the divine presence that *could* dissolve the separation, grant the

creature rest, *if only he would*.

Still, much of this Psalm is too severe and despairing even for Herbert at his most

melancholy and we can see why the poet might be overly cautious in his own depiction of

this state:

> My life is at the brink of the grave. (88:3)
>
> I have borne your terrors with a troubled mind. (88:16)
>
> Your terrors have destroyed me. (88:17)

Though perhaps harboring such terror in his times of doubt, Herbert recognized the need

to frame the extreme nature of negative feelings toward God more moderately—

concealing the darkness of his personal experience while revealing a more tempered

version of those feelings as an acceptable element of Christian life. Once again,

Brueggemann offers an important insight:

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[63] Psalms of new orientation move the faithful out of a state of disorientation, a process Brueggemann compares to the Resurrection of Christ following the disorientation of the Crucifixion (19-23). The "speaker and the community of faith are often surprised by grace, when there emerges in present life a new possibility that is inexplicable, neither derived nor extrapolated, but wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God" (124).

Much Christian piety and spirituality is romantic and unreal in its

positiveness. As children of the Enlightenment, we have censored and

selected around the voice of darkness and disorientation, seeking to go

from strength to strength, from victory to victory. But such a way not only

ignores the Psalms; it is a lie in terms of our experience…The psalms are

profoundly subversive of the dominant culture, which wants to deny and

cover over the darkness we are called to enter. Personally we shun

negativity. Publicly we deny the failure of our attempts to exercise

control.[64]

We can see that Herbert does, in fact, censor and select around the experience, the voice

and the representation of darkness. Both the poet's wit and the parson's prose can be

considered within the framework of Brueggemann's analysis; read within this framework

many responses to the Psalms reflect a more general desire to control and structure the

perception of our spiritual experience in positive terms. At times Herbert's work betrays

precisely this desire, too.

Doubt *in* Praise: A Speech Too Low

"Antiphon (I)" is commonly viewed as a poem of praise that is modeled on a

congregational hymn—Coburn Freer makes note of this "psalm-singing in the church" as

a regular element of Herbert's own practice as a parson.[65] As Bloch explains, the hymns

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[64] Brueggemann, (11-12).

[65] Freer, (9-10).

of the Book of Psalms begin with "an invitation to 'praise the Lord'" followed by an

"enthusiastic account of the motives for praise." [66] Brueggemann suggests a similar

interpretive model for such Psalms of *orientation* that are notably connected to communal

demonstrations of celebration and "well being that evoke gratitude for the constancy of

blessing" and "which in a variety of ways articulate the joy, delight, goodness, coherence,

and reliability of God."[67] Used extensively in the liturgy and included in the section of

The Book of Common Prayer designated as "Daily Morning Prayer," these Psalms of

praise and orientation would have been recited often and regularly.[68] It is obvious that

the regularity of praise services would have shaped the atmosphere of community in

Bemerton, reinforcing the positive aspects of the post-reformation church through the

vehicle of the Book of Common Prayer. As we have seen, Psalm 88 and others Psalms of

disorientation were by significant contrast, a rarity in the communal and aural practices of

the liturgy.

Bloch's definition that "the hymn is pure praise, with no petitional element; its

purpose is to glorify God before all the world, and its mood is one of jubilant adoration"

is spot on for Psalm 150:[69]

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[66] Bloch, (243).

[67] Brueggemann, (19).

[68] *The Book of Common Prayer: 1662 Version,* London: Everyman's Library, 1999. Verses 1-7 of Psalm 95 are used in the Venite, and Psalm 100 is used in its entirety in the Jubilate (72-78). Directions for utilizing the Lectionary are fairly prescriptive. For example: "the Psalter shall be read through once every Month, as it is there appointed, both for Morning and Evening Prayer," (15). This strict order is repeated in most sections of the Prayer Book.

[69] Bloch, (243).

Praise ye the Lord.

Praise God in his sanctuary:

Praise him in the firmament of his power

Praise him for his mighty acts:

Praise him for his excellent greatness. (1-2)[70]

The verses immediately following specify an "instrumental accompaniment—trumpet, lute, harp, cymbals, strings and pipe."[71] "Praise him with the psaltery and harp" (3), and "Let *every thing that hath* breath praise the Lord" (6), also conform to the objectives of the Book of Common Prayer in that the words are intended to be read *aloud* and with *exactness*. These objectives leave little room for the special kind of personal interpretation that is "spelled" out in Herbert's poetry. The individual, in this communal setting, might be personally inspired by the Holy Ghost, but any revelation from or affirmation of Divine presence is written only on the heart, and therefore remains veiled, even lost, from representation (at least until it is written out by the poet's hand). Although Bloch's definition can be generally applied to many of Herbert's poems, it is certainly not definitive in the context of verse (which is an adaptation of the original model). Despite her acknowledgment that her discussion of the form and function of the

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[70] The verses quoted here are representative of the motives for praise discussed by Bloch: "God's power and majesty, mercy and faithfulness, or his wondrous deeds in history and nature" (243).

[71] Bloch, (243).

Biblical Psalms of Praise is interpretatively reliant on a consideration of the "generic features of biblical hymns," Bloch does not veer away from these generalizing features in her reading of "Antiphon (I)."[72] In the following passage, we again see a push to impose a unifying pattern on the collection as a whole, where the ever-present lightness represented in this single poem of praise and communal worship serves to counter-balance the darkness of Herbert's more inward-turning poems:

It is interesting that Herbert chose to include "Antiphon, I," which is not found in the Williams manuscript, among the first group of poems in *The Temple*. In doing so he introduces, early in the volume, an image of communal worship that remains present to our minds even as we read the more inward and personal lyrics. Up to line 10, the poem appears to be an imitation of an Old Testament hymn. But the final couplet, which completes the antithesis of "church" and "heart"—"But above all the heart / Must bear the longest part"—summons up the temple topos and reminds us that this is after all a Christian psalm, written for a temple whose frame and fabric is within. At the same time, "Antiphon, I" tells us that the heart does not sing solo; its song is always heard against a chorus of many voices.[73]

In other words, the topos of interiority summoned up by the final antithesis of the poem is finally rendered secondary to the chorus of voices that consume the solo song of the individual heart. The "*Chorus,*" repeated without alteration in stanzas one, three and

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[72] Bloch, (243).

[73] Bloch, (245).

five exemplifies the consistency and formality of the psalms as used in the congregational setting:

> *Chorus.* Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
>
> > *My God and King.* (1-2)

Standard readings of "Antiphon (I)" focus on congregational or psalm-singing as the primary interpretive context for the poem; however, it is possible to read the alternation of voices in this poem, not only as a dialogue between "chorus" and "verse," but also as a kind of interior monologue. In this monologue, the speaker does not unreservedly offer praise in the manner of Psalm 105. Instead, the speaker, modeling the form of the dialogue anthem, explores how he can adequately praise God, and how he can endure a God who is indefinitely silent.[74]

The first "*verse*" (stanza two) explores problems related to successful praise through the subtle application of the logic of linguistic signification; the focus is on the unreliable exchange between the descent of the Divine (too high) and the ascent of the creature (too low):

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[74] In his analysis of "The Holdfast" and "A True Hymn", Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts; the Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972, suggests that the "poet-protagonists" of Herbert's early career include an expression of "debilitating *self*-concern" where the "impulse to 'mean,' to seek out 'quaint words and trim invention,' is born less of a desire to praise God (who is not mentioned) than of a need to validate the worth of his own imagination" (200). While I agree that Herbert's speakers are quite often debilitated, and that the focus is generally on the self, there is also a genuine angst regarding God's care of the speaker. I understand Herbert's *self*-concern as a sincere striving to explore the nuances of faith though the epistemology of meditative verse.

Verse. The Heav'ns are not too high,

His praise may thither fly:

The earth is not too low,

His praises there may grow. (3-6)

Generally, we think of praise as a manifestation of the human voice. The speech of praise can be understood as imperfect human language, imperfect because it always fails in its imitation of the *logos* (the word of God or God himself). Successful praise is a negotiation of the distance between "Heav'ns" and earth or, more specifically, between human language and Divine *logos*. At first glance, then, this stanza seems to be a positive representation of praise; it states that the heavens are not too high and the earth is not too low — that human praise can potentially reach the *logos* because the heavens are not too high for it, and the *logos* can descend to an earth that is not too low for it.[75] However, the use of the word "may" in lines two and five suggest the uncertainty of a meaningful connection between the high (Divine *logos*) and the low (human language). The distance "may" turn out to be too far, resulting in failed praise or divine silence. And for this speaker, successful praise results in establishing successful communication with God; read in this way, ideal communication between the speaker and God would be

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[75] I have italicized the word *logos* to underscore the divine nature of language as it pertains to God, scripture, praise and liturgy.

similar to an individual call and a communal response. To put it another way, an

unsuccessful congregational hymn would result only if the community of voices were

either absent or if they failed or refused to respond to the call.

In the second "*Verse*" (stanza four) the general location of "earth" is condensed to

the more specific area of "The church" (which is also no longer only a location, but a

community):

> *Verse.* The church with psalms must shout,
>
> No door can keep them out:
>
> But above all, the heart
>
> Must bear the longest part. (9-12)

In this stanza, praises that in heaven "may thither fly" and on earth "there may grow" are

now represented with greater specificity—praises are now psalms that *must* be shouted.

By beginning the stanza with two concrete nouns, the speaker emphasizes the primacy of

the church as a community; psalms, unlike praises, directly reference the *logos*. We are

now prepared to look for a resolution of the ambiguity of the speaker's meditation on

effective praise in the second stanza. However, as we progress through the imagery, the

specific and concrete references, when read together, function on many levels of

meaning, and the speaker swiftly redirects our attention from the "church" to the "heart".

If "no door" can deny entry to the community of voices that shout with psalms, then

every door is open in like fashion. The grammatical structure of this image, by implying

the existence of many doors by which human speech may reach the heavenly realm, also

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suggests the possibility that shouting can take a variety of forms—including, perhaps, shouts of lament, rage and suffering. This stanza combines the lingering image of the ideal Anglican Church—as it carries out the daily business of Christian employment, supported by a scriptural, liturgical and communal foundation—with the image of the solitary speaker. The weary heart, must endure the longest refrain, the interminable segue between human language and the *logos*. The speaker's reference to the "longest part" reiterates the themes of time and space that are developed over the course of the poem and ultimately comment on the speaker's experience of disorientation; they emphasize the speaker's proximity to God (too high or too low) as well as the duration of the speaker's suffering (a long and indefinite separation from God). This is not a self-consuming resolution, but rather, a meditation that illuminates the speaker's awareness of his difference and his isolation from God.

Herbert's specific reference to "The church" is a self-reflexive pun that points to the collection of poems in *The Temple* and works to direct our attention to the subversive elements of those poems, versions of the psalms that also "shout", but with the voice of doubt and uncertainty.[76] In contrast to the celebratory communal voices to which "No

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[76] Nicholas R. Jones, "Texts and Contexts: Two Languages in George Herbert's Poetry," *Studies in Philology* 79 (1982) explains that Herbert "intends an analogy between his newly purified language and the language of scripture: both are received rather than invented; both are packed with potential meaning; both are free from human artifice" (163). Jones suggests a strong relationship between "texts" (scripture) and "contexts" (poems); "The texts in Herbert's poems bring to our attention a plain, undistorted, honest, and efficacious speech that potentially conveys a direct, unmistakable knowledge of God. We attend to these purest moments because we have also become engaged in an obviously impure language—willful, witty, complex, and even on occasion perverse. The text-context structure reflects the major subject of the poems themselves, the action of God in human life." The "text" is "central to all human activity" and is "more enduring, more powerful, and more beautiful than any of its human contexts." For Jones then, the transcendental nature of the *logos* "frees us from the faults and excesses of

door" can deny entry, there is a second point of view expressed. The speaker's heart—the parson's heart, the heart of the doubting subject—is isolated from the church even in rhyme; the "heart" bearing as it must, "the longest part" of suffering, is also set apart, from both a terrestrial community and divine communion.[77]   Read in this way, the image of "No door" becomes extremely personal and refers to the many protective elements of Christianity, including Christology, kenosis, the liturgical calendar, church rituals, the Bible and The Book of Common Prayer; these protective practices are meant to shield the vulnerable heart, but ultimately cannot prevent doubt from entering in through many doors. Moreover, if there is a singular "door"—where the human voice meets the Divine *logos*—it is finally confirmed as entry-less, signifying instead, the failure of faith and daily devotion to protect and fortify the speaker; the speaker's suffering heart at the threshold of a securely bolted door, must endure a silent, secret and an ongoing "longest part." Thus we can see that even in praise, there is a powerful vein of personal lament.

Psalms of Confession: Lamenting "Thy Bitter Wrath"

Unlike psalms of disorientation that rarely made an appearance in the daily rhythms of the faith community, the set of psalms well known as "The Seven Psalms," integral to the services of the Lenten season are also classified according to their thematic

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ordinary poetic language" and paradoxically has "no meaning without a human context: "as pure, divine language, it depends on impure, human language" (164).

[77] Jones emphasizes that the negative phrasing of "no doore" allows "doubt to intrude"; we are "reminded of the very solid doors that do block worship: heresy, sectarianism, lethargy, etc." (167). In reference to the "heart" as a "soloist", Jones shows that in bearing the "longest part", it must "convert each stubborn 'corner' of its own being" (168).

and rhetorical characteristics. Brueggemann places Psalm 32 in a sub-category of disorientation; this lament psalm testifies to the speaker's need of *confession*. In verses three through five we observe that the speaker, though "roaring all the day," has "kept silence" regarding his sin:

> When I kept silence, my bones waxed old
>
> Through my roaring all the day long.
>
> For day and night they hand was heavy upon me:
>
> My moisture is turned into the drought of summer. Selah.
>
> I acknowledged my sin unto thee,
>
> And my iniquity I have not hid.
>
> I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord;
>
> And thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah. (32:3-5)

Here, God is represented as justifiably heavy-handed when it comes to the silence of unacknowledged sin. The speaker's disorientation is a result of the iniquity that was kept hidden. The return to orientation (forgiveness and new communion with God) is resolved neatly, quickly and with apparent ease; the process appears to begin with the decision to confess, continues through the confession, and is reinforced when the speaker shares the process with others; the speaker provides a model for actual confession. Moreover, as Brueggemann explains, "Real sin is a violation of relationship with God" and in this situation the psalmist "sees that sin is a *theological* problem—not moral, ethical, social,

or psychological."[78] By contrast, sin, for the speaker of "Sighs and Groans," presents both a theological and a psychological or spiritual problem. Brueggemann also explains that the form of confession does not present an argument; the speaker concedes that all that is wrong in the relationship is on his side," there is no "abrasion toward Yahweh, but a genuine admission that Yahweh is utterly in the right."[79]

In the first stanza of "Sighs and Groans," the speaker, rather than articulating a genuine admission of God's righteousness, attempts to persuade God not to "correct" him (by doling out the punishment appropriate to the sin). Instead, he attempts to appeal to God's vain desire for glory; if God "reforms" the speaker (preventing sin), the speaker will better reflect God's glory.

> Oh do not use me
> After my sins! look not on my desert,
> But on thy glory! Then thou wilt reform
> And not refuse me: for thou only art
> The mighty God, but I a sillie worm;
> Oh do not bruise me! (1-6)

The speaker seems the "sillie worm" by both wheedling and flattering God in an effort to accomplish favor. This attitude continues into the second stanza as the speaker supplies additional logic for his argument:

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[78] Brueggemann, (99).

[79] Brueggemann, (99).

Oh do not urge me!

For what account can thy ill steward make? (7-8)

This rhetorical question (the only question in the poem) also initiates the speaker's transformation; he shifts from blaming God for making him an "ill steward" to accounting for the sins he has committed.

I have abus'd thy stock, destroy'd thy woods,

Suckt all thy magazens: my head did ache,

Till it found out how to consume thy goods:

Oh do not scourge me! (9-12)

Lines 10-11 seem to indicate that the speaker has learned to consume the divine gifts associated with Christ's sacrifice—mercy and forgiveness. However, as the poem moves toward its conclusion, we note that unlike the psalmist, who truly learns both the reason for his suffering (transgression) and the means to assuage it (genuine admission), Herbert's speaker fails to fully incorporate the central message of Psalm 32 into the experience of his faith:

Many sorrows *shall be* to the wicked:

But he that trusteth in the Lord,

Mercy shall compass him about. (32:10)

The psalmist is relieved in part because of his confession, but he is also healed because he "trusteth in the Lord" and believes in the tenets of the covenant, namely that God will show mercy to the penitent. By comparison, the speaker of "Sighs and Groans," despite his faithful compliance to the promised efficacy of confession, cannot fully embrace the miraculous extent of God's mercy. The petitions that frame each stanza provide two interpretive possibilities. By asking the Lord to allow sin to go unpunished, the speaker appears petulant as he refuses to be justly compensated for his sinful actions. On the other hand, the relentless petitions show the speaker performing the motions/actions of confession, but unable to believe that Christ's sacrifice has replaced punishment with mercy:

> Oh do not blinde me!
> I have deserv'd that an Egyptian night
> Should thicken all my powers; because my lust
> Hath still sow'd fig-leaves to exclude thy light: (13-16)

The speaker, rather than focusing on confession as a sacrament, continues to feel sorrow for his wickedness and does not trust that God will in fact be merciful; if he has deserved the dimming of his own "powers" to the point of excluding God's light, he does not entirely believe that his confession will reunite him with God, restore his power, or put an end to the pain of being blinded by God's heavy hand. We can see that the speaker doubts his powers of right stewardship and that inward power associated with God's

presence in the faithful human soul. In the following stanza, instead of continuing his

confession, the speaker reasons with God about the reality of Christ's sacrifice:

O do not fill me

With the turn'd vial of thy bitter wrath!

For thou hast other vessels full of bloud,

A part whereof my Saviour empti'd hath

Ev'n unto death: since he di'd for my good,

O do not kill me! (19-24)

He begs to avoid God's "bitter wrath" (the outcome of sin before the incarnation of

Christ). Instead, he wishes to be filled with the redeeming blood of Christ. By ending

the stanza with a desperate plea "O do not kill me!" we sense that the speaker is still in a

state of disorientation; he remains uncertain about how his actions will impact his

relationship with God; more importantly, he goes so far as to doubt the redeeming merits

of Christ's sacrifice by emphasizing the possibility of his own spiritual death, over the

life that is predicted in the Psalms and fulfilled in the New Testament.

Returning to the Psalm 32, we see that the final verse is indicative of the

psalmist's faith; additionally, the speech ends with resolute clarity and we know that both

God and the psalmist find the resolution acceptable:

Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, ye righteous:

And shout for joy, all *ye that are* upright in heart. (32:11).

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We do not, however, find any guarantee of resolution in the final stanza of "Sighs and Grones":

> But O reprieve me!
>
> For thou hast *life* and *death* at thy command;
>
> Thou art both *Judge* and *Saviour, feast* and *rod,*
>
> *Cordiall* and *Corrosive:* put not thy hand
>
> Into the bitter box; but O my God,
>
> My God, relieve me! (25-30)

Although the speaker *asks for* forgiveness (in the form of reprieve and relief), he *has not yet* received it and remains in a state of disorientation. Because the speaker lacks the faith necessary to trust the Lord, the "reprieve" and "relief" he pleads for so ardently in each stanza are never granted. Returning to Psalm 32, whose speaker faithfully declares his transformation from "disorientation" to "new orientation," we note a significant dissimilarity between this speaker and the speaker of Herbert's poem:

> I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord;
>
> And thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah. (32:5)

We can see that Herbert's speaker has successfully performed, has said and has confessed his transgressions unto the Lord. However, the speaker cannot partake of the fruit of his

performance and rather than stating with certainty what *has occurred* (the past tense "thou forgavest" of Psalm 32), the speaker remains in the spiritual and psychological state of the original petition even as he ardently demands for the relief that *has not yet occurred*. Herbert's use of the present tense "thou hast" in lines 21 and 27 thus *resists* the reorientation or closure that the psalm achieves.

For Herbert the lyric subject, groans represent his doubt and the striving toward—the longing for—relief from that doubt. To get a sense of the sincere nature of this feeling we can return to "Superliminare" with its warning that to enter "The Church" (as well as "the" Church), one must be "holy, pure, and clear/Or that which groneth to be so."[80] For the speaker, faith is not simply a matter of *being* these things, but of *wishing* to be them. And though he can imagine that God's "bitter box" of judgment can be avoided, and that he wants his reader to know it, his own curative balm, his "cordial" is nowhere in sight, and in its stead is that "corrosive" doubt, destroying not only flesh, but heart and soul as well.

Third-Party Hostility: "Let Not Their Plot / Kill Them and Me"

The central issue at stake in psalms of personal lament is that something "is terribly wrong in the life of the speaker and in the life of the speaker with God."[81] Brueggemann groups these psalms into several categories, one of which I will use in my analysis of "Affliction (IV)." The first deals with speeches comprised of statements that

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[80] "Superliminare," line 7.

[81] Brueggemann, (58).

describe a situation of disorientation and "intend to fix the blame firmly on Yahweh; they do not "seek information" but rather accuse God of being responsible for the trouble, and that trouble is usually a result of the absence of God.[82] As Brueggemann points out, many psalms in the first grouping take as their subject the negativity that is experienced as an external circumstance; "because of *Yahweh's abandonment,* or because of *Israel's infidelity,* or because of *third party hostility,"* the speaker "has experienced circumstances that are unhappy, unbearable, and at least in part, unmerited." They are unmerited because they represent situations that are "not anticipated by the covenant community when the covenant is properly functioning: sickness, isolation, prison, abuse, death."[83] We can interpret the situation of disorientation in these contexts as a manifestation of the speaker's doubt; the speaker does everything he is asked to do, lives in accordance with the covenant, and yet is still persecuted.

The negative *external* circumstance of "Affliction (IV)" is a situation of third-party hostility (as evoked in Psalm 35); however, Herbert's speaker is not afflicted by an "external" enemy, rather, both the speaker's enemy and the context are *internal*:

> My thoughts are all a case of knives,
>> Wounding my heart
>> With scatter'd smart,
> As wat'ring pots give flowers their lives.

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[82] Brueggemann, (58-59).

[83] Brueggemann, (94).

Nothing their fury can control,

While they do wound and prick my soul. (7-12)

Brueggemann notes that in Psalm 35—a lament featuring a speaker who is in the throes of third-party hostility—the trouble is "closer," the speaker's trust in Yahweh "more uncertain," and the situation is "badly deteriorated."[84] Verses 1-3 begin with a "barrage of military images"; "the trouble is assumed to be Yahweh's business, if not his fault, and it is time that he act."[85]

Plead *my cause*, O Lord, with them that strive with me:

Fight against them that fight against me.

Take hold of shield and buckler, and stand up for mine help.

Draw out also the spear, and stop *the way* against them that persecute me:

Say unto my soul, I *am* thy salvation. (35:1-3)

Herbert's speaker in "Affliction (IV)" also employs military imagery in his petition that the Lord "plead" his cause:

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[84] Brueggemann, (63).

[85] Brueggemann, (63).

All my attendants are at strife,

    Quitting their place

    Unto my face:

Nothing performs the task of life:

    The elements are let loose to fight,

    And while I live, try out their right.

Oh help, my God! let not their plot

    Kill them and me,

    And also thee,

Who art my life: dissolve the knot,

    As the sun scatters by his light

    All the rebellions of the night. (13-24)

Like the speaker in Psalm 35, the speaker of this poem seeks help for himself—protection

from the loose elements plotting to kill (20). Yet the situation of the poem veers away

from the traditional lament when the speaker explains that his unruly, knife-wielding

thoughts (to which the deadly plot belongs), threaten to kill "them and me, / and also

thee, / Who art my life."[86] Thoughts can kill the speaker, they can kill "thee" (the

presence of God within the speaker), and they can kill themselves. What is interesting is

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[86] Brueggemann, (64).

that the destruction of any one of these (them, me thee) will prevent the resolution of the initial problem and the mutual destruction of all. The dissolution of "thee" ensures that the "knot" cannot be "dissolved." Yet this is the very thing that the speaker desires above all else—that God dissolve the knot, and rein in the "elements" and the "fury" of the speaker's "thoughts." The suppressed rebellion is the speaker's ordered mind.

Brueggemann's analysis of the formal elements of the Psalms is insistent that *all* psalms of disorientation will reach a positive resolution; this resolution is reflected in the speaker's "new orientation" towards God. The structural element that brings about this "new-orientation" in Psalm 35 is the *promise of praise* in the final lines. There are three implications in "anticipations of praise." First, they are certain; the speaker does not doubt that they will happen because they are based on an active insistence on change. Second, they are "*withheld*" anticipations. The speaker does *not yet* engage in any praise." "If Yahweh wants to be praised, then he must respond to this specific need with rescue and vindication." The third implication involves taking note of "the actual *substance* of sure, but withheld praise. Verse 18 provides no content. It only addresses the possibility of praise formally. "Much more important is the promised praise of verse 10, which asserts the distinctiveness of Yahweh. The claim is that when Yahweh delivers from this wretchedness, it will be known again that there is none other like Yahweh who delivers in such a way."[87]

Then shall those powers, which work for grief,

       Enter thy pay,

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[87] Brueggemann, (65).

And day by day

Labor thy praise, and my relief;

With Care and courage building me,

Till I reach heav'n, and much more thee. (25-30).

The speaker's thoughts, reordered by the Lord, suggest that the speaker has turned over "those powers" which in his possession "work for grief" to the service of the Lord. Thoughts will "labor *thy* praise" and *labor* the speaker's "relief." "Those powers"—the poet's own powers—transformed by the Lord's rebellion-squashing hand (now representing a form of indentured servitude) take on the additional duty of carefully and courageously "building" the poet to the reaches of "heav'n, and much more thee." The "anticipation of praise" while directed toward God, is also a thinly veiled praise of the poet's own power. Brueggemann's observation might be revised to read: "when Herbert delivers from this wretchedness, it will be known again that there is none other like Herbert who delivers in such a way." The subtle acknowledgement of his own pride belies Herbert's self-doubt in a way that borders on blasphemy. Only when "those powers" enter God's employ will relief occur, and unlike the psalm on which the poem is modeled, that re-orientation is still unrealized.

In "Man," the poem that immediately follows "Affliction (IV)" in "The Church," Herbert the poet—or rather "those powers"—surrendered to God, now "labor" to build a rhetorical picture of "Man" who is "ev'ry thing, / and more" (7).

My god, I heard this day,

That none doth build a stately habitation,

But he that means to dwell therein.

What house more stately hath there been,

Or can be, than is Man? To whose creation

All things are in decay. (1-6)

Ironically, after eight stanzas that describe and build this "stately habitation," the speaker is once again in a state of disorientation—and a state that is remarkably similar to the conditions that initiated the lament of "Affliction (IV)." The speaker's thoughts, despite their appearance of order in the final stanza of "Man," reveal a "brave palace" that is afforded "so much wit," but lacks the presence of God.

Since then, my God, thou hast

So brave a Palace built; Oh dwell in it,

That it may dwell with thee at last!

Till then, afford us so much wit;

That, as the world serves us, we may serve thee,

And both thy servants be. (49-54)

Importantly, the speaker's words in "Affliction (IV)"—build the man (empty and doubting) that will go on to praise the more general notion of God's creation in "Man." The beginning stanza of "Man" can be read as the fulfillment of the speaker's ending

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situation in "Affliction (IV)." The speaker, whose thoughts have been reordered, can build a poem that praises God's most valuable creation (man). Yet, the individual "man"—though in possession of thoughts that are properly employed—is an empty (and worldly) palace. In asking God to dwell "in it", the speaker is also asking for a temporary replacement for the future union of the palace with God. "*Till* then, afford us so much wit" is a nearly identical request to "Labor thy praise, and my relief…*Till* I reach heaven and much more *in* thee" (emphasis mine). The two poems work together to perform resolution or reorientation, but *reveal* the continuity of the speaker's disorientation. As we will see in the following section, the consistent pattern of the psalms from disorientation to new orientation is similar to Barbara Herrnstein Smith's discussion of poetic closure.[88] In Herbert's poetry, the readerly reward of closure, like that of new-orientation, is a faith-bolstering structure; it provides satisfaction because it resolves a conflict (or as I suggest, performs rather than "secures" closure).

Resisting Resolution

Smith places Herbert's "Redemption" in the category of the "narrative lyric."[89] The conclusion, she argues, "owes much of its power"—its power, that is, to provoke an "extraordinarily moving" response in the reader—to the "chilling and yet beautiful correspondence" of the narrative-thematic structure and the spiritual realm it refers to and is intended to reaffirm. "As the reader is drawn into the allegorical world of tenants and

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[88] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, (139).

[89] Smith, (139).

property transactions, he follows the events as in a fictional narration—even though their religious significance is always apparent. The conclusion is experienced with a double shock of surprise and recognition."[90] Smith's analysis of "Redemption" is significant to my argument because it points to a particular methodology that runs throughout the individual poems of *The Church* and governs the arrangement of the poems within the collection. As we have seen, Herbert is an interesting poet in this regard; his poetry repeatedly "secures" poetic closure through the "double shock" of surprise (doubt to faith, a series of poetic conceits that build toward a biblical truth) and recognition (of the patterns of sanctioned religious experience).

As Smith notes, the surprise ending rewards "a readjustment of the reader's expectations; it justifies itself retrospectively. A disappointing ending, however, leaves the reader's expectations foiled."[91] Within the confines of the modern critical acceptance of a unified master subject, few if any of the poems of "The Church" would be described as having disappointing endings, and although the psalms are not referenced by Smith, the expected outcomes of the psalms are similar to the expected outcome of poetic closure. In *The Temple*, poems of a liturgical nature, as well as poems of celebration

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[90] Smith, (125-126).

[91] Smith, (125-126) "With regard to the experience of poetic events, then, and particularly of poetic endings, we will say that both surprises and disappointments are events that occur, but each with a different relation to the reader's expectations, and that the value (pleasant or unpleasant) will attach not to the quality of the event itself but to the nature of that relation. All surprises, by this view, will be pleasant and all disappointments unpleasant. The surprise ending is one which forces and rewards a readjustment of the reader's expectations; it justifies itself retrospectively. A disappointing ending, on the other hand, is not accommodated by such a readjustment; it remains unjustified and the reader's expectations remain foiled" (213).

(orientation) and thanksgiving (new orientation) are relatively stable in meeting any

reader's expectations, as Herbert certainly intended.

The iconic closing stanza of "The Temper (I)" is illustrative of how Herbert

creates the impression of poetic closure to resolve a beginning situation of complaint:

> 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. (25-28)

Stanley Fish's analysis of this poem's "triumphant" conclusion has also achieved iconic

status and I quote it here in full:

> As is often the case in a Herbert poem, the resolution of the spiritual or
>
> psychological problem also effects the resolution of the poetic problem.
>
> For when the speaker is able to say "Yet take thy way; for sure thy way is
>
> best (21)" he removes the obstacle to his singing of God's praises; that
>
> obstacle is not his uneven spiritual experience, but his too easy
>
> interpretation of that experience as a sign of God's desertion. Once he
>
> gives up that reading of his situation, he is free to see it in a more
>
> beneficent purpose. . . . Thus the very condition the speaker laments
>
> finally yields the praise he thought himself debarred from making, and
>
> itself becomes the occasion for, because it has been the stimulus to, praise.

That is, the sense of heaven's desertion leads to the mental exertions

which produce the poem which generates the intuition that God's way is

best. What begins as a complaint against God ends with the realization

that the supposed basis of the complaint, when properly seen, is something

to be thankful for."[92]

Fish's reading supports my argument that, for Herbert, poetry is a place where "mental

exertions" take place, effectively producing the poem and eventually the resolution of the

poem. However, we must acknowledge the possibility that despite the poem's structural

closure, the spiritual problem of the poem remains unresolved. I realize this may seem a

bold claim, in the face of such powerful prior readings that emphasize the final orthodox

orientation of the text; however, my claim can be justified if we consider this poem as

part of a larger spiritual problem that is represented in the collection as a whole. If at the

end of "The Temper (I)" the speaker's identity has been dissolved, that identity, the same

identity that issued the initial complaint in "The Temper (I)," reasserts itself prominently

in the opening stanza of "The Temper (II)," the very next poem in the sequence:

> It cannot be. Where is that mighty joy,
>
> > Which just now took up all my heart?
> >
> > Lord, if thou must needs use thy dart,
>
> Save that, and me; or sin for both destroy. (1-4)

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[92] Fish, (162).

Read as sequential and overlapping—the final lines of the first spilling over into the opening lines of the second—we see both the poetry and the speaker resisting resolution and closure. What had previously "generated the intuition that God's way is best" now "cannot be"; instead, both the complaint ("How should I sing thy praise") and the resolution ("Thy power and love, my love and trust/ Make one place ev'rywhere") are moot. The speaker again interrogates the heavens with his slightly modified complaint: "Where is that mighty joy, / Which *just now* took up all my heart?" (emphasis mine). In "The Temper (II)" the complaint of desertion is magnified—the speaker cannot sing or resume his praises and also now faces the destruction brought about by sin. The poetic and spiritual problems in "The Temper (II)" fit nicely into Fish's interpretive framework right through to the "triumphant" conclusion; the poem ends with the speaker's "dissolving of distinctions":[93]

> Scatter, or bind them all to bend to thee;
>> Though elements change, and heaven move,
>> Let not thy higher Court remove,
> But keep a standing Majesty in me. (13-16)

In most, if not all of his poems, Herbert produces effects of closure of the kind that are expected by the Christian reader. In the poems of affliction, this is commonly achieved through a "surprise" final turn, wherein the troubled subject is once again dissolved into the omnipresence of God. Following the logic of Smith's argument, the

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[93] Fish, (161).

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poems in the collection--"narrative lyrics" that are thematically structured—represent the common themes and narratives of religious life and as such, present a portrait of a unified subject flawlessly, accurately performing the particulars of early modern religious experience—activities and psychologies. In addition, the poems perform or "secure" poetic closure *in service of* the overarching structure of the spiritual experience in the early modern period. And while we may insist, with a great degree of accuracy, that these poems both refer to and are intended to reaffirm the structures that govern the spiritual realm, it is less accurate to insist that the poems *actually* accomplish the *intended* outcomes of reference and reaffirmation.

Thus we can acknowledge Herbert's complicity in the performance of resolution that we find in individual poems, and in "The Church" as a whole. In many ways, "Love (III)" performs poetic closure in a way that is similar to the shock and surprise Smith discusses in her analysis of "Redemption." As part of the larger sequence, "Love (III)" casts a totalizing shadow of resolution and poetic closure over every variation in the preceding poems. Nevertheless, the restless obsession with doubt that permeates so many poems in "The Church" becomes apparent every time we return to the text; it does not relent simply because the collection ends as it does. We are therefore entitled to treat doubt as an ongoing (and creatively generative) aspect of Herbert's private individual religious experience.

CHAPTER III

GEORGE HERBERT AND DIONYSIAN THEOLOGY

Recent critical interest in Herbert and negative theology has tended to focus on

the influence upon his thought of the apophatic element expressed in Dionysius' (also

known as Pseudo-Denys, or simply Denys) *Mystical Theology*—that is, those aspects of

the *Mystical Theology* (one of the shortest treatises in the corpus) that either support a

negative conception of divinity or that emphasize God's silence.[94] This critical focus is

due in part to the fact that questions regarding the nature of language are (for obvious

reasons) central to the concerns of literary theory. As such, the apophatic exegesis of

Herbert's poetry tends to take as its primary concern the issue of the success or failure

of linguistic signification to evoke divine presence through union with God.

For example, Hillary Kelleher's discussion of Herbert and the *via negativa*

focuses on the inability of verbal signs to capture the "hyperessence" of God.[95] Her

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[94] The complete writings of Pseudo-Dionysius (also known as Pseudo-Denys) are referred to as the *Corpus Dionysiacum (CD)*. The *CD* includes the four treatises: *The Mystical Theology, The Divine Names*, *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. The surviving letters of Pseudo-Dionysius complete the collection. Until as recently as the 19th century the *CD* was thought to be the writings of a first century convert of the Apostle Paul.

[95] The application of the *via negativa* in relation to early modern authors most often covers the term in an over-generalizing way by lumping together the thinking of a broad swath of Medieval theologians, including Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart, Gallus, and the anonymous *Cloud* author, among many others. Dionysian mysticism is also the primary approach to critical interest in Donne's tendencies toward a poetics of negative theology. Sarah Coakley in Sarah Coakley & Charles M. Stang, eds., *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Aeropagite*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009, offers a useful summary of the attributes of the mystical tradition embodied in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* which underscores the complexity to be found in "its unique blend of Neo-Platonism and Christianity; its vision of a 'hierarchical' cosmos conjoining the angelic as

solution to this problem of signification is to make it a poetic virtue — tracing the ways

that Herbert will "use language reflexively, to trace an absence rather than to affirm a

presence." Ultimately, she affirms that this procedure is "a central strategy in *The*

Temple."[96] In her explication of "Prayer (I)," Kelleher emphasizes the way that

Herbert's poem enacts a "turn from the cataphatic to apophatic."[97] This turn occurs, she

declares, when the deliberately vague notion of "something understood"—the

concluding phrase of the poem— "breaks a string of analogies that could have gone on

without ever completely capturing the miracle of divine communication." Her

argument is primarily an argument about language, as becomes clear in her final

assessment of *The Temple*; "Neither the poet nor reader can follow the speaker, and we

are left with a book of poems, a collection of linguistic signs, rather than the divine

presence they beckon."[98] Jennifer Davis Michael adopts a similar approach. For

example, in her analyses of "Paradise" and "Heaven," Michael emphasizes the way that

Herbert's speaker "pares" and "prunes" language until it finally reaches the point of

being "something more aligned with God's word."[99]

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well as the human; its ecclesiastical anchoring in acts of liturgical praise; and its alluring
invitation to an unspeakable 'union' with the divine by means of 'mystical
contemplation'"(2).

[96] Hillary Kelleher, " 'Light Thy Darkness Is': George Herbert and Negative Theology."
George Herbert Journal, 28.1, 2007, (52).

[97] Kelleher, (52).

[98] Kelleher, (60).

[99] Jennifer Davis Michael, "Silence and 'Wounded Speech' in George Herbert's Poetry,"
Sewanee Theological Review, 52:4, 2009, (358).

Sarah Coakley offers a useful summary of the attributes of the mystical tradition embodied in the *CD* which underscores the complexity to be found in "its unique blend of Neo-Platonism and Christianity; its vision of a 'hierarchical' cosmos conjoining the angelic as well as the human; its ecclesiastical anchoring in acts of liturgical praise; and its alluring invitation to an unspeakable 'union' with the divine by means of 'mystical contemplation.'"[100] By contrast, most readings that address the cataphatic element of mystical theology only do so in passing, acknowledging the existence of Herbert's many metaphors and analogies that operate affirmatively and descriptively, even as they then focus on negation and linguistic failure in his work.[101]

The critical emphasis on the ultimate inadequacy of language to express divinity in Herbert's poetry is often supported by recourse to the *Mystical Theology,* and particularly by an oft-cited statement which has become a kind of Dionysian aphorism: "the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable."[102] Here, a mystical union with an indescribable being is rendered as an

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[100] Coakley, (2).

[101] Kelleher, for example, suggests that "beyond the level of imagery", apophatic texts "enact the failure of analogy" through a "complex interplay of affirmation and negation". The result, as she explains, is a "dialectic designed to praise those aspects of God that can be known and to mourn that which remains hidden." We can certainly see evidence of this dialectic in Herbert's poetry; his imagery of praise and lament has received frequent critical attention. Praise is a significant and recurrent mode of affirmation in *The Temple* (53).

[102] Rorem, (139). Also see Andrew Louth for a variant on this translation: "so now as our reason ascends from the lower to the transcendent, the more it ascends the more it is contracted, and when it has completely ascended it will become completely speechless, and be totally united with the Inexpressible (MT III: 1032 D-1033 C)" (165).

ascent away from language into a state of unknowing which is also a union with the

darkness of God. However, the many texts that comprise the *Corpus Dionysiacum*

(*CD*) advance a more dialectical theology than might be apparent from the linear,

upward drift of this single oft-cited fragment—a theology that Denys Turner describes

as a "dialectic of affirmation *and* negation, of the darkness of God and the light of

Christ."[103] As Kelleher points out, many "affirmative" theologians have expressed

worry over the ambiguous Christology involved in a mystical endeavor that seeks to

understand spiritual being, but can never gain "knowledge of the uncreated being—

which is God" (49). However, an understanding of Dionysius' entire corpus including,

specifically, the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*, demonstrates that the corpus is in many

ways explicitly Christian or Christ-centered. It is also important to note that, as Louth

reminds us, "Dionysius is not exalting some sort of 'pure' thought over involvement in

the world of the senses as such."[104]

The neglect of other texts that make up the *CD*, as suggested by Coakley, "is a

notable feature of a certain phase of the medieval reception in the West" when the

Mystical Theology "became a supreme focus of interest, thereby sundering it from its

liturgical and ecclesiastical moorings in *The Celestial Hierarchy* (*CH)* and *The*

Ecclesiastical Hierarchy (*EH*)."[105] I intend to show how a more comprehensive

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[103] Denys Turner, "The Darkness of God and the Light of Christ: Negative theology and Eucharistic Presence," *Modern Theology* 15:2 April 1999. (152-158, emphasis mine). As Kelleher points out, many affirmative theologians have expressed worry over the ambiguous Christology involved in a mystical endeavor that seeks to understand spiritual being, but can never gain "knowledge of the uncreated being—which is God" (49).

[104] Louth, (174).

[105] Coakley, (3).

approach to Dionysius' work in relation to Herbert's poetry—including an overview of the theological foundations of the hierarchies— illustrates that the relation between the cataphatic and the apophatic is much more than a simple opposition. The complexity of the dialectic, as we will see, is revealed most cogently in Herbert's understanding of the Eucharistic ritual, which I will examine in detail in my final reading of the "H. Communion."

At the most general level, affirmative or cataphatic theology describes a theology of symbols, both verbal and non-verbal (such as sacramental actions), that are deployed "in an effort to express something about God."[106] By contrast, its complement, apophatic theology, attempts to describe God through negation; by describing God in terms of what He is not, we can more accurately ascertain what God is. As Turner says, the "apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language."[107] Thus, in an attempt to explain the etymological meaning of apophatic theology, Turner suggests that a translation from the Greek "*ought* to mean something like: 'that speech about God which is the failure of speech'."[108] But Turner adds a qualification to his definition--that "ought to mean"-- because he wants to draw attention to an important and often misleading paradox: "that

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[106] Denys Turner, 1995, (20). Turner also refers to the cataphatic element as a "symbolic theology" one that he characterizes as "a kind of verbal riot" full of "metaphor-ridden" vocabularies, that is, in general, "linguistically overburdened." The symbolic theology includes the "extensive *non*-verbal vocabulary of theology, its liturgical and sacramental action, its music, its architecture, its dance and gesture, all of which are intrinsic to its character as an *expressiv*e discourse, a discourse of theological articulation" (20).

[107] Turner, 1995, (34-35).

[108] Turner, 1995, (20 emphasis mine).

negative language about God is no more apophatic in itself than is affirmative language." For Turner, there is a fundamental similarity shared by both apophatic and cataphatic discourse; a positive *affirmation* ultimately leaves one in the same position regarding the nature of the Divine being as does a negative *denial*.[109] Turner continues to explain the fallacy in a second, but related misconception: Dionysius' theology does not consist in the "recognition that before the transcendence of God our affirmations *fall away into the silence of negations*." Rather, "what falls away are *both* our affirmations and negations" for "it is on the other side of both" that the "silence of transcendence is glimpsed" through the "fissures opened up in our language by the dialectical strategy of self-subversion."[110]

The result of the critical trend to emphasize the apophatic Herbert at the expense of the cataphatic, then, is that several important questions are left unattended, of both a specific historical and more general doctrinal or philosophical kind. In the (necessarily condensed) account of prior apophatic readings of Herbert's corpus that I have offered, then, we discover a critical tendency to drive a wedge between the positivism of Christian liturgy and the negativity of the mystical ascent into unknowing. But Herbert's poetry demonstrates an extensive knowledge of the epistemological foundations and history of official Church doctrine *and* of medieval mystical thought. The official and unofficial—the liturgical and mystical—are each coterminous with the

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[109] Turner, 1995, (20).

[110] Turner, 1995, (45 emphasis mine).

'idea' of Christianity that was constantly evolving in Britain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Herbert clearly can engage with both.

Bernard McGinn, in the first of his four-volume series on the history of western Christian mysticism, makes a statement that helps put this frequently misunderstood and underrepresented relationship into perspective:

mysticism is only one part or element of a concrete religion and any particular religious personality. No mystics (at least before the present century) believed in or practiced 'mysticism.' They believed in and practiced Christianity (or Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism), that is, religions that contained mystical elements as parts of a wider historical whole. These elements, which involve both beliefs and practices, can be more or less important to the wider body of believers.[111]

Late twentieth-century attitudes—deeply embedded in transcendentalist and deconstructionist thinking—have shaped and distorted the manner in which we think about what is "mystical."[112] As McGinn points out, the beliefs and practices of

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[111] Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism,* London: SCM Press Ltd., 1991, (xvi).

[112] McGinn, (xvi). Turner makes a similar claim or rather a "hypothesis" that "modern interpretation has invented 'mysticism' and that we persist in reading back the terms of that conception upon a stock of mediaeval authorities who knew of no such think—or, when they knew of it, decisively rejected it." Though Turner does not "identify when, where or how this conception of 'mysticism' emerges" he is "inclined towards McGinn's suggestion that it is a product of nineteenth-century scholarship" (7).

mysticism are firmly rooted in the historical Christian traditions; equally important is the coming together of the concrete elements of religious ritual and practice, and the affinities of the individual religious personality. In discussing Herbert's poetry, then, we need to recall that a cataphatic symbolic theology (the 'parson's church') could be fully compatible with a more apophatic mystical theology. Those "mystical elements" are "more or less important" depending on an individual's religious practice. In Herbert's poetry, mystical elements are revealed and appear along the entire spectrum of "more or less."

Having established the intellectual background and blind spots of some (nonetheless valuable) current criticism, my goal for the remainder of this chapter will be to recover the liturgical elements of Herbert's mysticism and to show how this process of recovery can extend and clarify our understanding of Herbert's engagement with Dionysian mystical theology. I take three paths to this goal. First, I will offer a brief description of the structural principle of Dionysius' theory of language and theology as it appears in The *Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names* — this will include consideration of *The Celestial* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*, which I elaborate upon in my discussion of Herbert's poems. Second, I will demonstrate what it is that Herbert *reveals* when he is writing in the cataphatic mode. Third, I will consider the convergence of these paths in Herbert's intellectual and emotional preoccupation with Divine presence as manifested in specific poems of *The Temple*. In the poems that I will examine (the culmination of these being the controversial and problematic "H. Communion"), the figure of prelapsarian Adam emerges with a new importance as a signifier of presence that does not require an intercessory medium such as the Eucharist,

or an intervening motion (such as the descent of grace as the light of Christ or the ascent of the soul into the darkness of God).

The Self-Subverting Utterance: Disordering Language Through Paradox

   The Mystical Theology begins with a prayer. In this prayer Dionysius petitions the Trinity, the ultimate source of all creation and the highest triad in the ecclesiastical hierarchy:

   Trinity! Higher than any being

        any divinity, any goodness!

      Guide of Christians

      in the wisdom of heaven!

   Lead us up beyond knowing and light,

      up to the farthest, highest peak

        of mystic scripture

      where the mysteries of God's Word

      lie simple, absolute, unchangeable

      in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.

   Amid the deepest shadow

      they pour overwhelming light

      on what is most manifest.

   Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen

they completely fill our sightless minds

with treasures beyond all beauty.[113]

In addition to providing a sample of Dionysian language, this prayer establishes the structural principle that informs *The Mystical Theology*. Turner calls this structural principle the "'self-subverting' utterance"—the "utterance which first says something and then, in the same image, unsays it."[114] It is from this prayer that we get the well-known apophatic description of God as a "brilliant darkness" as well as the notion that the "mysteries of God's Word" are "hidden" in "silence." The self-subverting utterance is also depicted in the goal of "knowing unknowing" that is found throughout the mystical tradition. According to Turner, these "opaque utterances" are "deliberately paradoxical":

> They are, for Denys, the natural linguistic medium of his negative,
>
> apophatic theology: or more strictly speaking, they are the natural
>
> medium of a theological language which is subjected to the *twin*
>
> pressures of affirmation and negation, of the cataphatic and the

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[113] Turner, 1995, (21, MT 997A-B). A note on translations used in this chapter: In referencing the *Corpus Dionysiacum* I am using the translations from the original Greek by the scholars quoted. Abbreviations and numbered location within the *CD* are consistent. (*Mystical Theology, MT; Divine Names, DN; Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, EH; Celestial Hierarchy, CH*). Both Turner and Louth have done extensive work analyzing the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Paul Rorem collaborated with the esteemed translator Colm Luibheid on a translation of *The Complete Works*. As a baseline I have used the 1980 translation by John D. Jones, Ph.D. of Marquette University, but do not cite this translation.

[114] Turner, 1995, (21). As noted earlier, Pseudo Dionysius is also known as Pseudo-Denys or simply Denys; Turner uses these interchangeably, and Louth uses Denys. I will use Dionysius exclusively in my commentary.

apophatic. . . . That is why we must say affirmatively that God is 'light', and then say, denying this, that God is 'darkness'; and finally, we must 'negate the negation' between darkness and light, which we do by saying: 'God is a brilliant darkness.'"[115]

Louth offers a slightly different explanation of the principle that governs the self-subverting utterance:

> Symbols may be either like that which they symbolize or unlike. When speaking of God Denys makes clear his preference for unlike symbols (*anomoia symbola*), for with them there is no danger of thinking that God is directly like that which the symbols call to mind.[116]

Louth and Turner agree that all symbols ultimately fail in describing God and "not even lofty and spiritual ones, are ultimately privileged" for "*they* can be especially misleading."[117] Turner, for instance, notes the "good practical sense" in the self-subverting structure: "A 'golden and gleaming' God is too like what we might choose to

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[115] Turner, 1995, (22).

[116] Louth, (172). "If the negations concerning things divine are true, but the affirmations are inadequate to the hiddenness of the ineffable, revelation through representations unlike that which is revealed are more suitable to the invisible (*CH* II. 3: 141 A)."

[117] Louth, (178).

praise; a God 'enraged,' 'cursing,' and drunk and hungover; might have greater power to

shock us into a sense of the divine transcendence by the magnitude of its metaphorical

deficiency."[118]

In *The Divine Names* Dionysius lists fifty-two names, found in direct scriptural

sources that refer to the Divine Being, and seventeen names for descriptive properties of

God. Turner comments on the subtle (and often overlooked) Dionysian irony at work in

the text, pointing out that this list of names reveals in its "variety and imaginativeness"

the "contemporary diet of theological metaphor to be very thin gruel indeed."[119] Indeed,

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[118] Turner (1995), here offers a translation and paraphrase of (*MT 141: A*). In order to understand why the self-subverting utterance is of such great importance to the "natural linguistic medium" of apophatic theology, it is helpful to understand that for Dionysius, the cataphatic is part of the movement of creation, "the *prodos*, or progression, by which beings descending on the scale of being disperse into ever increasing multiplicity, variety and differentiation." The divine creative action, as Turner (1995) explains, applies not only to beings but also to language. Hence, the more distanced our language is from the simple, abstract, higher names of God, the more particularized and fragmented it becomes. Hence too, as names multiply and differentiate, each name taken singly becomes more limited in its expressive capacity, less adequate to the descriptions of the Cause of all, less capable of being interchanged with other names, and more prone to literal inconsistency with the other names. It is from their characteristic of being more particular that is derived the necessity of multiplying the descriptions of the Godhead, of piling description upon description to supply for the increased inadequacy of each. And it is from their proneness to being inconsistent with one another that their conjunction results in the necessity of that paradox which will lead, ultimately, to the recognition of their collective deficiency" (30).

[119] Turner, 1995, (23). We can see evidence of this restrictive diet in both pre and post-Reformation theology. The authorized King James Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and the Common Lectionary are particular and specific in propitiating a restricted language. This is a significant impetus for the expansion of theological language in poetic forms. Expanding one's linguistics of reference obviously leads to the evolution of theological language and the imagery and metaphor used to describe the spiritual path.

in Dionysius's work, anything that God has brought about provides a potential source of imagery for the description of God."[120]

But a more conventionally "pious vocabulary" would strike Dionysius as a dangerously limited one, because, as Turner explains, it might lull the theologian into believing "that our language about God has succeeded in capturing the divine reality in some ultimately adequate way."[121] Therefore, we "not only may, but must" strive to "*adequately*" name God. To name God adequately, then, requires the "maximization of our discourses about God."[122]

> For it is true that whatever we say about God, and that however
>
> vividly, and with however much variety of image we name God, all
>
> our language fails of God, infinitely and in principle. But it is also
>
> true that, should we arbitrarily restrict the names with which we
>
> name God, we will fall short of that point of verbal profusion at
>
> which we encounter the collapse of language as such.[123]

It is in bits of "collapsed" or "disordered" language, "brought to our attention by the necessity of ascribing incompatible attributes, that the transcendence of God above all

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[120] Turner, 1995, (23, partial paraphrase of Dionysius, DN 596A).

[121] Turner, 1995, (24).

[122] Turner, 1995, (24).

[123] Turner, 1995, (25).

language is approached"—and this approach is the foundation of cataphatic theology.[124]

The poet's language, moreover, while ultimately just as impotent in describing God, uses

a multiplicity of images—metaphor, pun or analogy, for example—and this more

inventive, open-ended vocabulary—a combination of cataphatic and symbolic

theology—is capable of moving one *closer to* "that point of verbal profusion" that

produces the collapse of language.[125]

        In attempting to understand the relationship between cataphatic and apophatic

theology we also need to look at Dionysius' conception of hierarchy—a term he coined to

systematize "a chain of being" on which beings of every type are placed. It begins with

The Trinity descending through a hierarchy of angels (the celestial hierarchy) and

eventually moving downward through a hierarchy of the church (the ecclesiastical

hierarchy).[126] As Turner points out, our 21st-century perspective seriously limits our

ability to conceptualize the thinking of "ancient and medieval writers" (such as Plato,

Dionysius, or the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*). Hierarchical ordering such as

Dionysius' was a staple of Christian thought for centuries and was "both an ontological

structure and a rule of governance of the universe" of which Turner concludes; "we have

no systematically hierarchical conception of either."[127] Herbert, however, was not

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[124] Turner, 1995, (26).

[125] Turner, 1995, (26). "It is in the collapse of ordinary language, brought to our attention by the necessity of ascribing incompatible attributes, that the transcendence of God above all language is best approached. But an inadequate descriptive provision will not get us to that point where the inadequacy of all language in principle is met."

[126] Rorem, (3). Louth refers to this upper triad of the Trinity as the "Thearchy," (163).

[127] Turner, (28).

similarly limited, and would have understood these "schema" even if not fully accepting them within his theological worldview.

Although my focus in this chapter is primarily on *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy,* it will be useful to our overall understanding of Dionysius' work to briefly outline how hierarchies (celestial and ecclesiastical) are structurally organized. The most obvious organizing feature is that of the triad, and the three major hierarchical divisions in the *CD* are the Trinity, angels, and humans. At the highest level—we encounter the Trinity—this can be understood simply as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the first triad-within-a-triad (an organizing principle which is repeated throughout the hierarchies). This is, of course, what we might refer to as "God," the unknowable, the transcendent—and that apophatic "brilliant darkness" to which we strive for union through the application of the cataphatic elements in our movement toward God.

Both the celestial hierarchy (or heavenly realm) and the ecclesiastical hierarchy (that which concerns the earthly created realm) consist of three "levels" each of which has three levels of its own. The former with its angels, seraphim, cherubim, and the like, invokes a more illusory place, un-tethered to our earthly experience. The celestial hierarchy deals with the heavenly elements of Dionysian theology—the angelic beings-- and can only be understood through analogy by way of our human senses.

The purpose of this heavenly hierarchy, as Paul Rorem explains, is to "mediate between the Deity and humanity."[128] The desired union with God is accomplished when each being fulfills its role, thereby manifesting divine energy. In the structured lower

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[128] Rorem, (67). In general, the beings listed in the two highest triads are not discussed by Dionysius as having a ranking, while in the third they do. Rorem, (66-68; *CH* 284C, 174).

triad the angels are charged with passing on enlightenment to humankind—this passing on is what we refer to as revelation. God's plan, in a sense, is filtered through a series of "subordinates" to the angels who pass it on to us. Dionysius says that the reason for this is "so that the uplifting and return toward God, and communion and union, might occur according to proper order."[129] Taken together, these hierarchies of the cataphatic theology "are concerned with the perfecting of our praise of God."[130]

The ecclesiastical hierarchy of earthly rites and persons promotes the mystical understanding of the workings of the heavenly hierarchy. By virtue of its application to all things human, including the sacraments and structures for our dealings with the divine, this series of triads is somewhat familiar and more easily understood. Rorem calls *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* "a full and systematic exposition of liturgical rites" that has impacted Christian practice for centuries.[131] This is where the cataphatic takes on a more complex dimension in which language (as understood in *The Mystical Theology*) interfaces with the rites of the church, the order of beings, and the liturgy of praise. The hierarchy itself, as well as its parts, fulfills another triad, the *processes* of perfection, illumination, and purification.

Simply put, the highest rank in the ecclesiastical hierarchy—the church sacraments—includes the rites that *perfect* the Christian believer: baptism, communion, and the less familiar consecration of ceremonial ointment. These are the basic

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[129] Rorem, (67; CH 260B, 171).

[130] Louth, (170).

[131] Rorem, (3).

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"mysteries" that inform Christian belief and practice. The second rank is that of the clergy, such as bishops, priests, and deacons, whose role is to *illuminate* the mysteries of the faith to those of the third rank, that of the lay order, who are in the process of being *purified*. The laity includes monks, those who have received the sacraments, and those who are undergoing the preparation for receiving them. It is important to note that one is not expected to move up the hierarchy step by step; for example, most lay believers do not become priests.

Louth characterizes the elements of the sacraments as "a Christian use of material things to effect man's relationship with the divine," and since "they are vehicles of grace not because of what they are materially, but because of their *use* in a certain symbolic context," we can see how the poet's [referring to poet generically] material *words* may be seen to take on a function similar to that of the baptismal water or the elements of the Eucharist.[132] Seen in light of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, "Prayer (I)" is an Herbertian experiment that as Kelleher explains, consciously "exploits the possibilities of the *via positiva* until it becomes the kind of 'verbal riot' Turner sees as this path's inevitable end."[133] The poem unfolds rapidly, as if in a single breath; the speaker attempts to describe the ineffable essence and outcome of prayer; thus, through his use of analogy Herbert describes prayer in an almost sacramental way. Indeed, the "verbal profusion" Herbert employs in this poem far surpasses in imagination the usual metaphors used to describe prayer, and takes the reader forward and backward on a pilgrimage through

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[132] Louth, (164, emphasis mine).

[133] Kelleher, (52).

biblical history and the varied dimensions of biblical time—including allusions to

Genesis and the infusion of life into man, through to the Passion and Christ's wounding.

Additionally, the individual and combined images can be seen as examples of a self-

subverting structure.

> Prayer, the Church's banquet, Angel's age,
>
> > God's 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' Almighty, sinners' tower,
>
> > Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
> >
> > The six-days world-transposing in an hour,
>
> A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
>
> Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
>
> > Exalted Manna, gladness of the best,
> >
> > Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,
>
> The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
>
> > Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
> >
> > The land of spices; something understood. (1-14)

By overtly calling attention to the verbose, metaphorical element of human language,

Herbert controls the reader's perspective, which is temporarily misdirected by the

predisposition to understand "Prayer" from a point of view that is distinctly human. Even

readers familiar with Herbert's rhetorical strategies may be surprised by the abrupt mid-line transition to "something understood." But it is legible as an attempt to correct our human perspective, in the way that any reader familiar with Herbert's rhetorical strategies will finally be primed to recognize. Thus, we may first observe the *absence* of God that is the inevitable result of a non-analogous relation between God and Man. Importantly for my purposes, however, we must also note that it is the *cataphatic* mode that helps us to understand the linguistic paradox of a present-absence as representative of the relationship between the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies, for it is only by analogy that we (as part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy) can comprehend the celestial hierarchy. And it is through our use of sensory perceptions and symbols that we construct analogies.

Kelleher has commented that "by pushing language to its limits, "Prayer (I)"

> demonstrates the limits of language; defining prayer becomes as
> problematic as naming God because the relation between the finite
> and the infinite has no analogue. 'Something understood' thus rings
> true on an intuitive level while simultaneously conveying the
> impossibility of naming exactly what prayer is. Since prayer is only
> completely understood by God, the phrase both signifies and
> highlights the failure of signification.[134]

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[134] Kelleher, (52).

This passage underscores the problem of separation as one of language *and* of being; what is finite, corporeal, and human is not—and cannot be—analogous to what is infinite, and yet it should be pushed to a state of paradox through the use of analogy. While it may be true that we can only imagine or intuit an ultimately false similarity between our finite being and the infinite being of God, Dionysius asserts that in cataphatic theology "God is really known [and] He is really praised in our affirmations about Him. But it is none the less clear that the rejection of these affirmations is the path to a deeper knowledge of God." [135] In affirming that Prayer is something understood by God, Herbert has used two simple words to acknowledge that this is as close as he can come through poetry to *knowing* God. Summers observes this idea in his own reading, when he says that "'Something understood' is both an abandonment of metaphor and its final crowning"—language that can go no further.[136]

But the work of cataphatic analogies in "Prayer (I)" provides another example of the disorder of "collapsed language" by imitating a biblical timeline that is itself, disordered. For example, the first action was The Word, the divine *fiat,* the *logos,* ("The six-days transposing in an hour"). However, the analogy that describes the creation of the world does not appear as representation in the opening line as we might expect; instead, it is referred to in line 6 and subverted by the analogy in the previous line (7) with the most recent divine action—the death of Christ on the hill of Golgotha

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[135] Glossing Dionysius, Turner (1995) explains that because there is "no knowable distance between God and creation" there is "no language in which it is possible to state one" (45).

[136] Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1954, (183).

("Christ-side-piercing spear"). These two chronologically reversed events are placed in the center of the poem (lines 7 and 6) and can also be understood as an expression of the speaker's desire to undermine the human logic that informs a chronological ordering of events. The disordered timeline thus might be said to express a desire for a time when *access to* divine presence was (at least as portrayed in the Bible) a powerful and frequent experience. The purposefully disordered syntax ("gladness of the best," "Heaven in ordinary" are two examples, in addition to those quoted above) and the disordered description of biblical time, together reinforce theological intricacy implicit in the self-subverting utterance.

"Prayer (I)," is also an expression of praise; the poem describes through affirmations, both the creation of the world and the manifestation of divine presence in the world. For Dionysius, "[theology] is concerned with the creature's response of praise and worship to the Love of God. The whole creation has been brought into being by God to manifest His glory, and each creature, as it fulfils the role that God has assigned to it, manifests His glory and *praises* Him."[137] *The Divine Names*, as discussed previously, is concerned with the affirmations that are intended to praise God.

Terry Sherwood makes several observations that resonate with the hierarchies, but are expressly concerned with the way in which Renaissance theology understood the relationship between prayer and praise and its relation to man's unique status in creation:

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[137] Louth, (166, emphasis mine).

All creatures praise God by fulfilling their natures; . . . Only man

can 'express thy works' ("Providence" 142), since he alone

'knows,' comprehends the goodness of creation. As 'Secretarie of

thy praise' (8). . . .entrusted both with God's secrets and also the

task of using language to honor God, man fulfils nature itself by

fulfilling his own nature. [138]

Sherwood argues that *all* petitions (prayers) are a form of praise—this is a staple of

Renaissance theology, which has its roots in writings from Augustine to Donne.[139]

"Prayer (I)" illustrates several fundamental elements expressed in the theology

of the *CD*. First, it accomplishes precisely what cataphatic theology is intended to

accomplish, that is, it stretches language to its fullest affirmative potential. Second, it

reminds us that we should not reduce the cataphatic aspects of this poem to little more

than a feint that leads to apophasis. And third, it demonstrates that our affirmations

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[138] Terry G. Sherwood, *Herbert's Prayerful Art,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989, (24-25).

[139] Sherwood turns to Donne in parsing the ideas of prayer, praise, petition and thanksgiving within the early modern context. *The Sermons of John Donne,* Vol. V, George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, eds., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962. On the difference between terms Donne says "The name changes not the nature; Prayer and Praise is the same thing . . . As the duties agree in the heart and mouth of a man, so the names agree in our eares" (270). Later in the sermon Donne connects "petition" to that lexicon: "Prayer is as our petition, but Praise is as our Evidence . . .yet God himselfe proceeds by precedent: And whensoever we present to him with thanksgiving, what he hath done, he does the same, and more againe." (272). Sherwood concludes with "God 'translates' praise as prayer, thanksgiving as petition. Thus, to praise God . . . is also to petition for more of the same, however implicitly. In that sense praise is really prayer, that is, petition to God" (8).

about God in the cataphatic realm are a necessary prelude to the implied and hoped for experience of *extasis,* where, "in the presence of God, speech and thought fail us and we are reduced to silence."[140]

Exstasis: Only "Thou Dost Know the Way"

Dionysius believed in the doctrine that God formed creation out of nothing. That being the case, his conceptualization of the hierarchies, though similar to and even to some extent dependent on neo-platonic systems of being, nevertheless points to a notably different outcome. For example, as Louth helps to clarify, "we do not receive our *being* from other creatures higher up than us in the hierarchies, we are created immediately by God." For Dionysius, emanation is "not a matter of *being,*" but rather "seems to be ultimately a matter of light, illumination, and revelation."[141] The hierarchical orders "suggest intermediaries between the self and God" and are "only God's revealers and messengers."[142] The hierarchies (and cataphatic theology), Louth points out, are "concerned with God's manifestation of Himself in and through and to the cosmos [and are] concerned with God's movement *outwards*." Apophatic theology, by contrast, is concerned "with the secret, hidden relationship between the soul and God: it is concerned

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[140] Louth, (165).

[141] Louth, (176).

[142] Louth, (176).

with the soul's movement *inwards* to God."[143] Dionysius uses the term ascent, but the

hierarchies are not ladders in the sense that one is expected to climb upward.[144]

Let us consider the poem "Grace," for example, as an occasion for an analysis that

will also clarify how the poem's imagery and argument correlate with some of the central

tenets of Dionysius' hierarchies. The poem illustrates the tension between two essential

concepts. On the one hand is the Anglican doctrine of grace, which is built around a

typology of descent that endows a seeker with knowledge and divine presence. On the

other hand is the mystical knowing-unknowing which demands total abandonment of

what is and can be known and is, in spatial terms, more interested in ascent).

In the repetition of the line "Drop from above" we can clearly observe the

speaker's petition for a descending motion of Grace, a Grace that will alter the condition

of the soul, disordered as it is by its carnal condition and finite capacity.

My stock lies dead, and no increase

Doth my dull husbandry improve:

O let thy graces without cease

         Drop from above!

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[143] Louth, (177).

[144] Louth, (177). "Denys sometimes seems less clear than he might be on this because he uses one image only for the soul's movement Godwards, that of ascent. It is misleading because the most obvious ascent would be up the hierarchies, which is not at all what Denys is thinking of."

If still the sun should hide his face,

Thy house would but a dungeon prove,

Thy works night's captives: O let grace

        Drop from above.

Death is still working like a mole,

And digs my grave at each remove:

Let grace work too, and on my soul

        Drop from above.

Sin is still hammering my heart

Unto a hardness, void of love:

Let suppling grace, to cross his art,

        Drop from above. (1-20)

If the speaker's focus in the first five stanzas is on the *descent* of grace, in the final stanza there is a distinct shift from the familiar typological figure of Christian grace descending in the form of a dove or as the light of Christ, to a mystical context. The shift may be indicative of the speaker's acknowledgment that he has in some way failed to express God's transcendence through negation and *dis*similarities; though he uses many dissimilar images to describe his own being, his reference to the transcendence of the divine appears to be limited to the single word "grace." Yet, the speaker works on a deeper level to resolve this problem of reference. The first and second lines of each

stanza metaphorically describe the condition of the speaker and it is this pattern that may result in our missing the subtle interplay between the poem's metaphorical language (descriptions of sin and despair) and the Dionysian "scriptural doctrine of God": "God is in no way like the things that have being and we have no knowledge at all of his incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility."[145] If we return to the logic of the self-subverting utterance: "incongruities are more suitable for lifting our minds up into the domain of the spiritual than similarities are," we can see that the speaker of this poem is less interested in the literal notion of descent, and rather more interested in "lifting his mind"—in this instance—not upward, but inward (toward God).[146]

> Oh come! for thou dost know the way.
>
> Or if to me thou wilt not move,
>
> Remove me, where I need not say,
>
> *Drop from above*. (20-24)

By acknowledging that only "thou dost know the way", the speaker alters his petition; instead of asking for grace to move his soul, the speaker asks to be *removed* to a place where speech is no longer necessary, where petition and metaphor fall away, where the intellect's wish for Grace ceases to be and union simply "is." This is also the place on that hierarchical path of spiritual ascent where the soul can be said to reach "the limit of

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[145] Rorem, (55, DN141A).

[146] Rorem, (55, DN 141B).

intellect."[147] In asking to be "removed" the speaker thus relinquishes both what has

already been made known to him in the past through the intercession of the Holy Spirit,

and also the idea that any of God's ways may be known at all. In this sense, the speaker

reproduces through representation his desire to trade an active and language-oriented

process of knowing for the silent knowing-unknowing of mystical union with the divine.

But by making a request, the cataphatic relation between speaker and world is

reestablished, as are speech and the need for a divine intervention, represented in "Grace"

as a *descending* motion.

However, the Dionysian concept of the *descending* or *outward* movement of God

is not entirely compatible with the idea of descent as a form of intervention. Rather, as

Louth explains, God's movement outward is "concerned with God's manifestation of

Himself in and through the cosmos." Because, for Dionysius, "each being is immediate

to God" because it was created by God, this manifestation is not intermittent, but

constant.[148] Viewed within this context, the speaker, already participating in the

Manifestation of God (from the moment of creation) cannot be moved *by* God; rather he

must move himself to the place where God is. The speaker, whose heart is hammered by

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[147] In the more general mystical tradition, the hierarchical process of spiritual ascent is often conceptualized as a ladder, with the rungs representing the various manifestations of human *intellectus*—that is, all of the attributes of the intellect, which include our perceptions, language, reasoning, and imagination. The worldly attributes of sensory perception serve as the lower rungs while conceptual attributes are higher up. As the layers of the *intellectus* are shed, the soul deliberately exits the cataphatic arena where the world of sensory experience reigns and ascends upward.

[148] Louth, (176-177).

sin, can remove *himself* to a place where he "need not say," but only through the

"mystical rhythms of the liturgy" that are part of the cataphatic theology.[149]

The soul's role is not only an outward descending movement, as in "Grace," but an

inward *ascending* one as well. Louth clarifies:

. . . . the soul's role within the hierarchy is to be as closely united as

possible with that divine energy which establishes it in the

hierarchy. The ultimate fulfillment of that role is by the way of

apophatic, mystical union with God. Apophatic theology does not

contradict cataphatic and symbolic theology. The movement

inwards in no way detracts from God's movement outwards through

the soul. The more deeply the soul is in God (ultimately in

unknowable union) the more clearly and perfectly can it manifest

the glory of God.[150]

The interdependence of the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies is an important

context that informs my reading of "Clasping of Hands" and "Aaron." Using Paul as an

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[149] Denys Turner, "How to Read the pseudo-Denys Today?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology,* Vol. 7, No. 4, October 2005, (430).

[150] Louth, (177). Curiously, Louth uses masculine and feminine pronouns interchangeably to describe the soul; Turner does the same when describing God, and makes the point that we cannot restrict the names with which we name God. For example, if we refer to God as exclusively male what we have is "a misdescription of God by exclusion, since it rules out the ascription to God of the names distinctive of half her human creation" (25-26).

example, Dionysius demonstrates how ecstasy "draws the soul out of itself and centers it on the object of its love":

> So also the great Paul, caught up in rapture by divine love and
> participating in its ecstatic power, said with inspired speech, 'I live
> and yet not I, but Christ lives in me'. As a true lover, caught up out
> of himself into God, he lives not his own life, but that life so much
> longed for, the life of his beloved.[151]

Dionysius, however, does not only speak of the soul's ecstasy, but also of God's own ecstasy:

> We must dare to add this as being no less true; that the Source of all
> things Himself, in His wonderful and good love for all things,
> through the excess of His loving goodness, is carried outside
> Himself, in His providential care for all that is, so enchanted is He in
> goodness and love and longing. Removed from His position above
> all and beyond all He descends to be in all according to an ecstatic
> and transcendent power with is yet inseparable from Himself.[152]

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[151] Louth, (176; *DN* IV. 13:172 A).

[152] Louth, (176; *DN* IV. 13:712 AB).

Many scholars and theologians who study the works of Pseudo-Dionysius discuss the

concept of *exstasis* in the context of "apophatic anthropology." Dionysius' apophatic

anthropology describes the process of shedding or 'unsaying' the names used to

describe the self. The anthropological element of apophasis is, according to Charles

Stang, "a sort of asceticism, an exercise of freeing the self as much as God from the

names and categories that prevent it from being divine."[153] In Herbert's poetry we find

many examples of speakers who describe or enact *exstasis* through poetic form. One of

the most popular and obvious examples is "Clasping of Hands," a poem that Helen

Wilcox describes as attempting to "collapse the difference between earthly and

heavenly, self and other."[154]

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[153] Charles M. Stang, "Dionysius, Paul and the Significance of the Pseudonym,"(16) in
Sarah Coakley & Charles M. Stang, eds., *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Aeropagite*, Oxford:
Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009 ."This may seem an obvious point, namely that the
effort to suffer union with the unknown God will necessarily transform the human
subject, conform him or her to the God beyond being. And yet modern scholars have
been less interested in the theological anthropology implicit in this ascetic endeavor,
often instead treating the affirmation and negation of the divine names as a sort of
scholastic discourse that aims either to police speech about God or to solve problems that
arise when creatures speak of the uncreated. To the contrary, our author draws attention
to such insoluble problems precisely so that his readers might make *use* of the problems
inherent in language in their efforts to invite the divine to break through language.
According to Dionysius, then, making appropriate use of language—specifically the
divine names—will change the user, and that change, that transformation of the
contemplative, ascetic subject is what I am calling the 'apophatic anthropology' of
Dionysius."

[154]Wilcox, (541). Terry G. Sherwood in *Herbert's Prayerful Art,* Toronto: University of
Toronto Press, 1989, makes a similar point. "But he [Herbert] and his God do possess
each other . . . Imputation of Christ's righteousness explains man's possession of God,
while preserving the distinction between human and divine," (52). Vendler, too, in
Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbury, Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 2005, comments on the poet's being "unable to tolerate any
distance at all" in his wish for intimacy with God, concluding that the final line of the
poem has the speaker "praying . . . that some ineffable new state (at present only
negatively describable) can be attained" (11). Arthur L. Clements, *Poetry of*

Lord, thou art mine, and I am thine,

If mine I am: and thine much more,

Then I or ought, or can be mine.

Yet to be thine, doth me restore;

So that again I now am mine,

And with advantage mine the more;

Since this being mine, brings with it thine,

And thou with me dost thee restore,

      If I without thee would be mine,

      I neither should be mine nor thine.

Lord, I am thine, and thou art mine:

So mine thou art, that something more

I may presume thee mine, then thine.

For thou didst suffer to restore

Not thee, but me, and to be mine:

And with advantage mine the more,

Since thou in death wast none of thine,

Yet then as mine didst me restore.

Contemplation: John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughn and the Modern Period, Albany: State University of New York, 1990, while "playing upon the repeated *mine* and *thine*" can be confusing, "the conclusion is plainly a prayer of union" (106).

O be mine still! still make me thine!

Or rather make no Thine and Mine!

The poem's iterations of "mine" and "thine" take the reader through a contemplative exercise that eventually ends with the speaker's realization that his finite self is transitory and that he is willing to "let go" of that self in order to *merge* with the transcendent divinity that is God. However, the speaker seems unable to achieve transcendence of his own accord, even in the penultimate line: "O be mine still! Still make me thine." Here, the relationship between the speaker and God is somewhat imprecise; the convoluted syntax reinforces the speaker's difficulty; he is unable to understand or to state his desire clearly. Only in the construction of the final line—"Oh rather make no Thine and Mine!"—is the speaker finally able to make a precise petition; indeed, the line reads almost like a sudden insight, a revision of thought in which the path toward union between the soul and God is made clear. It is as if the divine has descended to spell out the line; with this one line the objective of the entire poem is revised, from a desire for mutual "ownership" to a desire for the eradication of both human subject and divine object.

"Aaron" demonstrates the dual process of self-emptying (*kenosis*) and un-naming that is integral to achieving *exstasis*. However, this poem, unlike "Clasping of Hands," addresses the speaker's role in the liturgy of praise. It deals with the speaker's relationship to both the divine and to the congregation.[155] As the first high priest

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[155] Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975 (119).

mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible, Aaron precedes the Christ of the New

Testament as well as all priests—those who *illuminate* the mysteries of the

sacraments—*the perfection*—for the Christian laity who are seeking *purification*.

Holinesse on the head,

Light and perfections on the breast

Harmonious bells below, raising the dead

To leade them unto life and rest.

Thus are true Aarons drest.[156]

Profanenesse in my head,

Defects and darknesse in my breast,

A noise of passions ringing me for dead

Unto a place where is no rest.

Poore priest thus am I drest.

Onely another head

I have, another heart and breast,

Another musick, making live not dead,

Without whom I could have no rest;

In him I am well drest.

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[156] The word blessed rhymes with Drest, and in all but the second stanza could be substituted for Drest without loss of meaning. Since the second stanza is the only one to focus on the "profanenesse" of the garment, might this be a Herbertian witticism?

Christ is my onely head,

My alone onely heart and breast,

My onely musick, striking me ev'n dead;

That to the old man I may rest,

And be in him new drest.

So holy in my head,

Perfect and light in my deare breast,

My doctrine tun'd by Christ, (who is not dead,

But lives in me while I do rest)

Come people; Aaron's drest.

The poem illustrates the speaker's self-critical struggle with divine absence, and begins with a characterization of his own failings to live up to the Aaronic model. As the poem concludes, perfection is no longer "on the head," but *within*, and the priest's "doctrine" has been "tun'd" by Christ. The un-naming is complete; the speaker is no longer (him)self, no longer Aaron; through the process of *kenosis*, the speaker has opened a space for Christ whose indwelling allows the speaker to rest. The closing petition, "Come people" in "Aaron," the "make no mine or thine," and the mournful refrain "Drop from above," are examples of cataphatic and prayerful praise that attempt

to both acknowledge and affirm the mutual desire of both Divine and mortal for apophatic union.[157]

William Kerrigan establishes an important connection between "Aaron" and the Eucharist in his description of the tension between the poetic representation and the reality of the priesthood:

> That Herbert as a priest administered the 'fare' of Christ ("The Priesthood") unquestionably tightened the dark emotional conflicts clustered about his meal at the pole of myth and theology. Here, too, there could be no question of deserving the office; Christ alone dresses the priest in holiness ("Aaron"). But as he officiates for the Lord, what happens inside the man—the man who might well be standing in front of an icon of the crucified Christ imaginatively quickened into speech, reproachful speech, as the one true priest of his own Passion, as in "The Sacrifice"?[158]

The realization of ecstatic union with divine presence is complicated when we consider, as Kerrigan does, "what happens inside the man" that must administer and partake of the sacraments. Perfection (in the context of the ecclesiastical hierarchy) is achieved through contemplation of the liturgical rituals. Symbols, Rorem explains, "bridge the

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[157] "Aaron" (25); "Clasping of Hands" (20); "Grace" (refrain).

[158] William Kerrigan, "Ritual Man: On the Outside of Herbert's Poetry," *Psychiatry* 48, 1985, (79-80). Kerrigan references *The Country Parson*, p. 257.

gap between the earlier and lowlier dependence upon sense perceptions (the hierarchy

in the days of the Law) and the future and higher purity of conceptual contemplation

(the heavenly hierarchy)."[159] This bridge, however, has its limitations; the most

obvious limitation is related to the temporary status of symbolic representation—for it

involves "*fill*[ing] that gap by lifting us up to the divine." In a sense, by lifting us up,

symbols (if only for an instant) collapse time. The "earlier and lowlier" dependence on

Mosaic Law merges with the expectancy of a "future" and "higher purity of conceptual

contemplation."[160] Yet for the mortal being, the experience of a higher purity is, more

often than not, temporary. And for Herbert, contemplation of the Eucharistic ritual is

complicated by the uncertain terms of Christ's absent presence.

Christ's Absent-Presence: Seeking *Exstasis* in Eucharistic Feasting

Turner suggests that the eschatological element of the Eucharist is an act of

"radical communication given to us by the Father through Jesus"; in this act of

communication Christ is present to us, but He is also absent from us.[161] The

complicated dialectics of negation and affirmation, of the darkness of God and the light

of Christ are "forced upon us as theological necessities of thought."[162] These

necessities of thought are the subject of "The H. Communion."

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[159] Rorem, (108).

[160] Rorem, (108 emphasis mine).

[161] Turner, 1999, (157).

[162] Turner, 1999, (158).

In "The H. Communion" the speaker opens with three apophatic negations that describe where Christ can be found by first showing where He cannot be found:

Not in rich furniture, or fine array,

Nor in a wedge of gold, (1-2)

It seems obvious that the speaker would deny Christ's presence in worldly adornments. What is, perhaps, not obvious is the speaker's difficulty with the Holy Communion, which is also part of the world. The communion—in the body and blood of Christ—demonstrates Christ's presence through a communication of signs. The poem continues with a description of the ideal outcome of this liturgical practice:

But by the way of nourishment and strength

Thou creep'st into my breast;

Making thy way my rest,

And thy small quantities my length;

Which spread their forces into every part,

Meeting sin's force and art. (7-12)

The presence of Christ—who is no longer in the world (and who is, for the speaker, an absent presence) must "creep" in "by way" of the Eucharist. The "small quantities" of bread and wine become the speaker's "length" and "spread" to fill "every part"; thus, driving sin from the corporeal body. Or so they should. The speaker adds an important

qualification in the next stanza; he wonders if the "small quantities" that fill his body

can also fill his soul:

> Yet can these not get over to my soul,
>> Leaping the wall that parts
>> Our souls and fleshly hearts;
>> But as th' outworks, they may control
>> My rebel-flesh, and carrying thy name,
>>> Affright both sin and shame. (13-18)

The speaker concludes the first section of the poem by suggesting that the bread can

only "carry" thy name. Turner's discussion of the Eucharistic sign offers a perspective

that helps to clarify the theological dilemma that this poem explores:

> For until we too are raised that communication with the risen Jesus
>
> can only fail of ultimacy. The Eucharist is not yet the kingdom of
>
> the future as it will be in the future. It points to it *as absent*, not
>
> because, as a sign, it is in the nature of signs to signify in the
>
> absence of the signified, but because by means of the Father's action
>
> this human sign of eating and drinking acquires a depth, an
>
> 'inwardness' of meaning which realizes the whole nature of our
>
> historical condition: what, in its essential brokenness, the Eucharist
>
> haltingly and provisionally signifies, can be fully realized only by its

abolition in the kingdom itself. The Eucharistic sign thus caught up

in this eschatological two-sidedness becomes thereby and

necessarily a two-sided sign: it is affirmation interpenetrated by

negation, presence interpenetrated by absence . . . .[163]

The speaker's negation of Christ's presence in the body of the Eucharist—bread that

can only "carry" the name—is "interpenetrated" by the affirmation that "grace"

transforms absence into presence. Grace (presence) "with these elements"—bread and

wine (absence)--are a poetic expression of "eschatological two-sidedness."[164] The two-

sided sign is the Holy Communion that can fill the body's parts and "open" the "soul's

most subtle rooms."

> Only thy grace, which with these elements comes,
>
>> Knoweth the ready way,
>>
>> And hath the privy key,
>>
>> Op'ning the soul's most subtle rooms;

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[163] Turner, 1999 (157).

[164] Herbert strategically avoids contemporary doctrinal issues relating to the communion
in this poem—only line 19 alludes to the ways in which the Eucharistic elements are
interpreted. In the Williams MS poem of the same name, however, he was more
forthcoming, providing grist for much debate as to his proclivities. Herbert relished the
rituals of the church and drew comfort from them, generally taking the "via media," or
the Anglican middle way. William Kerrigan, "The Ritual Man: on the Outside of
Herbert's Poetry," *Psychiatry* 48:1, 1985, says "Unlike those of radical Protestant
authors, Herbert's texts reflect something forever outside them—the unutterable joy of
the ritual event" (78).

While those to spirits refined, at door attend

Dispatches from their friend. (19-24)

The provisional status of Eucharistic presence is addressed in the problematic

transitional stanza that begins the second section of the poem:

Give me my captive soul, or take

My body also thither.

Another lift like this will make

Them both to be together. (25-28)

The speaker's most urgent petition is that his body and his soul will be united. There

are two ways to interpret this stanza. The first posits a speaker who demands

eschatological presence in the human world—an ecstatic union that will free his soul

from his sinful body; the outcome would be a body-soul that is "holy, pure and clear",

sanctified, but still earthbound. The second interpretation imagines the ultimate "lift"

into divine presence at the time of the resurrection—a future time when absence will be

consumed by presence, making "both to be together." The body and soul will be

brought together in the heavenly realm; moreover, the newly unified (once human)

being will be present with God. The second reading can be viewed as a conceptual

bridge that spans the distinct chasm between the first and second halves of the poem.

To put it another way, the speaker establishes a connection, albeit shaky, through the

expression of his longed for but constantly thwarted desire for *extasis*. The newly

introduced formal rhetorical dress of the second half of "The H. Communion" is a rejection of the belief in the efficacy of the Eucharist on the individual soul. The speaker (Herbert) returns to the biblical past because this past provides a clearer image of the human being (Adam) in the presence of God. The speaker's own present (post-Reformation England) fails to provide the necessary assurance because it is present; it cannot yet be situated as part of the biblical past or future.

The change in form that divides the poem into two sections also underscores the speaker's perspective on biblical time.[165] In the first section the speaker yearns for divine presence in the "now" of human time, but also in the "future" of a resurrected state that is beyond notions of human time. The second section, by contrast, shows a speaker who reflects on the accessibility of divine presence in the past, and once again, Adam becomes a symbol of *exstasis*. This is a unique adaptation by the poet of the concept of ecstasy, and sets the nostalgic tone of the second section; the speaker yearns

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[165] A version of The "H. Communion" appears in the Williams Manuscript. Coburn Freer, in *Music for a King: George Herbert's Style and the Metrical Psalms*, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972, notes that "the second part originally appeared in the Williams manuscript, under the title 'Prayer,' and was later revised to incorporate Eucharistic imagery. The first part appears later in the Bodleian manuscript and in the 1633 edition. There is also in the Williams manuscript another poem entitled 'The H. Communion,' but this was not included in the later manuscripts" (166-7). The Williams version of H. Communion has an almost brash tone, conveying perhaps a mildly sacrilegious disregard demonstrated by his witty "sallies" and "tart satire" as Vendler describes them (141). Freer agrees, describing the second part as having "a jesting and ironic whimsy that complicates the tone" of the poem (165). The early version was more doctrinal, which Vendler minimizes as "the satiric rejections of theological debate [regarding the Eucharist]" (140). However, both poems continue to engage critics in that very debate, with Gene Veith (and others) leading the charge on the Calvinist interpretation and John E. Booty (and others) advancing the Anglican view.

for Adam's time, a time when access to divine presence is fluid, simple and certain. For

Adam, there is no need for a theology that leads one towards a mystical union.

> Before that sin turned flesh to stone,
>
>> And all our lump to leaven;
>
> A fervent sigh might well have blown
>
>> Our innocent earth to heaven.
>
>
> For sure when Adam did not know
>
>> To sin, or sin to smother;
>
> He might to heav'n from Paradise go,
>
>> As from one room t'another.
>
>
> Thou hast restored us to this ease
>
>> By this thy heav'nly blood;
>
> Which I can go to, when I please,
>
>> And leave th'earth to their food. (29-40)

The final stanza declares that God "hast restored" the speaker to the ease of Adam. But

again (as in "Prayer I") biblical time—past, present and future—is confused by the

speaker's use of signs that express multiple meanings simultaneously. The 'heav'nly

blood' could be the blood of the Crucifixion, or the blood of the Eucharist. Similarly,

to "leave th'earth to their food" calls to mind the absence of Christ in the bread of the

Eucharist, but also a literal image of the human body "leaving" the earth and no longer in need of the two-sided sign of the provisional Holy Communion.

Moving chronologically from a description of the prelapsarian state of the "first man" to the post-lapsarian "lump of flesh" that is "sinneful" man, the final stanza of "Miserie" utilizes cataphatic imagery to describe the (apophatic) fluidity of divine presence that Adam enjoyed, but did not *strive* for.

> 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 that 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. (67-78)

The speaker recognizes that, like Adam, he is restricted by his own nature and free will, and that his vessel (containing the soul and spirit) is dashed about due to his sinful actions. All of the "divine names" (and these include those Herbert uses to describe man in lines 67-72), all of the cataphatic language-oriented elements are at his disposal, but are ultimately restrictive.[166] With sin comes the need to move *beyond* language, beyond the corrupt flesh of the post-lapsarian corporeal body ("without foot or wing") negating those cataphatic images (both good and bad) including his very self, to once again become Adam-like, unknowing, as Adam was before taking from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The interrelatedness of the cataphatic and the apophatic theologies as Dionysius envisioned them has not often been realized, often clouded by mis-perception. The symbolic church of the *via positiva* and the mystical *via negativa*, far from being at odds are uniquely symbiotic in principle. Once we look at the hierarchies of the Dionysian theology, their connection to the symbolic church is clear. How we approach the soul's movement inwards to God is not as clear. The poems discussed in this chapter are a litany of the essential doctrines of Christian faith—the Holy Communion, Grace, Prayer, Christ's priesthood. Each of the poems is "drest" with the liturgical

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[166] My claim that Herbert's names for Man are actually Divine names is based on Turner's discussion of the "ontological foundation" he paraphrases from Pseudo-Dionysius: "Anything that God has brought about provides a potential source of imagery for the description of God . . . any name that names a property of creatures can also be a name of God" (Turner, 23). In the words of Dionysius "Those who are wise of God themselves celebrate the cause of all beings in terms of the totality of what is caused and with many names" (*DN* 596B; John D. Jones, trans., 115).

garments of the symbolic church, and at least attempts to move "with a ritualistic gravity from opposition to a climactic synthesis."[167] That potential synthesis—the union with God—ultimately fails in the language dependent poems, where praise and petition finally lead only to silence. Yet while remaining unrealized, as it must, it is why George Herbert writes.

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[167] Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954, (138).

CHAPTER IV

MEMORIAE MATRIS SACRUM

On July 7, 1627, less than a month after Magdalene Herbert Danvers was buried,

an entry was made in the Stationers' Register acknowledging the printing of the full text

of John Donne's Commemorative Sermon preached on the occasion of her memorial

service at Chelsea a week earlier.[168] Also included in the volume, under the dedicatory

heading *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* (*To the Memory of My Mother: A Consecrated Gift*),

was a sequence of poems by her son George Herbert, 14 of which were written in Latin

and 5 in Greek.[169] The poems in the sequence reveal the poet's negotiation of the

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[168] "A Sermon of Commemoration of the Lady Danvers, late Wife of Sir John Danvers, Preach'd at Chilsey, where she was lately buried. By John Donne Dean of St. Paul's, London. 1 July 1627," in *The Sermons of John Donne, Vol. VIII*, Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, eds., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962. All references to the sermons are from this source.

[169] *Memoriae Matris Sacrum, A Critical Text, Translation and Commentary,* edited by Catherine Freis, Richard Freis, and Greg Miller, Fairfield, CT: George Herbert Journal, 2012, (also referred to here as *MMS*) is the translation of Herbert's Latin and Greek poems that I have used for all explications in this chapter. All English translations of the poems come from this text unless otherwise indicated. In consultation with Dr. Mary K. Jaeger, Professor of Classics at the University of Oregon, this translation was considered an accurate reflection of both Herbert's intent and his high level of mastery of both Latin and Greek. Other translations of the poems were used for comparative purposes and to highlight alternate critical claims based on those translations. The translations referenced are: E. Pearlman, "George Herbert's God," *English Literary Renaissance* 13, no.1, 1983, 88-112; Mark McCloskey and Paul R. Murphy, *The Latin Poetry of George Herbert*: *A Bilingual Edition*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1965; and Rhonda L. Blair, "George Herbert's Greek Poetry." *Philological Quarterly* 64, fall 1984. 573-584. An 1874 translation of the poems by Alexander Ballach Grosart is referenced by the *MMS* translators in their commentary. Almost all previously published articles use these translations since the Freis, Freis, and Miller translation is so recent.
"*Sacrum* is the neuter of the adjective *Sacer*, used in the title as a substantive. Its literal meaning is "a sacred thing," and can be used of a temple, sacrifice, or a religious ritual in ancient Roman religion. It also means "a religious dedication" or "a dedicatory offering"

timeless dilemma of human existence; the question of what awaits us beyond the

grave.[170] The boundary between life and death illuminates other boundaries as well:

between the sacred duties of the ordained orator and the common parishioner, between

the spiritual rituals shared by a community and the "private ejaculations"[171] of the

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when it is found on many classical Roman funerary monuments. . . . the formulaic phrase *Memoriae sacrum* continued to be used in Christian tombstones and inscriptions. The Latin phrase as well as its English translation, "sacred to the memory of," is common in many English epitaphs (*MMS* 56). Mary Jaeger made a similar observation during our conversation. Of the several distinct translations of the title (Pearlman – *Sacred to the Memory of My Mother;* McCloskey & Murphy—*In Sacred Memory of My Mother;* Grosart-- *Sacred to a Mother's Memory.* Dr. Jaeger considers the Freis, Freis, and Miller translation *To the Memory of My Mother: A Consecrated Gift*, appropriate. It is notable that the obvious translation of "Sacrum" as "sacred", is used in all but the *MMS* version. Glossing "Sacrum" as "consecrated" provides a more Herbert-like sense to the word: to devote entirely; dedicate; to cause to be revered or honored.

[170] I refer to the pairing of *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* with Donne's sermon as somewhat accidental due to the short period of time involved—less than a month if we start with Lady Danvers' funeral on June 8 and end with July 7 when the publication was entered in the stationer's register. Only this and five other of Donne's sermons were printed in his lifetime and this one only a week after being preached. I argue that Herbert's poems, which he would have been frantically writing over the course of a few weeks, were not intended for publication but for the edification of his mother, and as such were most likely included as an afterthought, an emendation to the sermon being published, perhaps as a favor to Donne. Donne, as Dean of St. Paul's, was a well-known figure and orator, whereas Herbert was much more unfamiliar, having at best a small coterie of readers. Most critics mention this pairing in passing, if at all, and their comments can only be considered speculative. "Donne's sermon was *accompanied by . . .*" (Simpson and Potter 3). . . ,"published *as an appendix* to Donne's famous funeral sermon" (Pearlman 90), ". . . were *printed at the end* of John Donne's Memorial Sermon" (Blair 573).   Freis, Freis, and Miller (vii) imply a collaboration: "Herbert and Donne sought to eulogize *together . . .*," while Doebler and Warnicke make it seem as if Herbert was in charge; it "so comforted her son George that he *attached to it* nineteen poems of his authorship . . ." (5)**.** Additionally, there would be little expectation that any but the most well-educated would even be able to read the Latin and Greek poems, while the sermon, in English, would be more accessible to literate people of lower social and educational status.

[171] This phrase is taken from the sub-title of *The Temple*, "Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations." As with the title of the collection, this was most likely added by Ferrar, to placate the powers that be "by announcing it as a personal, 'private' text." Drury (283).

individual mourner, between the highly circumscribed realm of everyday life and the unknown, ambiguous realm of the afterlife, between the familiar and the unknowable, between presence and absence. In this chapter I will show how these borders become sites of crisis that are involved with the complex process that Henry Staten has described as the "dialectic of mourning."[172]

Mourning in the early modern period was a highly structured and prescriptive process. Renaissance elegy and funeral oration, while capable of considerable complexity, were also highly formulaic modes that served ritualistic purposes through the evocation of specific literary devices. John Donne, who knew Lady Danvers well, provides us with a powerful example of the commemorative or funeral sermon—the public, ritualized version of mourning which was intended to provide both the community and the individual with a set of structuring patterns for grieving that were comforting and familiar. However, Herbert's grief, as William Kerrigan observes, "could not be managed by the resources of the congregation" and his highly expressive elegies represent an unusual personal early modern foray into the ambiguous aspects of loss.[173] The outcomes of mourning are unpredictable, and for Herbert that unpredictability is exacerbated by the inconsolable nature of his loss. His "cathexis of longing" for his mother (hetero-mourning) brings up fears about his own spiritual death and loss of self-possession that are characteristic of auto-mourning.[174]

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[172] Henry Staten, *Eros in Mourning: Homer to Lacan*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, (xi).

[173] William Kerrigan, "Ritual Man: On the Outside of Herbert's Poetry," *Psychiatry* 48 (1985), 74.

[174] Staten, (8).

Speaking in Classical Tongues

For readers only familiar with *The Temple*, the tone and content of these elegiac

verses can seem surprisingly—even shockingly—at odds with the persona Herbert

projects in his more famous English verse. As far back as 1652, Barnabas Oley made a

clear distinction between the two:

> Though they be good, very good, yet they be dull or dead in comparison of his
>
> Temple poems. And no marvel; to write those [*MMS*] he made his ink with water
>
> of Helicon, but these inspirations prophetical [*The Temple*] were distilled from
>
> above.[175]

Sadly, this distinction—a stereotype perpetuated by most critics since—has led to the

neglect of the *MMS* sequence as a significant part of Herbert's poetic legacy.[176] The

general neglect of the *MMS,* though due in part to the dearth of English translations,

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[175] Barnabas Oley, *The Remains of That Sweet Singer of the Temple, George Herbert,* London: Pickering, 1841, (civ-cv). In Greek mythology Helicon was the home of the muses. Deborah Rubin, "*'Let your death be my Iliad'*: Classical Allusion and Latin in George Herbert's *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*," *Reconsidering the Renaissance: Papers from the Twenty-first Annual Conference. Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies.* Ed. Mario A. Di Cesare. 93 (1992), frames the contrasts similarly in a modern context: "In *The Temple,* human frailty and mortality are locked in combat with a grace-dispensing God; in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*, forgiveness and salvation recede in the face of crushing grief" (431).

[176] Freis, Freis, and Miller have a different view regarding the complexity of the poems of *MMS*, no doubt arrived at through their comprehensive analysis & commentary on the Latin and Greek structures. "Herbert has to be treated with such complexity in order to be grasped . . . This marriage of differentiation and unity, of economy and richness in and between every perspective shaping his verse, draws on and funds the inexhaustibility of Herbert's spare and neat verse" (104-105).

nevertheless highlights the consequences of pigeon-holing Herbert's *Temple* poems

within the category of devotional poetry.

For example, Elizabeth Clarke has examined Oley's suggestion that Herbert's

classical poems and his vernacular poems demonstrate "obvious differences in

character." Among these differences, two seem especially relevant. The first is an

objective or empirically verifiable difference: "There is an abundance of classical

reference in the Latin poetry, whereas the English lyrics eschew classical allusion

altogether." The second, however, is more of an aesthetic evaluation, and suggests that

the religious lyrics are superior through an evocation of the local and temporal: "The

Latin poems are often concerned with contemporary politics and gossip: the English deal

with the timeless issue of how an individual Christian may relate to his Creator."[177]

Clark attributes this difference to the careful and thoughtful crafting of *The Temple*

poems over an extended period of time, in stark contrast to the few weeks of emotionally

driven versifying that produced the *MMS* sequence.[178]

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[177] Elizabeth Clarke, "Sacred Singer/Profane Poet: Herbert's Split Poetic Persona" in Helen Wilcox and Richard Todd, eds., *George Herbert: Sacred and Profane*, Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995 makes an interesting distinction: Oley (quoted in Clark 24) claims that "there is a great deal of metrical innovation in *The Temple*, whereas the Latin collections consist of imitations of classical forms" (24).

[178] A number of critics have pursued the application of psycho-sexual theory to the works of the *MMS*. The comments by E. Pearlman, "George Herbert's God," *English Literary Renaissance 13, no.1,* 1983, are the most radical: in discussing Poem 7 for example, he refers to "a vision of a female or bisexual Jesus" and to Herbert's "confusion of gender identity in both the poet and in the God he worships." (108). William Kerrigan, while not rejecting Pearlman outright, mildly rebuts his claim as "altogether too ominous. [But] Every serious exploration of the symbolism of deity produces bisexual elements," (73). Rubin comments in passing on "erotic associations" (440). Janice Lull, "George Herbert, Magdalene Herbert and Literary Biography," Ilha do Desterro 34 (January-June 1998), cautions against using poems themselves and questionable biographical commentary as documentary evidence (13-26).

It is certainly true that *The Temple* demonstrates a greater subtlety and restraint, and is centered on the relations between speaker and God, whereas the *MMS* has as its subject the poet's mother, Lady Danvers. Yearning to describe and to praise the woman who gave him being, Herbert turns to verse.[179] But not *English* verse, and Deborah Rubin has this to say about that choice:

> By choosing to write in Greek and Latin in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum,* Herbert has allowed himself access not only to other languages, with the prosaic options they allow, but also to a pagan literary tradition and to the classical mythology upon which it is constituted. In doing this, he deliberately removes himself from the language of the Church of England, and his major devotional poems, and of the largest part of his rational life.[180]

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[179] G.W. Pigman III, in *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, discusses elegy in detail. Though not the emphasis of this chapter, it is worth noting that Renaissance elegy, as part of the *profanus*, has traditionally been viewed as primarily concerned with praising the deceased, and less so with consolation and lament (40-41). But for Herbert the elegies of Memoriae Matris Sacrum, though full of praise for his mother, are ineffective in providing a comforting venue for mourning. Elegy is not able to protect him against the *sacer*-like unpredictability that characterizes his highly sensitized and personal process of mourning. Barbara K. Lewalski, comments in *Donne's 'Anniversaries' and the Poetry of Praise: The Creation of a Symbolic Mode*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973, that in Renaissance elegies, exaggerated praise is a common formal element; the deceased are presented as "ideal types rather than as peccable [capable of sinning] individuals." (38).

[180] Rubin suggests that by burning to the "ambivalent, eroticized matter of pagan myth" he is also turning to a "tongue" that he "identifies with the experience of the maternal" (431). A corresponding note acknowledges, "While we do not know whether [Magdalene] Herbert knew Latin or to what degree she personally participated in her children's early care and learning of English, George Herbert makes claims in poems 1

For Rubin, the world of "pagan allusion," although "utterly excluded from [Herbert's] English poetry," serves as a mediating system for the poet's grief in these elegies for his mother—granting that grief a necessary and secular context, and thereby rendering what might have otherwise been inexpressible feelings expressible.[181] Indeed, by utilizing the resources of pagan literature and philosophy, in Rubin's words, Herbert "is able to explore intimate aspects of his psychology and his relationship with his mother in the *ritually controlled context of an ancient language, traditional verse forms, and a pagan mythology*" and by "distancing himself from Christian culture" he also creates for himself a deliberately constructed space in which "to experience stages of mourning that conflict with his ordinary beliefs."[182] For if the "idolatry, erotic content, and exaggerated despair" we encounter in the sequence seem to be "violations of his English-speaking persona, psychologically, theologically, and aesthetically," they are also manifestations of an alternate (European Neo-Latin) verse tradition that was more tolerant of "such materials than the Renaissance vernacular traditions."

Without disputing Rubin's claims, I will argue here that the intensity of uncontrollable emotion Herbert experienced at his mother's passing also pushed him to

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and 2 that suggest a symbolic identification between the poems' language and his mother" (431).

[181] Rubin, (431).

[182] Rubin, (444-445). In "moments of denial, rage, despair, and confusion he falls back upon the resources of pagan literature and philosophy" (432). Furthermore, "Latin, which has been characterized as the vehicle of a '[male] Renaissance puberty rite,' has been appropriated by Herbert for a private, subversive, exploration of experience and feeling that predates formal religion, patriarchal structures, and the acquisition of their language and symbols" (Rubin 445).

articulate some of his most urgent inquiries into the realm of the unknown.**[183]** I am

interested in these texts as 'darker' and less subtle examples of Herbert's struggles to

understand the mysteries of life and death, faith and doubt, God and nothingness than we

can find in *The Temple*, and that I have touched on in the previous chapters. Rubin

astutely observes a close relationship between "forbidden associations" and "forbidden

emotions" which Herbert sought to "explore and contain" by means of both classical

verse forms and a "more private language." What gives these associations and emotions

their "forbidden" quality is the distinctive mark of the individual mourner, which, more

often than not, is at odds with early modern British (and predominantly Anglican)

mourning rituals.

Sacer and *Profanus*

Daring juxtapositions or conflations of the 'sacred' and 'profane' are of course a

familiar aspect of Renaissance literature and culture.[184] But I will be using those terms in

ways that expand their meanings in relation to their mythological, spiritual and

etymological origins in Latin—the concepts of *Sacer* and *Profanus*. Ori Soltes, in his

study of mysticism in the Abrahamic traditions (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim), suggests

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[183] Rubin, (432). See also, Fred Nichols, *An Anthology of Neo-Latin Poetry* who also comments on the intimate quality that is not present in the vernacular and suggests that poets writing in Latin perhaps found it "easier to be intimate in a language other than the one in which they had developed all the mental reticence and inhibitions formed as part of [their] earliest education" (3).

[184] The so-called Metaphysical Poets, of which Herbert and Donne are two, are frequently discussed in terms of their work as being either (or both) sacred or profane. In general usage profane refers to secular or love poetry, while the sacred includes devotional poems addressing themes of the divine. When paired, the terms tend to suggest positive and negative connotations.

that the Latin antecedents of 'sacred' and 'profane' have distinct nuances of meaning that are "essential to religion in general and to mysticism in particular."[185] Soltes uses a number of accessible metaphors in his description of the *sacer*:

> ... the *sacer* realm is the *unknown* and *not safely circumscribed* in all
>
> its aspects. It is that which falls beyond the edge of the
>
> community—wilderness, forest, desert, ocean; it is nighttime, sleep
>
> and dreams; it is before birth and after death; it is the realm of
>
> divinity. It is the realm that operates unpredictably for us in both
>
> time and space, according to its *own* patterns.[186]

Unlike the *sacer* realm that operates according to unpredictable and often unintelligible logic (we might say *divine* logic), the *profanus* is a realm that is ordered by human patterns, empirical observation and language.

> The Romans used the term *profanus*, meaning simply 'before (i.e.,
>
> outside) the temple/sanctuary,' to refer to the realm of the *known*
>
> *and the safely circumscribed* in all its aspects: the community,
>
> daytime, awakeness, life—the realm, in time and space where things
>
> happen according to what we might term normal patterns of
>
> expectation." [187]

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[185] Soltes, (ix).

[186] Soltes, (3).

[187] Soltes, (3).

We might be inclined to associate the space *outside of* or *before* the temple/sanctuary

with a space that is unprotected and disconnected from the patterns of spirituality that

help to structure the unknown aspects of the human experience.[188] Spiritual patterns—

such as that of Christ's life and death—are codified, simplified and humanized versions

of a realm that lies outside human experience. And though the deep, profound spiritual

ritual of the Eucharist takes place *inside* a sanctuary, it is also a pattern of expectation—

and a highly prescriptive one at that. While we may glimpse some fleeting, miniscule

element of the *sacer*, this glimpse is facilitated by the normal expectations of the

profanus. It is the *sacer* realm that leaves us unprotected from normal patterns of

expectation and disconnected from the community that establishes and upholds those

expectations.

Herbert inhabited the *profanus* as a member of the greater community of British

nationals and as a member of other smaller, overlapping communities: the community of

Cambridge, of his family parish, of his mother's household. Each community could be

said to contribute to or underwrite an epistemological mode that effectively keeps one

safe from what is unknown and therefore unpredictable by sustaining "normal patterns of

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[188] Herbert famously evokes this literal meaning of "profane" as "before or outside the
temple" in the short poem – "Superliminaire" – that stands just outside the figurative
church of his own English poems;

    Avoid profanenesse; come not here;
    Nothing but Holy, pure, and cleare, (5-6)

Stanley Fish, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing,* Berkeley: University
of California Press, 1978, (128-131) comments on the ambiguity of "profaneness," which
he believes complicates the reader's task of determining whether Herbert means the word
as "evil personified" or as a more classical warning. Nevertheless, Fish calls this
boundary poem "the perfect introduction to that section of *The Temple*."

expectation". However, death—the most common human encounter with the *sacer* realm—is an event that disrupts the patterns of the *profanus*. The patterns of Christ's Passion or the Eucharist serve—in part—to help the mortal being bypass two significant carnal responses to the sudden *absence* of a beloved that are set in motion by the disorder of death. And they accomplish this by a process of redirection—by turning the mortal gaze from the *profanus* to the *sacer*—thereby filling the "gaping wounds" of mortal eros with a notion of transcendental presence. We might say, following Henry Staten, that the notion of divine eros displaces mortal eros, taming and ordering it in the process of displacement. For example, the disorder of death is reorganized by the pattern offered in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ; this pattern reassures both the necessity of mortal death and the timelessness of an eternal dwelling place. The perplexing and intrusive nature of death, if understood in the Christian perspective Herbert inhabited, would have placed him in a position of confronting directly both the unpredictability of the *sacer*—its unknowability— and the promises of the Christian tradition regarding the transcendental aspects of the *sacer*, promises that demand faith as a prerequisite to their fulfillment.

Taking the term further, *sacer* can refer to an individual as well: one who is spiritually separate from the community, such as a priest or shaman. Familiar with the rituals of the society, such an individual serves as a go-between who "guides the community (the *profanus*) in its relationship with the *sacer*; hence that figure is termed, in Latin, *sacerdos*—'one who gives the *sacer* [to us].'"[189] In life, at least in the eyes of

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[189] Soltes, (3-4).

Herbert himself, as well as Donne and many others who knew her, Magdalene Herbert

was *sacerdos*, a priestess of great religious influence, giving the *sacer* to her community,

her family and especially, to her children—and also bringing those she knew and loved to

the *sacer*.

If we recall that the term *profanus* means 'before' or 'outside' the *sacer*, it is also

possible to conceptualize the *profanus* as 'before' or 'outside' death. Death then is *sacer*

and in death, the mortal being—even the exceptional mortal being that is *sacerdos*—is

absorbed into the *sacer*. In crossing the boundary between life and death, Magdalene

Herbert herself crossed the boundary between *profanus* and *sacer,* thus becoming

sacer—that is, part of the realm that is unknown and not safely circumscribed. Herbert is

outside, occupying the familiar space, unable to fully penetrate the mystery of the *sacer*

realm, while his mother is within—her station, like God's, unknowable to him.

The word "Mother" for Herbert, with her death, therefore becomes in some

important sense equivalent to the word "God"— an inadequate and paradoxical sign.

Both words now represent a being that is *absent* from the *profanus* that is the world.

What is absent, what is *sacer,* also represents the absence of particularities and concrete

form (which are also representations of order and expectation). A mortal body, for

example, can be known and recognized according to its knowable particulars, its distinct

parts, emotions, and characteristics; and it is knowable according to its proximity to other

mortal bodies. Simply put, it is specific and knowable *because it is present*. As Staten

points out, the continued possession or presence of the desired object (whether mortal or

divine) is impossible in its absoluteness:

It seems that desire must aim at the continued possession of or

proximity to what is desired, such that the loss of the loved thing, or

even the anticipation of its loss, is necessarily the destruction of the

happiness of the desiring subject. Conceived in this way, eros is the

origin of idealism. Nothing short of perfect possession can satisfy

its craving, for the desired good is either all there or it isn't; any flaw

in the absoluteness of its presence is a wound in the substance of the

lover. And what flaw could be more decisive than that of

mortality?[190]

The *profanus* then is also the space of desire. While it may seem a logical step to say that

ideals are part of the realm of transcendence, this is complicated by the fact that ideals,

while transcendental in aspiration, are given form by the thoughts and language of human

beings. Mourning or grief has a similarly ambiguous status in regards to the *sacer-*

profanus boundary. Staten observes that "as soon as desire is something felt by a mortal

being for a mortal being, eros (as desire-in-general) will always be to some degree

agitated by the anticipation of loss—an anticipation that operates even with regard to

what is not yet possessed."[191]

Just as the community and the church give order to the *profanus* through various

mechanisms of structure, those same institutions—and the individuals that comprise

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[190] Staten, (2).

[191] Staten, *(xi).*

them— respond to the threat of loss with "strategies of deferral, avoidance, or transcendence" by which the "self is 'economized' against the libidinal expenditure involved in mourning."[192] Staten's ultimate argument is that for the "religious-philosophical tradition in which Western literature is rooted, *mourning is the horizon of all desire.*"[193] This metaphor is interesting because it situates desire 'before' the horizon that is mourning. Mourning, then, is situated at the boundary, and just as the horizon separates the visible from the invisible, it agitates and disrupts the desire and expectation of presence in the *profanus* realm in its anticipation of an inevitable absence.

The structures that order the *profanus* realm—especially Renaissance proscriptions for proper mourning—strive to contain and to ultimately sublimate mourning, though this striving may fail. Soltes tells us that the aspect of the *sacer* that is "by far the most disturbing" is the assumption "made by religion that it has the power to determine the extent and patterns of our lives." In other words, religion, by first engendering the "assumption that the *sacer* created the *profanus* carries with it the corollary assumption that it can destroy us."[194] As Staten points out, "the limit term in the series of affronts to the soul's self-possession is of course death."[195] Within the set of social, historical, and religious contexts that impacted Herbert's notion of his soul, Augustine's articulation of death's all-encompassing affront to self-possession is

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[192] Staten, (*xi*).

[193] Staten, (*xi*).

[194] Soltes, (5).

[195] Staten, (9).

especially relevant. For Augustine, it is not merely the thought of *mortal* death that

causes "ultimate psychic pain," it is a continual lack of assurance that the body and soul

will, in fact, be exempt from death.

> Even the righteous man himself will not live the life he wishes
>
> unless he reaches that state where he is wholly exempt from death,
>
> deception, and distress, and has the assurance that he will for ever be
>
> exempt. This is what our nature craves, and it will never be fully
>
> and finally happy unless it attains what it craves. (Augustine)[196]

As Staten suggests, death is the "illimitable gap" that prevents the "circle of the self from

closing against the intrusion of the not-self." This gap – the psychic wound that never

closes – is the cause of "auto-mourning" which, as Staten explains, is an "aggressive

reaction to the thought of one's own death."[197] Herbert's aggressive reaction to the

experience of auto-mourning takes the form of writing, but at times, the products of his

imagination constitute a very real threat to his self-possession. By exploring the limit

term of his own soul's self-possession—the conditions of his death take on a newly

realized urgency. If he cannot find exemption from death, he loses the presence of both

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[196] Quoted in Staten, (9).

[197] In Staten's reading of the *Iliad*, auto-mourning is described as "vengeful or resentful."
Because Akhilleus is "overcome with grief for his own death," he must "make someone
pay for his suffering by making this person suffer, and preferably by making him or her
grieve illimitably for his death. Yet, Akhilleus's grief of self-loss is also the most intense
possible sensation of his own being," thus "the sense of injury exasperates to the limit the
grief, but also the pleasurable self-affection, of Akhilleus's autobereavement" (9).

mother and God. As we will see in poem 6, Herbert is aware of the necessity of finding

and following the "way" that leads to the "best parent"; however, his awareness of this

religious absolute—the way that is straight and narrow— is often obscured by the "broad

and "blameworthy" (poem 8, line 2) paths that are imagined in the *MMS* sequence.

John Michael Crafton offers a useful summary of the significance of

philosophical thought regarding grief that informs my reading of Poem 6:

> The ideology of transcending mourning has its primary expression
>
> in Plato's *Symposium*. By instructing the disciples to direct their
>
> eros away from mortal details to the Ideals, the abstracting
>
> idealization of the ladder of love becomes an elaborate attempt to
>
> *eliminate mourning before it has a chance to grow.*[198]

Addressing Galenus, the quintessential physician, in poem 6, Herbert speaks with

insistence about the nature of his unresolved mourning. The doctor is rebuked because

he wishes to *eliminate* mourning through potions and probing; he is also rebuked because

he has misdiagnosed the patient's "illness" as a physical malady: "My mind is sick:

which neither bottles of pills / Nor slow-working medicines has the power to reach" (5-

6). Galenus does not have the power to heal, but does have the means to kill (9). Here

Herbert links the mental anguish that accompanies mourning the loss of a mortal object

(hetero-mourning) with the implication that this loss has given way to what Staten

describes as auto-mourning. Herbert asks: "why, pushing me in my misery, / Do you

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[198] John Michael Crafton, *South Atlantic Review,* Vol. 60, No. 4, 1995 (145).

dunk me in floods of endless questions" (1-2). The passive quality of being forced to endure this probing reinforces the uncertain position of the poet; as a man of secular and religious learning, Herbert expresses frustration regarding his inability to choose—to have faith in—an epistemological approach that will definitively resolve the pain of separation.

Line 10, beginning with a qualifying conjunction, is Herbert's attempt to diffuse auto-mourning by directing eros away from mortality and he does this by turning to the image of the Christian path—a recurring image throughout the sequence:

But this isn't the way either by which I'll be led to the best parent:

If I do not leave life in a holy way, as my mother did,

I'll be by that death shorn of her the more, her widow (10-12)

His belief that he must "leave life in a holy way" as his mother did is connected to the powerful structuring force of "the good death"; it also comments on the influence of Donne's sermon. However, this reflection on the "holy way" to a transcendent union with his "best parent" is only a fleeting digression. Herbert's overarching objective is to understand his misery, his questions, and his cure.

Galenus has an active role in the eradication of grief; dividing, prodding, and provoking the interior terrain of Herbert's body and mind, Galenus exacerbates the poet's grief even as he attempts to cure the defective part. Herbert complains that Galenus is, "Handling the pulsing arteries / Of this fleshly, liquid mass of mine", a handling that is the source of the poet's interminable pain. The concrete image of the artery that pulses

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with life-sustaining blood is juxtaposed with the dissolution of what can be grasped and handled. Consequently, the "fleshly, liquid mass" that Herbert claims as his own, is a kind of spiritual putrefaction; the anatomical parts that are known because they can be divided and observed as separate, are here reduced to an indiscriminate mass. The poet, at the mercy of this handling, has control over only one part of his body—the hand that writes the poem.

> It [my Arm] draws heat from the passion of writing.
>
> > In my leaping vein is my mother. (15-16)

Herbert suggests that poetry is a viable discourse for spiritual concerns and he uses imagery of the physical body to describe the complex manifestations of what is a spiritual or soul reaction to his grief. However, he quickly abandons this notion and begins an elaborate conceit comparing the gestation of grief's praises to childbirth—a conceit that collapses the masculine into the feminine:

> If I should be all swollen, if I should puff up and creak,
>
> Don't blame my limbs, the hidden reason lies in my mind
>
> > Giving birth to my parent's praises:
> >
> > > Nor is it safe, either, to take medicines when pregnant.
>
> Now my makeup is distinctive:
>
> May its composition not be spread to anyone else.

What you see as a fever is in fact something healthy

And alone mends my mind. (17-24)

Michael Schoenfeldt explains that the "Galenic physiology inherited by the Renaissance" made possible a conceptualization of sexual mobility, and "inscribed masculine anatomy as the ideal of which the feminine physique was understood to be an inverted or incomplete version."[199] Imagining himself as inverted or incomplete, because he has become like a pregnant woman, is indicative of a perceived loss of self-possession.

The final four lines can therefore be seen as Herbert's individual reaction to the condemnation of poetry in book 10 of the *Republic*; he acknowledges the fear that verse can generate emotional turbulence and hopes that the "distinctive" "makeup" of his "composition"—the unique qualities that define him and ensure his wholeness—will not "spread to anyone else." But he also defiantly asserts that this "fever" of versing presents for him a curative of sorts that "alone mends [his] mind". However, as we will see in other poems, Herbert's adamant posture with regard to the outcomes of his verse cannot be sustained in a consistent way.

The Good Death

The 1627 texts of both Donne's Sermon and *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* are interesting to compare in that they offer a set of contrasting points of view that represent

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[199] Michael Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. (236).

a multiplicity of early modern "messages from the English Renaissance."[200] The

communal and performative aspects of the sermon both illuminate and contrast with the

private aspects of the poetic sequence. Arnold Stein's investigation into what he calls

"the house of death" is an analysis of how certain early modern texts—both prose and

poetry—help us to imagine and to understand how individual writers took an active role

in the evolving response to the philosophical and theological control that religious

leaders, texts, and rituals had over early modern discourses regarding death, dying, the

afterlife and especially the concepts of grief and mourning.

> Death, which pagans could endeavor to understand as a law of
>
> nature, Christians interpreted as a direct punishment for Adam's
>
> disobedience. Since the punishment was imposed by God, it could
>
> not be explained by reasoning based upon the natural order of
>
> things; furthermore, the pains were believed to be unique,
>
> appropriately exceeding all other natural experiences. In
>
> Augustine's influential expression, death was 'a sharp, unnatural
>
> experience" (*City of God 13.2*). *Timor Mortis* was then a natural
>
> response to a divinely ordained 'unnatural experience,' and religious
>
> instructors did not neglect stimulating the fear of imminent death

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[200] Arnold Stein, *The House of Death: Messages from the English Renaissance*,
Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. I find Stein's full title particularly
interesting as it offers several interpretive possibilities by tapping into the poetic
sensibility. It invokes the architectural analogy that has a long Christian tradition: the
house that is built with messages from competing epistemologies (sermon, scripture,
secular and sacred poetry) is not yet finished, but evolving.

while balancing that personal fear, variously, with doctrines

intended to provide the support of reason and faith, and finally to

transform the fear into acceptance and the purified desire of eternal

life.[201]

According to Stein, the proliferation of what he calls "messages" from early modern

writers (including the poetry of mourning during the period) demonstrates and expresses

a need for new modes of discourse around death. In particular, texts produced by

individual witnesses pushed back against older communal religious practices with their

dual mission to instill terror and fear of God before offering consolation and comfort.

Most people during the Renaissance "could assume that, except for a few changes made

by the Reformation, the most important knowledge concerning the subject of death had

already been collected and systematically organized . . .and much of the basic knowledge

could have been learned without reading—by word of mouth instruction, attending

church services, [or] being present at the deathbed."[202] It is not surprising that neither the

ritualized approach nor the individual approach could ever adequately handle the

complex problem of Christian dying. Early modern writers who were both inspired and

conflicted as a result of the Reformation upheaval, gave new life to the forms of

discourse about death and grief that an often overly-zealous and indoctrinating political-

religious state sought to control and contain. Writers working against universalizing,

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[201] Stein, (7-8).

[202] Stein, (6).

proscriptive perspectives on death undertook to emphasize the importance of contemplating death as it affected the individual. These contemplative efforts often manifested in representations that depicted an unrelenting, unpleasant, exhausting experience of severe intellectual and emotional vexation.

The popular communal rhetoric of "remembering death" or "remembering your end" was accompanied by calculated instruction and description pertaining to the Christian significance of dying a "good death," and was often highly prescriptive in regards to this matter.[203] This was in part due to a long doctrinal history with distant origins in pagan and classical antiquity, but perhaps finally owing to centuries of Christian ritual and teachings that took as a primary focus an "orientation toward death as a final test of life."[204] As Stein points out, the "good death" was reinforced by the "most authoritative pattern for Christian Death"—the "history" of Christ's death.[205] And though Donne himself would later become obsessively reflective (and doubtful) about his own prospects for a "good death," in his commemorative sermon for Lady Danvers, he clearly and resolutely describes the last moments of her life as exemplary of "the Good Death." The private letters of the "mourning child" (poem 2, line 64) are thrown into

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[203] Stein, (9).

[204] Stein, (7). "Though Christian philosophy could handle or assimilate parts of the pagan tradition while consciously rejecting other parts, the providential meanings of Christ's death introduced some radical differences in the orientation toward death as a final test of life."

[205] Stein, (9-10). Even Christ had initial hesitation in fully accepting death, and his last words from the cross—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46)— are anything but serene. Still the model is always "not as I will, but as thou wilt," and Donne's description of the death of Lady Danvers demonstrates her acceptance of death, reinforcing the model for those present.

relief by Donne's controlled rhetoric and the neatly balanced structure of the commemorative sermon. As William Kerrigan points out, Donne's sermon "acknowledges death, structures a communal identification with the dead woman by praising her virtues and charities, and then offers the consolation that regularly soothed mourners in his culture—the joyous new residence of Magdalene in Heaven."[206]

> Shee was joy'd to see the face, that *Angels* delight to looke upon, the
>
> face of her *Saviour*, that did not abhor the face of his fearfullest
>
> *Messenger*, Death? Shee shew'd no feare of his face, in any change
>
> of her owne; but died without any change of *countenance*, or
>
> *posture*; without any *struggling*, and *disorder*; but her *Death-bed*
>
> was as quiet as her *Grave*.[207]

On the surface, this passage is a description; Donne comments on Lady Danvers serene and joyful countenance, her fearless demeanor, the ordered posture of her corporeal frame, and the grave-like silence of her death-bed. Yet Donne's description is also clearly governed by the motivations that underlie his functionary role as *sacerdos*: one who guides the community in its relationship with the *sacer*. Seen in this light, the objectives of the sermon demonstrate Donne's investment in maintaining the order of the

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[206] Kerrigan, (74).

[207] *The Sermons of John Donne, Vol. VIII*, Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter ,eds., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962, (91). This description of the "Good Death" is contrasted by a detailing of the "Bad Death" in another sermon of Donne's in this same volume (188-189), which is eerily similar   to poem 6 in the *MMS*.

profanus. His rhetoric is similarly ordered; he uses impersonal words, stock phrasing

from scripture and the commonplace language of funeral sermons, all of which meet (but

carefully do not surpass) the general expectations of the community. And he is careful

not to disturb either the order or the expectations of that community.[208]

Donne points the congregation in the direction of the (potentially disordered)

sacer while carefully maintaining the order of the *profanus* and he accomplishes this

primarily by offering instruction in the thinly veiled guise of description and praise. He

emphasizes the significant aspects of a good death (joy, fearlessness, lack of struggle,

etc.). He underscores the implication that a good death is made possible by the virtues of

a good life, and he speaks to the common understanding that both the manner of how one

lived and how one died (if good and virtuous), testified to the superb constitution of the

soul and the immediate transition of that soul from the *profanus* to the transcendent *sacer*

realm. Thus, by reinforcing order and expectation, the sermon functions as a mechanism

of the *profanus* that contains, mitigates and structures the grieving process for both the

community and the individual.

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[208] In *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, John
Carey argues that Donne is perhaps outside the norm in his personal approach to death:
"He finds death challenging, not mournful—and that, too, distinguishes his image of it
from commonplace ideas" (201). Carey also comments on Donne's rhetorical style,
making much of the poet's refusal to tame it for the squeamish. He quotes from the
sermon; "That body upon which you tread now, That body . . .now, whilst I speake, is
mouldring, and crumbling into lesse, and lesse dust, and so has some motion, though no
life." (201). However, someone like Stein would no doubt respond that within the context
of both Donne's times and his mode of commemorative practice this rhetoric falls within
the realm of expectation.

However, it is possible to view Donne's sermon as both a structuring aspect of communal life *and* as equally expressive of auto-mourning brought on by Donne's personal response to death. If we adopt this perspective, because writing precedes preaching, it is possible both to agree and disagree with Kerrigan's observation that the "act of writing, *as opposed* to the act of preaching, drives mourning into a private space of misrule."[209]

According to Stein, individualized, private mourning rhetoric is indeed a space of misrule. The increased production of personal writing that explored the ambiguous aspects of death and grief during the English Renaissance added radically new dimensions to the discourse.[210] What people learned from the deaths of others though prescriptive in many ways, could not take away individual response to death.

> . . . however authoritative [the prescriptive practices] were, the
>
> instruction of what to think and feel would not surely correspond at
>
> all significant points with the experience of the witness and the
>
> mourner. When one brought the lessons home and resumed one's

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[209] Kerrigan, (74).

[210] Pigman comprehensively traces the development or evolution of poetic expressions of grief and the process of mourning during the Early Modern period. He includes significant analysis of the works of major poets of the period including Surrey, Spenser, Jonson, and Milton (with some Shakespeare thrown in) but only references Herbert in passing. However, much of his commentary is directly applicable to the poems of *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*. Interestingly, one of Pigman's conclusions is that the evolution of societal acceptance of grief and mourning to a more compassionate stance may actually decrease the emotional power of elegiac poetry.

life, the unquestionable answers were not likely to divert all

questions arising from grief.[211]

Presumably, Herbert was present at his mother's death, but there is no sure way to

know what he saw or experienced in her dying moments.[212] Whether Herbert saw in her

death any sign of fear in her, he would have experienced it himself, and if he witnessed

no struggle in Lady Danvers, he certainly felt the exacerbation of his own struggle.

Donne's memorial sermon, which though "public," explicitly crafted and performed with

specific liturgical emphasis, would most likely have effected for Herbert both comfort

and additional grief.[213] While fully basking in the reflected glory of the sermon's public

praise for his mother's exemplary life and "good death," Herbert defaults to the position

of worrying about what might be thought of his own intense grieving. This bit of self-

reflection acknowledges that his own grieving process might not live up to the

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[211] Stein, (19-21).

[212] Amy M. Charles, in *A Life of George Herbert*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, places Herbert as staying at his mother's house in Chelsea at this time based on a letter to his deputy at Cambridge, Robert Creighton. (131-132).

[213] Stein concisely summarizes Donne's intent when preaching a funeral sermon (or in this case a commemorative sermon functioning as a de facto funeral sermon): "[His] examples are public and optimistic, mindful of the established laws concerning penitence and alert to the practical wisdom of disciplining listeners and readers in the art of mortification, but turned finally and emphatically toward the goals of justified consolation and hope" (49). In its structure Donne's commemorative follows the cultural and religious commonplace for this type of sermon —although he clearly saw her as beyond the norm, using her as a transcendent example. It is notable that he moderated in his sermon for Lady Danvers some of the fire and brimstone that would normally be expected; "Donne quietly omits that formal stage of a penitential review of sins and the assurance that they are forgiven" (53).

expectations of his contemporaries. The *private*, or *personal* engagement with death, while involving similar practices, nevertheless had a potentially different quality. It was, in Stein's words, "easily summarized and reduced to rule and practice" which suited society, but "being immediate and personal and entering into the flow of both voluntary and spontaneous memory, could not but begin with and develop qualities of *individual distinctness*."[214]

Poem 2 of *MMS*, one of the longest in the sequence, alternates between voluntary and spontaneous memory. It begins with the expected rhetorical device of praise, but ends in an outpouring of grief—grief not only for the loss of his mother, but also for the way that the loss has altered his own person. Here the flow between hetero-mourning and auto-mourning is subtle. In the middle section of the poem, Herbert offers a simple anecdote; rising early in the morning, Lady Danvers puts her house "in good order" "so that daily labor ends in early evening." Herbert continues:

> But if, as happens
> Rarely an occasion arose, an important guest coming
> She herself rose to the occasion, and immediately elevated herself:
> She does battle with the moment and prevails from end to end. (25-28)

The poetic construction of this voluntary memory is overwhelmed by an abrupt change in tone and pacing:

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[214] Stein, (19, emphasis mine).

O! what a storm of speech, and how fine its civility,

A sharp charm, an Athena joined with the Graces;

Her speech fetters and shackles you, binding you in nets:

Or if an hour must be consumed with business,

She glides through the alleys and byways of the matter,

Challenging with her sage edicts even the Catos. (29-34)

After praising the "renowned letters" that "fly across the globe" and her "alluring right hand," Herbert observes that "in no sense" has her writing "Deserved that dusty parcel where you now lie, / The gold sands of Pactolus your sole fit tomb" (39-42). Kerrigan emphasizes the connection between Magdalene's and Herbert's letters; "the quick, minute, automatic manipulations of his pen themselves remember this good mother, reanimating the hand that now lies in the dust."[215]

Finally, how wondrous an Uplifter of the poor!

For the stumbling, a staff; a cover for the fallen,

The common comfort of the harried heard:

Public blessings garland her head,

The heavens both echo them and precede the measure.

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[215] Kerrigan, (74).

> *I grow weak, summoning such great things* that my sorrows
>
> Only number, sorrows even as numerous as the least stars. (46-52 emphasis mine)

Though Herbert uses the present tense in line 49 to describe an ongoing outpouring of public adoration, in shifting his attention to his own present state, praises quickly turn to grief. Kerrigan makes an interesting observation: "The lost one can no longer be named as a possible presence, which supplies a psychic analogue to the 'gap' or 'hole' of a death that, rupturing the inertia of structure, compels the community to reorder itself." The individual mourner who grows "weak, summoning such great things" is forced to confront an "intolerable hole in the present tense, and into the aperture images come swirling—memories, fantasies, fantasies we wish were memories, memories we wish were fantasies."[216] At the turning point in the poem, Herbert indignantly answers those who are critical of both his writing and his grief. His reply to a community of many who share one normative view about his indulgence is very different from the conflicted conversation he has with Galenus in Poem 6. In the following section of poem 2, Herbert assertively and confidently counters his critics with a critique of his own, railing against the "crippled" "codes and cant" of an "ignorant" society:

> But you who judge these improper for a son's speech,
>
> Depriving a child of the Celebration of a parent,
>
> Shove off, cripple, with your codes and cant.

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[216] Kerrigan, (74).

So will I be the only one mute and senseless

While the *world blasts broadcasts*?

Is it to me alone that my mother's urn's shut up,

Is the meadow dead, the rosemary withered?

Do I bring back, for a mother's use, my tongue, to bite it?

(2: 52-59, emphasis mine)

And, finally,

You will be praised as a mother truly everlastingly

By your *mourning child*: so much do my letters, by which

You taught me, owe you, they choose to flood the pages

Having chased the ultimate ripeness of their toils

By praising Mother, though the ignorant resist this. (2:63-67 emphasis mine)

Here we can note the contrast between a communal, ritualized, standardized, performative and controlled *reaction to death* and Herbert's personal, confused *experience of grief*. This contrast is readily apparent in the juxtaposition of the "world" that "blasts broadcasts" and the "mourning child" who is "mute and senseless." The speaker attempts to remedy his situation of impotence by granting "letters", taught to him by his mother, a will of their own; they "owe" praises and "choose" to flow from the pen, "Having chased the ultimate ripeness of their toils / By praising Mother." The silent labors of the poet's "letters" unabashedly, deliberately, willfully flood the pages; years of practice and preparation ("letters, by which / you taught me") "owe" and now duly serve

by "praising Mother." The public blasts resound over a broad range, but despite the volume and pervasiveness, this communal outpouring cannot be sustained, nor can it elicit praise "everlastingly." The community of the ignorant world resists the immediacy and intimacy of the letters that pour out of the "mourning child" in a spontaneous burst of praise—praise that quietly "Floods the pages."

The spontaneity of thought, variety of imagery, abrupt shifts in perspective, mood, and tone reveal a speaker that is significantly destabilized by grief. In the poem's 66 lines, Herbert's representation of a mind thinking is one that is out of its own control; grief has unsettled both his self-possession and his relationship to the structures of the *profanus*.

The Counterfeit and the Garden

Poem 7, one of the longer and more complex Latin poems in the sequence, introduces several contexts, three of which I will examine in detail: reformation demonology, pagan mythology, and Christian resurrection. In order to adequately and clearly analyze the significance of these contexts, it will be helpful to look at the poem in sections.

As the poem begins, we are presented with the striking image of a demonic, deceitful "chimera."[217]   In his assessment of the nature and quality of the "cloud-like"

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[217] A fabled fire-breathing monster of Greek mythology, with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail (or according to others with the heads of a lion, a goat, and a serpent)", OED 1a. The element of the serpent is fitting in the poem since the imago is an incarnation of the devil. Herbert also plays on three of the figurative usages of the word (OED 3a,b,c): "any reference to the terrible character, the unreality, or the incongruous composition of the fabled monster: A horrible and fear-inspiring phantasm;

being that hovers before him, Herbert announces his conclusion; the being is not "a motherly Guardian Spirit," but rather a "pallid, bloodless semblance" of that beloved figure he desires.

> Pallid, bloodless semblance of a motherly Guardian Spirit,
>
> Surely joys have not become cloud-like and like you?
>
> And my mother replaced by a misleading chimera
>
> And bared breasts made of air to fool a gaping son? (1-4)

In keeping with the conventional manner of addressing a demonic spirit, Herbert poses a series of rhetorical questions that serve the dual function of description and interrogation. In other words, Herbert describes the negative aspects of the chimera, but uses the interrogative structure to indicate his discernment; though he may be "a gaping son," he cannot be fooled by the shocking specter of a grotesque parody of his mother.

If we compare Donne's descriptions of Lady Danvers we might note that both the sermon and the poem imagine a spiritual being (the heaven-dwelling mother and the demonic chimera); furthermore, both suppose that this spirit can be *present* even as it is *absent*. (For Donne, asking Lady Danvers to "be still content, to be part of this congregation, and hear" is reasonable because the "body" is "still within these walls").[218] The resemblance ends here, however. Donne speaks not *especially* to Lady Danvers, but

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An unreal creature of the imagination, a mere wild fancy; an unfounded conception, an incongruous union or medley."

[218] *The Sermons of John Donne, Vol. VIII*, (91-2).

specifically for the benefit, edification and education of the congregation. By contrast,

Herbert's righteous desire to sit privately with "a motherly Guardian Spirit" is from the

beginning, supplanted and tainted by a personal grief that darkens the products of

imagination and reason; and the counterfeit spirit that is conjured, that becomes present

for Herbert is—at least initially—not offered a petition to *stay*, but rather a *command* to

leave. The forceful rhetorical question, "Why don't you go?" (7) is "syntactically a

command of exorcism."[219]

> Hang you, cloud, laden with rain and no milk, and
>
> Jeering my tears, with which your water shares merely the color.
>
> Why don't you go? My Juno hadn't been so overcast,
>
> So wan a face, knowing no spring-tinged dawn,
>
> Such a lifeless mother counterfeited by moving ash: (5-9)

The forceful "Hang you, cloud" marks the poet's evolving relationship with the spirit that

can be seen as the tone changes from one of anger to one of reflective sorrow. Now,

Herbert laments not the dissimilarity between the spirit and his mother, but the

dissimilarity between the cloud's "water" that is accused of "jeering" because it "shares

merely the color" but not the content of the poet's tears. By introducing his own tears,

Herbert sets up a series of images that elsewhere in the sequence are explicitly connected

to versing. The "laden," "overcast" cloud, the "wan" face, and the dusky dawn, are all

images that evoke the color gray—the literal color of the deceased "lifeless mother," the

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[219] Freis, Freis, and Miller, (93).

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color of the "bloodless" counterfeit, and the color of "moving ash." All of these images are brought together in line 9 and mark a curious reflective pause in the poem, a fleeting glimpse of the poet writing.[220] In this instance, the mother has been twice "counterfeited": once by the dissembling cloud, and yet again by the poet's pen.

Herbert here acknowledges the possibility that he has been complicit in the creation of the demonic spirit; the "moving ash" has spread across the page by impulse driving the poet's quill; Herbert has written into existence "a lifeless mother." The context of Protestant demonology supplied by Freis, Freis, and Miller casts Herbert's creative impulses and products in a foreboding light: "According to Protestant thinking, the *imago* that appears to Herbert at the start of this poem cannot be his mother's ghost or spirit, but must be a devil, enacting a savage parody of motherhood."[221] The situation of writing is not only sinful because Herbert has created a demon, but also because Protestant theology accepted the general view that demons only visited the sinful.

His "why don't you go?" is an indignant command that shows Herbert's disgust with the imago's unsubtle or transparent attempt to represent his mother. It is also a self-critical statement; *he* is the one who has counterfeited this distressing image of her through his versing. Later, he lays out the conditions that if met, will allow him to

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[220] As we have seen**,** Herbert deals with his grief *by* writing, and the necessary substance *for* writing (ink) is represented throughout the sequence with relatively consistent imagery—ink (ash and water) is formed by mixing the mourners' tears ("flood", "spring" "the Thames" "your water") and the byproduct (ash) of the body that has been disintegrated ("burned") and enlivened ("my leaping veins") by grief. *MMS* references to ink: 1:6, 9:18; to ash 1.5, 7.9. Rubins references Early Modern ink-making in her comments on Poem 1: "As burning pitch is reduced to lampblack and then moistened to form ink" (15).

[221] Freis, Freis, and Miller, (93).

rationalize his desire to invite—even persuade—the imago to stay: "and with you, noble ghost, I'll spend / What's left of my life." (14-15). This "noble ghost" is also a counterfeit image of his mother, but one that is, although delusional, at least acceptable. This moment of self-reflexivity is also significant because it demonstrates that Herbert controls the counterfeit image through the act of counterfeiting.

Herbert, who, having first seen the demon spirit, now adopts a radically new tone and agenda as he turns his focus away from darker counterfeit in order to *reinvent* its form, qualities, and function. Herbert's acknowledgement of his own complicity in counterfeiting this invented version of his mother allows him the prerogative to use versing to create an alternate image—in essence a *re-visioning* that is a more acceptable representation of what he remembers. In contrast to Hamlet's well known description of the "counterfeit" image of his uncle, which undermines the memory of his father, Herbert's second image is reconstructive.

> But my parent is hallowed, her face holy and to be sought in heaven,
>
> A face like the one Astrea displayed, just before she was to leave
>
> Her marsh retreats, or like kindly Themis pendant from her august throne
>
> With the Tongue of the Scale, halting all legal squabbles. (10-13)

Turning away from the counterfeit spirit, Herbert begins a lengthy and indulgent description of the qualities of his "hallowed" mother whose "holy" face is to "be sought in heaven" (10). However, the heaven that Herbert describes is slightly ambiguous and is not explicitly connected to either a Christian or a pagan context. For example, as poem 7

develops, the "hallowed" mother is brought into representation as a series of

mythological female deities. Herbert, by willful manipulation, adjusts his perception of

the initial apparition by renaming and rearranging the qualities of the *imago* according to

his own preference (an artistic control that he will also use to compose the idealized

garden in lines 23-30).

Rubin argues that these allusions are not "interchangeable evocations" and

cautions against the impulse to interpret the combination of deities as a mere "allegorical

representation of human virtue" despite their "idealized, almost sainted" status in the

pagan world. Rubin suggests that Herbert's "dramatic confrontation" with his mother's

ghost is indicative of the poet's "ambivalent attitude toward his mother, who in death has

been split into many images."[222] There are a number of ways to interpret Herbert's

attitude; for example Pigman in his remarks on anger in Renaissance elegy suggests that

"death tends to exacerbate ambivalent feelings" and a "common way to handle them is to

split of the positive and negative components."[223] In terms of the structure and imagery

of poem 7 Pigman's analysis is spot on—the brazenly revolting image of subconscious

resentment is contrasted with the hallowed and goddess-like image of selective memory.

For Rubin, the ambivalence she attaches to the relationship is primarily the result of an

unresolved psychosexual tension, but is also related to the conflicting emotions of praise

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[222] Rubin, (442). Pigman discusses how idealization and even exaggeration in regards to the deceased loved one is often "an attempt to neutralize" resentments, both of the kind accumulated over a lifetime, and regarding the abandonment that the death itself represents (46). Rubin's analysis is much more Herbert-specific; Pigman's brief comment is interesting: "it is striking how much more easily some authors, Surrey and Herbert for example, express anger than sorrow" (47).

[223] Pigman, (8).

and anger that Herbert feels towards Magdalene—who is both a love object and an abandoning mother:

> Chaste, accomplished, just, and pious, she is also an abandoning mother, and a love object who has rejoined her first husband in the afterlife, just as Dido has. In Aeneas's address to Dido, we can perceive both the desperate lover, afraid of being abandoned, and the guilty murderer. In Herbert's glancing tributes to Dido here and elsewhere, we read the poet's rage at abandonment, his sense that he has been injured by the departure of the dead, and his guilt at such a representation.[224]

There are two elements of Rubin's analysis that I find especially interesting. The first is the idea that the figure of Dido functions as a marker—a marker that is dependent, in large part, on the associative mechanisms of the mind. As such, a rhetorical and symbolic marker points us in relatively consistent, but not definitive interpretive directions. For Rubin, Dido indicates the presence of two associative groupings: those that can be traced back to the specific psychosexual elements in the myth of Aeneas, and those that remind us of the more general elements of rage, abandonment, and personal injury that Herbert returns to throughout the sequence.

The second point of interest is Rubin's observation that death has split Magdalene into many images. For Rubin—and for Pigman—this splitting is the outcome of

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[224] Rubin, (442).

Herbert's ambivalent feelings toward the love object; however, I see this through a slightly different lens. Magdalene's splitting is also related to themes of memory and remembrance. For Herbert, death fractures the memory of his beloved mother and with the passing of time, bits and pieces of memory become more difficult to see clearly and often fall away entirely; the object of desire is no longer whole, but rather dispersed. Not only does the fractured image complicate the psychological aspects of mourning, it also prevents Herbert from finding recompense in religious substitution that involves imagining the deceased in a Christian heaven; thus is follows that if it is difficult to remember a dispersed object, it is perhaps more challenging to imagine that object in a specific location.

In the section of narrative beginning at line 23, Herbert tackles the problem of locating the fractured being by creating an idealized space; he offers to share his "tiny house" and "small garden" with the cloud-like vision of his mother.

I have a tiny house fretted with twice five roof beams

In the country; and a small garden with whose flock of flowers

Space jostles, such a garden, though, that a lord who's level-headed

Picks, so the flowers' fragrances breathe more thickly compacted

Together, so the garden that clumsy feet can't cross might be,

As it were, a budding posy and nest of spices. (23-28)

The carefully composed "flock of flowers," like the *imago* that has been similarly "compacted" by the poet's careful selection of images so that it might "Reveal this

face"—a sacred matronly and illusory spirit that is a satisfactory companion for the grieving son (14). Bargaining—even with the devil—is part of the process of grieving, and there is an odd harmony in the bargain the speaker lays out:

. . .only put on a face faithful to hers,

A face similar, too, to my temper; don't mix up

Your spiritless face and my mind's recollection; lest we,

Disagreeing because of our disparate

Appearance, rain down confusion on the flower's delicate fragrances

And lest, growing among the remaining buds of the garden,

Our joys, too, by parallel fates begin to wilt. (30-36)

The illusion will only be sustained if the ghost fulfills three non-negotiable conditions, conditions that rationalize the poets revised counterfeiting: "only put on a face faithful to hers," "A face similar, too, to [Herbert's] temper" (30-31), and "Don't mix up / Your spiritless face and my mind's recollection" (31-32). If the spirit does not honor the likeness of Lady Danvers and align with Herbert's memory of her, then the human lord and the inhuman spirit will confuse and destroy the "delicate fragrances" of the "varied greenery" that this counterfeiting has fostered (30, 29). Mixing the poet's organic form with the spiritless, capricious form of the chimera has the potential to "rain down confusion"; this confusion threatens to destroy the "joys" of the illusion, joys that are described as having "parallel fates" that lead to destruction. The implication here is that Herbert's fate is inextricably linked with the fate of the *imago*, the garden and even the

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poem. Kerrigan sees this as a form of denial: "The scenario for discovering reality has been appropriated by a yearning for allusion," which inhibits the natural movement away from hetero-mourning and a return to the community.[225]

The amity between the created "noble ghost" and the poet is tied to memory—the failure of the image to properly represent "the mind's recollection" forces a falling back to a state of chaos—for Herbert a very personal chaos characterized by emptiness and a haunting dissolution of self. The sense of longing that existed in the hetero-mourning directed toward his mother "opens the limitless flow toward his own self-as-lost" that becomes a form of auto-mourning.[226]

Herbert simultaneously mourns the absence of his mother's living presence and the presence of her image as *memory*, a presence that, dimmed by the passing of time, becomes yet another indication of absence. The fading memory of his joys and her face is a loss of both the actual form and the memory of that form. The tragic possibility that the illusion of "Our joys, too" may "begin to wilt" recalls Herbert's earlier concern that real "joys" can become mere illusions: "surely joys have not become cloud-like and like you?" (3). Additionally, if Herbert's recollection, like the "bloodless semblance" of his mother's spirit can, in fact, become "like you." then the memory may also become "cloud-like" and *not* "like you"—retreating ever further into the *sacer*.

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[225] Kerrigan, (76).

[226] Staten, (9),

The parallel with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden is worth noting.[227] If the garden (the space of the illusion) begins to wilt, the "joys"—the innocence of the illusion and the implication of *absolute presence and proximity* shared by Herbert and the *imago* will also wither (36). Once cast out of the garden, absolute presence—between one human and another, but also between human and divine being—will be destroyed; furthermore, the destruction of absolute presence is also the destruction of absolute access (both conditions of proximity to a beloved object). What is perhaps most interesting is that nowhere in the poem does Herbert give any definitive indication that the illusion will, in fact, end.

Poem 15 presents the reader with numerous parallel images to those of poem 7, but now Herbert introduces a number of undeniably Christian images. Written in Greek, styled after a Homeric lament, the poem adopts a formulaic structure that is surprisingly similar to the Psalmic laments discussed in chapter one of this dissertation. These include the common patterns of address, praise, complaint, comparison of the past and the present, and a yearning for death so as to join the lamented one.[228]

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[227] Adam and Eve "grieved" or were given grief. —"I will greatly multiply thy sorrow" (Gen. 3:16) and "thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee" (Gen. 3:18). Their expulsion resulted in a move from order to a sort of chaos.

[228] Freis, Freis, and Miller, (149). In this poem, of course, the lamented one is Lady Danvers, and the choice of the ancient literary lament matches Herbert's choice of the ancient Greek instead of the vernacular English. It connects with the more pagan, mythological and highly personal. In contrast, the Psalmic lament (see Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984) has as its subject, as its lamented one, GOD, who in that Old Testament tradition, is accused of abandoning the lamenter—however, in the tradition of the biblical lament, there is a more public or community sense to the form. It is as if a *people* (the Jews) are part of, or at least privy to, the lamentation. If we think of the tragic laments of Greek tragedy, what comes to mind is the individual pathos of the

Mother, resplendence of women, men's means to zeal,

The dread of Demons, God's tended garden,

How can you take to the air now and leave us

Pinned with sorrow and peril on all sides?

If you had to leave, you ought to have left

To your children as life's helpmeet

Your wise understanding of life

And polish, and the sweet flow of manners,

And the words' allure, with which to move and meet people.

But now like a triumphant host you rise up

Stripping everything and leading all away,

Or like the North Wind

Compacting the garden's flowery smells

So all might follow together, the path cleared.

Since I've caught the scent I'm on the track to see

If by chance I might stumble on this best path,

Knowing death's better than life on any other path.

Greek heroes, which in the case of *MMS*, and particularly of this poem 15, is George Herbert.

The opening line is a poetic composition or conjuring of Magdalene's image that is radically different from the image of the "pallid bloodless semblance" of a mother that we encounter in poem 7. Herbert's mother *is* "God's tended garden"—neat, ordered and above all, exemplary. The implication is that God has "tended" to her form, composed her in His image, just as He created Adam according to His own likeness in the Garden of Eden. She is also the "dread of demons," endowed with divine power to oppose and to discern.

Herbert, by using similar (often identical) imagery in poem 7 (Latin) and 15 (Greek), draws our attention to the ways in which those images are manipulated to exhibit and display two dissimilar artifacts of grief.[229] In poem 7, Herbert's grief conjures the demonic *imago* that shows up in an illusory garden as a counterfeit Magdalene. In poem 15, grief produces a saintly image of Magdalene—a version more in line with Donne's memorial praises. There is a certain degree of grotesque, yet humorous, irony at work in the self-cancelling agenda of the two figures; the real "Mother" is the "dread of demons" and by extension the dread of *counterfeit mothers*. The saintly virtues that make this Mother the "resplendence of women" are the very same virtues that would ostensibly compel her to cast the counterfeit mother out of the illusory garden. In addition to being at odds with the intentions of the *imago*, the "dread of demons" is also at odds with the "level-headed lord" (Herbert the son) who lacking a

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[229] It would seem that the Christian poem would be composed in Latin—the official language of pre-Reformation Judeo-Christian Church—and that the pagan poem with its sacrilegious *imago* would be written in Greek. However, both the pagan and Christian traditions of the Greco-Roman world overlap in many places. It may be calculated irony, but it might also be representative of the confusion and ambiguity that one encounters at the boundary between the *profanus* and the *sacer*.

Christian perspective, keeps company and bargains with the *imago*. Seen in this way, the *counterfeit mother* and *Mother* cannot exist simultaneously except in the space of the poem. The true "Mother," like Christ, represents the possibility of transcendence.

In poem 15, the poet imagines his mother's absence as motivated by her willful departure, an action that, complemented by her virtue, is capable of achieving a kind of transcendental alignment—in terms of power, purpose and virtue—with the Christian God. Her departure is immediately characterized as a willful decision, an active plundering where she, "Like a triumphant host" rises up "Stripping everything and leading all away" (10-11). Her transition from earth to heaven is so instantaneous, that no trace of her bodily presence is left behind.

A second version or (re-vision) which immediately follows, likens Magdalene to the "North Wind / Compacting the garden's flowery smells" (12-13) and establishes a connection to the garden of poem 7 where the level-headed lord compacts the gardens to enhance their fragrance, but also to establish an enclosure that cannot be "jostled" by "space" (25). The pathless garden is compacted so tightly that "clumsy feet can't cross" (27) "the budding posy and nest of spices" (28); moreover, the cozy nest gives off a perpetual and potentially malicious fragrance (at least in terms of Christian doctrine). That Herbert is so enamored with both his garden and his companion demonstrates his lack of concern for the future; the poet disregards the inevitable changes of the temporal world and reveals his ambivalence toward the changes effected by the transcendent realm.

Both the transcendent force of the "triumphant host" and the temporal force of the "North Wind" impact the garden. Magdalene's departure, similar to Christ's passion,

prepares a path that leads to rebirth and resurrection. And though the destruction of the garden in poem 15 seems to express an explicitly Christian orientation (an orientation that might also destroy the illusory garden of poem 7), Herbert leaves us with no real sense of closure, no optimism that he can transcend his doubt ("tracking" implies searching for something; "by chance" and "stumble" have connotations of uncertainty, instability and doubt). Still, Herbert knows that he must find that transcendently oriented path, and this is his challenge, for it is only in doing so that he can be sure that his mother is with God and that he will eventually regain presence by following the same path. The path "by which I'll be led to the best parent"—a conflation of both mother and God—is to "leave life in a holy way, as my mother did," (Poem 6: 10-11).

Both Staten and Kerrigan directly address the relationship between universal mourning for Christ as part of the Christian tradition, and hetero-mourning. Staten calls the former "absolute mourning":

> Jesus by his divinity can call forth an unreserved libidinal
>
> investment from his disciples; he is an embodied being who can be
>
> loved as no ordinary mortal being can. . . . Jesus' death [leads to] the
>
> limitless pathos of the self-clinging that is the essential correlate of
>
> all object-cathexis. The essence of this pathos is fully manifest only
>
> in the unbearable sharpness and pain of separation from the most

loved and most loving being. (Isn't this paradigmatically the

mother? It is her place that Jesus occupies.)[230]

Staten's parenthetical remark in the above passage, though framed as a general

reference, is directly relevant to the relationship of George Herbert to his mother—both

during her life and with regard to her death. To Herbert she was more than a generic or

universal paradigm of "mother" in whose place Jesus now occupies; in life and in poetry,

it may be argued, it is Jesus' place that *she* occupies. But in the case of Herbert's

poetry—and indeed, in the current state of his life that is reflected in that poetry—the

conflation of "the Divine" and "mother" as "most loved and most loving" is

transcendent. In Herbert's early writing and in the poems of *The Temple,* the focus is on

the speaker's relationship with God; in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*, Herbert's concern over

his relationship with God is complicated by his relationship with a "divine mother" (a

somewhat sacrilegious notion). For Herbert, both God and mother become absent-

presences to a degree that verges on the irreconcilable.

The immediacy of his mother's human form is for Herbert, part of his experience

in the recent past; by contrast, his relationship with Christ is purely symbolic, as he has

no living memory of Christ; his memory is entirely dependent on the memory of others

and on liturgical rituals. As a result, Magdalene's departure leaves a vacancy that is

similar to the vacancy of Christ's human form in the world. As in ancient lament,

Herbert exhibits an intense desire to be with the deceased (his mother); however, this

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[230] Staten, (10-11). In his preface to *Eros in Mourning*, Staten defines cathexis as "the
process of attachment to, or of, an object, without which mourning would never arise"
(xi). This would include material things as well as people and deities.

desire is one that —if not entirely impossible—is at the very least, deferred (for obvious reasons) and must be mitigated until Herbert's own death. Herbert is forced to remain in this wind-blasted garden, entirely alone.

If he has given up the prophylactic companionship of the demon spirit, he does so at a great cost. The concept of remembrance is complicated by this act of letting go; by surrendering the illusion, Herbert restrains his imagination and reenters a world dominated by Christian belief; this world lacks the certainty, immediacy, intimacy and personal control that Herbert finds in his illusion. Outside the illusory garden, he can only recall the image of his mother (a process similar to the way that one might recall Christ in the act of prayer) by composing her form in accordance with the limited and reductive doctrines of Christianity. In this context, to recall Magdalene—to praise and to mourn—Herbert must compose a figure that is little more than a generic model of Christian virtue or a general pattern of expectations that reveal not her human form, but her resurrected form.

Kerrigan approaches the absent presence of mother and Christ by way of the Eucharist, which becomes "a substitute for an unbearably lost presence, whose own presence renders the original loss tolerable."[231] The Eucharist is "to some degree a defense against unwanted knowledge—the absence of the dead, who are with God, and ultimately the absence of God." Kerrigan suggests that Herbert finds a substitution for his "mother's nourishing presence" in a ritual symbol where the wine of the Eucharist stands in place of "the blood that the fading image" in poem 7 lacked. He also suggests

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[231] Kerrigan, (77)

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that the movement from poem 7 to poem 8 is an intentional choice on the part of the poet.[232]

> Not the broad, blameworthy one,
>
> An ill-wishing star reached even for this humble good
>
> And mixed gall with my wine.
>
> Hence from my core I would roar
>
> And threaten wildly even the stars themselves;
>
> Till at last, my little cloak tugged gently,
>
> Someone whispers in my ear,
>
> This once was the cup of your Lord.
>
> I taste and see the Cask's goodness. (Poem 8)

By "conceding" the absence of his most loved mother – the bitter gall mixed with wine of line 4—Herbert, in Kerrigan's view, "transforms his psychic work into the drama of salvation."[233] Freis, Freis and Miller agree: the final line of the poem presents "a sign of his realignment of will; he must 'take up his cross' and follow Christ."[234] Both of these analyses however, are based on a perspective that views Herbert as a unified master-subject.[235] If we look closely at Herbert's state of mind during the writing of *MMS* this

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[232] Kerrigan, (77).

[233] Kerrigan, (77).

[234] Freis, Freis, and Miller, (113).

[235] I discussed the Unified Master Subject in Chapter II.

poem describes the vagaries of the poet's faith and doubt in terms both of the wandering

classical figure (in this case Hercules) and his own fall from the righteous path as a result

of the death of his mortal mother (Alcmene). However, in this poem, rather than

expressing anger at the abandoning mother, Herbert's grief and despair are directed

toward God: "from my core I would roar / And threaten even the stars themselves" (5-

6).[236] Comparing his own suffering with that of Christ's Passion, his sense of

abandonment is that of Christ's lament after giving up his access to divine presence:

"Why hast thou forsaken me?"

But there comes what might be seen as an inviting motion that would potentially

turn despair to hope—"Someone whispers in my ear." In Herbert's poems generally,

inviting motions take on a mystical quality, and come directly from God, as an impulse to

choose the right way. But within the *MMS* sequence one notes the childlike quality of the

preceding line – "my little cloak tugged gently." Once again, Herbert cannot shake off

the mother-son bond, even for the greater reward of certain salvation. Here, as in other

poems of the sequence, Herbert shows signs of what Pigman calls unresolved mourning,

a condition in which both yearning and despair chronically linger well beyond what

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[236] Rubin notes that in several poems, Herbert "responds to imagined interlocutors who criticize him for excessive grief and inappropriate praise of his mother, or who treat him as ill. Under this unusual stress, he retreats temporarily from a Christian perspective and consolations and also from the language of Protestant worship" (444). She mentions this poem specifically in a corresponding footnote and points out that "this retreat is not total" and that this poem "alone of those in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* would appear at home in *The Temple*" (444).

would be considered the norm. In this state the bereaved may "unconsciously recreate relations" that "duplicate those with the deceased in an effort to undo death."[237]

Indeed, the inviting motion has come through an intermediary—the "someone," who whispers the reminder—"This once was the cup of your Lord." This admonition rather than calling up for Herbert the sacrifice of Christ and the promise of the Eucharist, and its outcome of new life, serves as a reminder that Herbert *may not* live up to the example of Christ, presenting an almost blasphemous renunciation of that sacrifice for the sacrifice he himself has suffered. Even the final line, "I taste and see the Cask's goodness" leaves us with a feeling of skeptical dissatisfaction. He cannot take up the cross with the memory of his mother so firmly entrenched.

Displacing Mourning, Becoming *Sacerdos*

If we compare poem 19 to the first poem of *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* we can see that the final poem is not simply an achievement of closure; the two poems neatly bookend the sequence, and are "mirrors of each other with the same structure and *reversed tasks*."[238] They also mirror each other in theme: that the *message* of his versing is right and true, but the *medium* on which versing relies—language—is insufficient to the task of either praising that which is seen as divine, or of dealing with the boundaries that death presents. Poem 1 is, in essence, the dedication to the sequence of poems. It

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[237] Pigman, (9). Unresolved mourning is one of the variants of what Pigman calls "abnormal mourning." The other is absence of grief, which is sometimes seen in combination with unresolved mourning.

[238] Freis, Freis, and Miller, (167, my emphasis).

also functions as a point of ingress, an entrance into an intense period of mourning. During this period, Herbert laments his inability to match the enormity of his mother's life with his feeble praises, but finally throws down his poetic gauntlet in response to Grief's challenge—he will do his best with the tools he possesses, but acknowledges that the poems will "fall incommensurably short of his grief and his mother's virtues."[239] The primary function of poem 19 then is one of egress, a mirroring or reverse image of the rhetorical and thematic tasks of poem 1; its purpose is to "support the writer's and the readers' return to the tasks of daily living from the all-mastering grief that earlier poems express."[240] This is a mirroring that in closing acknowledges that his mother's "distinct excellence calls for songs" eternally but that his versing is no longer sufficient, allowing the poet "the recognition that the competence and value of words has reached its limit."[241]

> By having flung the pipes from my hands, and picked up the scythe
>
>> Again in the field, I had insulted her, the Muse said.
>
> Seeking out Mother (with song, to bribe the fates)
>
>> And crushed by this death the Muse claims the compensation
>
>> Of her expected rituals. I was in no way able
>
> At all to resist, stung by the cruel scourge:

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[239] Freis, Freis, and Miller, (173).

[240] Freis, Freis, and Miller, (168).

[241] Freis, Freis, and Miller, (168).

No, my mother's distinct excellence calls for songs.

Come on, I'm writing: you've won out, Muse; but listen:

I'm writing these vain things this once, to be still forever. (Poem 19)

However, falling silent does not necessarily indicate that the "Muse" has left, or that expressions of praise or grief will remain unfelt or unexpressed. The "someone that whispers" in poem 8 can be seen as a counter-muse. It is the voice of the divine "friend" that gently tugs on the parson's coat many times in "The Church." What is significant is that the pagan "Muse" that wins "this once" is not gone, will not be "still forever," but will, in fact be transformed. Ultimately, Herbert's poetic impulse will be redirected from a "mother's distinct excellence" that "calls for songs" to a God that calls for *psalms,* from the almost irresistible urge to express "vain things" to the perceived duties of life.

The conclusion of the sequence can also be understood as a two-tiered spiritual task, one in which the grieving son attempts (perhaps unsuccessfully) to release his mother *from* the realm of the *profanus into* the realm of the *sacer*. In doing so, the figure of Magdalene Herbert is no longer the *sacerdos*, the priestess that once negotiated the boundary of the known and unknown *for* or *in service of* the community. The second tier is the spiritual task of becoming a *sacerdos*. Indeed, this is what George Herbert does as he assumes the posture and performs the outward duties of a wise and beloved Country Parson.

Ultimately, and in accordance with normative standards of the human passage through grief, it might seem that Herbert finally accepts the loss of his mother as the sequence ends, and moves forward with his life, saddened yet resolute. However, in

contrast to such a reading I argue that despite a valiant rhetorical effort at resolution in the final poem, Herbert never fully recovers from the loss.[242] The first lines of Poem 16 summarize, in a sadly eloquent way, what is to be George Herbert's lot in the remaining years of his life:

It seems hard to weep,

And while it is truly hard not to weep

It is of all things by far the hardest

Once we are weeping to cease. (1-4)[243]

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[242] His continued writing of "The Church," along with the major events of his marriage in 1629, the move to Bemerton (1630), and his ordination into the priesthood (1630), serve as examples of a "picture of normalcy" that further complicates our limited understanding of George Herbert.

[243] Freis, Freis, and Miller (154-155) note that these first four lines imitate the opening of Greek Poem 29 of the *Anacreontea* and that those four lines may well have been known to a wide audience independent of the rest of that poem or the collection:
     [It is] hard not to love
          And hard also to love
          But harder than all
[Is] for the one who loves to fail. (translated by Catherine Freis)

APPENDIX

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