

SACRED SYMBOLS IN GEORGE HERBERT'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Although this study may be helpful for a theological understanding of the poetry of George Herbert, its more immediate concerns are not with theology. This thesis is an attempt to look beyond theology to the nature of the religious experience itself, and to explore that experience through the symbols that express it. Each of the symbols I have chosen, water, fire, and blood, reveals the essential paradox of the religious life, for while each symbol contains an element of terror and should be feared, each symbol also contains an element of relief and should be willingly embraced. Herbert's understanding of these symbols is not peculiar either to his poetry or to his age. The connection between Herbert's use of these symbols and the biblical use of them is undeniable and the influence of The Book of Common Prayer is considerable.

Water is used by Herbert to indicate his own sense of defilement and it becomes a sign of God's wrath with the power to destroy corruption. At the very moment of destruction, however, water also symbolizes purification and the establishment of new life. Similarly, fire destroys and recreates, and blood, too, defiles and purifies. Moreover, contact with each of these three symbols reveals a glimpse of the character of the holy; the paradoxical qualities inherent in the symbols are a reflection of the paradoxical qualities of the divine nature itself. Finally, each of the symbols transforms Herbert's world by abolishing the divisions between the sacred and profane, the temporal and the eternal, even between life and death itself. Through water, fire, and blood, all things are made new.

For my parents

God, our Parents, and our Master, can never be
requited.

- George Herbert

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Introduction

Herbert, Theology, and the English Church

It would be difficult to find a stronger or more satisfactory alliance between religion and literature than in the poetry of George Herbert. A study of his art is, by nature, a study of his faith, for, as T. S. Eliot observes: "It was only in the Faith, in hunger and thirst after godliness, in his self-questioning and his religious meditation, that he was inspired as a religious poet. . . . We are certainly justified in presuming that no other subject-matter than that to which he confined himself could have elicited great poetry from George Herbert".¹ But while this point is abundantly clear and receives the assent of almost all of Herbert's major critics, the agreement stops there. There is little argument with his literary worth; there is considerable argument with the nature of his religious beliefs. [A quick survey of this debate, for example, reveals rather confusingly that Herbert is traditionalist, Calvinist, sacramentalist,

¹T.S. Eliot, "George Herbert as Religious Poet", George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets, ed. Mario A. Di Cesare (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978), p. 238.

Puritan, Anglo-Catholic, a subject of Lutheran influence, Arminian, or simply Reformed. Moreover, his poetry and his piety appeal as much to the Puritan chaplain of Cromwell as to the Catholic Simone Weil, to Richard Baxter as much as to S. T. Coleridge.] The appearance, of course, is that his theology is as eclectic as his readership, and perhaps this is where the power of Herbert's poetry lies: Herbert virtually dares his readers to resolve the tensions of his verse by choosing between apparent and inadequate opposites. Regardless of the ambiguities designed to occasion such rival opinions, however, there is no ambiguity about the importance of theology to the understanding of Herbert. Indeed, many would agree with Richard Strier when he contends that "we can grasp the human content of Herbert's poetry only through, not apart from, the theology".² Religion and literature, in the poems of The Temple, are thus inextricably linked.

It is not difficult to find critics, therefore, who explore this relationship between Herbert's theology and his poetry. Rosemond Tuve, in her influential book, A Reading of George Herbert, establishes Herbert within a

²Richard Strier, Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. xxi.

³Rosemond Tuve, A Reading of George Herbert (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 47.

tradition of medieval liturgical practices, and claims that his use of those traditions betrays his "'Catholic' preoccupations".³ She continues to explain that Herbert's "way of using symbolic imagery is precisely similar to the liturgical way of using it; it is a characteristic medieval way, patristic, homiletic, literary".⁴ Louis L. Martz discovers strong parallels between Herbert's poetic practice and Catholic meditational techniques, and although he finds reason on occasion to disagree with Tuve, he can also find substantial ground for agreement with her.⁵ He suggests that The Temple's unity is based so strongly on ritual and liturgy that the first fifteen poems actually form "what may be called a sacramental introduction to the work".⁶ Richard Strier's Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry is a more recent attempt, in the manner of Barbara Lewalski and Ilona Bell, to combat such traditionalist portrayals of Herbert by replacing them with a decidedly Protestant, and, in Strier's case, Lutheran re-presentation. Strier argues for the centrality of the doctrine of justification by faith in

³Rosemond Tuve, A Reading of George Herbert (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 47.

⁴Tuve, p. 83.

⁵Louis L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 91.

⁶Martz, p. 292.

Herbert's poetry, and, because this doctrine is the foundation of Reformed theology, it is inevitable that "these two centres coincide".⁷ A final example of the theological approach to Herbert, and perhaps one of the more extreme, is G. E. Veith's Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert which claims that "Calvinism not only helps to explain Herbert's poetry, but also Herbert's poetry helps to explain Calvinism".⁸ Eventually, Veith becomes more explicit: "Herbert is a Calvinist".⁹ In matters of doctrine even Richard Hooker is a disciple of Calvin, according to Veith, but his reading of Article XVII of the Church of England on predestination, to cite one example, fails to consider the Article's condemnation of Calvinist excesses on this point.¹⁰ It is one thing to acknowledge Calvinist influences on Herbert; it is a completely different matter to say that Herbert was himself a Calvinist. These are, of course, only a few of the many possible examples of the theological investigation of

⁷Strier, Love Known, p. xi.

⁸Gene Edward Veith, Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1985), p. 12.

⁹Veith, p. 31.

¹⁰Veith, pp. 33, 34. For a commentary on the Thirty-Nine Articles, see E.C.S. Gibson, The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, 5th ed. (London: Methuen and Co., 1906), pp. 462, 477, 485.

Herbert, each attempting to provide a clear and complete account of The Temple, and each suggesting a particular method by which we can unravel the mysteries of Herbert's mind and art. And in no sense is the critical debate decided. As heated and as contentious as it sometimes is, this important discussion will continue to demand the attention of anyone concerned with George Herbert.

My interest in Herbert, however, though religious, is not explicitly theological. It is not clear that Herbert was himself explicitly interested in theological controversies; he most certainly is not an avid theologian; and he even manages on occasion to satirize theological disputes. It is true that Herbert defended the Church from Puritan criticism while he was the public orator at Cambridge.¹¹ Herbert's early series of Latin poems, Musae Responsoriae, for example, responds to attacks against the Anglican liturgy by the Scottish Puritan Andrew Melville. Although Canon Hutchinson points out several historical errors in Izaak Walton's account of this debate,¹² Walton's general observations are nonetheless significant:

[Mr. Melville] being a man of learning, and inclin'd to Satyrical Poetry, had scatter'd many

¹¹Amy M. Charles, A Life of George Herbert (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 91.

¹²F. E. Hutchinson, ed., The Works of George Herbert (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), pp. 587-88.

malicious bitter verses against our Liturgy, our Ceremonies, and our Church-government: which were by some of that party, so magnified for the wit, that they were therefore brought into Westminster-School, where Mr. George Herbert then, and often after, had such answers to them, and such reflexion on him and his Kirk, as might unbeguile any man that was not too deeply pre-engaged in such a quarrel.¹³

It is also easy to speculate that Herbert and Donne shared many opinions on matters of the Church and theology,¹⁴ and Walton suggests that Herbert was not averse to "a modest debate" with Lancelot Andrewes.¹⁵ Clearly, then, to say that Herbert treated theological disputes with moderation is not to say that he lacked conviction or the determination which characterizes a man of strong faith. As Amy Charles points out, though, [Herbert seemed to have a natural dislike for "religious controversy for its own sake",¹⁶ and Joseph Summers agrees: although "Herbert knew most of the groups and factions which made up his complex age . . . he did not give fanatical allegiance to any one

¹³Izaak Walton, "Life of Mr. George Herbert", in The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert and Robert Sanderson, ed. George Saintsbury (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), pp. 271-72.

¹⁴Charles, p. 119.

¹⁵Walton, p. 273.

¹⁶Charles, p. 91.

of them".¹⁷ Indeed, internal disputes can damage the Church, which, in "Church-rents and schismes", he compares to a rose:¹⁸

When debates and fretting jealousies
Did worm and work within you more and more,
Your colour faded, and calamities
Turned your ruddie into pale and bleak:
Your health and beauty both began to break.
(11. 16-20)

One of the most acrimonious theological issues of the Reformation Church concerned the nature of the Eucharist, and yet even here, Herbert is theologically cautious. In one poem, entitled "The H. Communion", which was not included in The Temple, he displays considerable indifference over the nature of the consecrated elements, and his indifference contains a satirical edge:

O gracious Lord, how shall I know
Whether in these gifts thou bee so
As thou art evry-where;
Or rather so, as thou alone
Tak'st all the Lodging, leaving none
For thy poor creature there?

First I am sure, whether bread stay
Or whether Bread doe fly away
Concerneth bread, not mee.
But that both thou, and all thy traine
Bee there, to thy truth, & my gaine
Concerneth mee & thee. (11. 1-12)

Handwritten notes:
"The H. Communion" is a satirical poem
on the Eucharist.
It is a metaphorical
reading of the
Eucharist.
It is a satirical
poem on the
Eucharist.
R.C. Zwingli
= Literal vs. Symbolic
interpretation
H. 70.

¹⁷Joseph Summers, George Herbert: His Religion and Art (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 29.

¹⁸I am using C. A. Patrides, ed., The English Poems of George Herbert (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1974). All references to Herbert's poetry are taken from this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text of the thesis.

He goes on to say that Christ "didst all those pains endure
 To' abolish Sinn, not wheat" (ll. 20-21) and suggests
 that "I could believe an Impanation / At the rate of an
 Incarnation, / If thou hadst dyde for Bread" (ll. 25-27).
 This poem is perhaps the clearest indication of the
 distinction in Herbert's mind between the indifferent and
 the essential: [here he values practice over doctrine, form
 over content.] Moreover, he writes in A Priest to the
 Temple concerning the Eucharist, that "Contentiousnesse in
 a feast of Charity is more scandall than any posture".¹⁹
 Thus for a poet whose art is so theologically rich, Herbert
 displays an obvious wariness over the bitterness which
 theological controversies engender. It is not difficult to
 believe that the modern critical debate over Herbert's
 religious beliefs would have caused him considerable
 dismay, if he had decided to become involved at all.

Such an approach to theological disagreements is
 not particularly unique nor should it be particularly
 surprising since it is so characteristically a part of the
 Anglican temperament, and Herbert, if nothing else, was a
 confident member of the Church of England. The English
 Church, unlike its Reformed counterparts, was neither

¹⁹George Herbert, "A Priest to the Temple", in
 Hutchinson, p. 259.

heavily doctrinal nor expressly confessional. It was essentially pragmatic, with its membership based not on assent to particular beliefs or common religious experiences, but on participation in the Church's way of doing things as expressed in The Book of Common Prayer. At its worst, such a church can be theologically vague, incapable of action, and lacking in rigorous commitment. But at its best, such a church is comprehensive and catholic, never arrogant, never narrow or sectarian, and never excessively individualistic. As such, the spirituality of the Anglican Church is rooted in an attitude rather than in a particular theology, and Herbert's refusal to become embroiled in religious debates may simply be an indication of the degree to which he valued the Anglican ethos, with its understanding of the varieties and complexities of truth. His admiration for his Church is due precisely to its attitude of moderation. He admires neither the painted face of Rome nor the nakedness of Geneva. The British Church is "A fine aspect in fit array, / Neither too mean, nor yet too gay" ("The British Church", ll. 7-8). What the Catholic and Puritan Churches miss,

The mean, thy praise and glorie is,
 And long may be.
 Blessed be God, whose love it was
 To double-moat thee with his grace,
 And none but thee. (ll. 26-30)

His affection for the English Church, for the middle way,

is deep and sincere.

Richard Hooker is perhaps the most significant figure in the development of the Anglican temper, for it is in his Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity that he charts an eloquent passage through the theological controversies of his time. His understanding of the Church is both reformed and traditional as he combines, in an authoritative association, the aid of Scripture, the sacraments and structure of the Church, and the use of right reason. In all things Hooker valued balance, measure, and restraint, and in response to the Puritan contention "that Scripture is the onely rule of all things which in this life may be doen by men",²⁰ Hooker establishes an alternative approach to the practice of Church government: "Sundrie things may be lawfullie done in the Church, so as they be not done against the Scripture, although no Scripture doe commaund them, but the Church only following the light of reason, judge them to be in discretion meete."²¹ Tolerance is explicit:

Whatsoever either men on earth, or the Angels of heaven do know, it is as a drop of that unemptiable fountaine of wisdom, which wisdom

²⁰Richard Hooker, "Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity", The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker, Vol. I, ed. W. Speed Hill (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), Title to Book II, p. 143.

²¹Hooker, Works, Vol. I, 218 (III, 7.2).

hath diversly imparted her treasures unto the world. As her waies are of sundry kinds, so her maner of teaching is not meerely one and the same. Some things she openeth by the sacred bookes of Scripture; some things by the glorious works of nature: with some things she inspireth them from above by spirituall influence, in some things she leadeth and trayneth them onely by worldly experience and practise. We may not so in any one speciall kind admire her that we disgrace her in any other, but let all her wayes be according unto their place and degree adored.²²

This attitude extends even to the controversy over Christ's presence in the Eucharist, where Hooker emphasizes what is most true and most common in the diversity of opinions on this subject.²³ For Hooker, the wine and the bread represent the body and blood of Christ in a symbolic way, where the aim is to transform the communicant rather than the elements. Such a position does not, however, minimize the worth of the sacrament:

*Zwinglian
View 1520*

These mysteries doe as nailes fasten us to his verie crosse, that by them we draw out, as touchinge efficacie force and vertue, even the blood of his goared side, in the woundes of our redemer wee there dip our tongues, wee are died redd both within and without, our hunger is satisfied and our thirst for ever quenched . . . this bread hath in it more then the substance which our eyes behold, this cup hallowed with sollemne benediction availeth to the endles life and wellfare both of soule and bodie, in that it serveth as well for a medecine to heale our infirmities and purge our sinnes as for a sacrifice of thanksgiving, which touching it

²²Hooker, Works, Vol. I, 147-48 (II, 1.4).

²³Hooker, Works, Vol. II, 340-41 (V, 67.12)

sanctifieth, it enlighteneth with beliefe, it
trulie conformeth us unto the image of Jesus
Christ.²⁴

Hooker avoids precise formulations which would explain the nature of Christ's presence, and instead thinks it sufficient that he receive the communion "without searching or inquiringe of the maner how Christ performeth his promise".²⁵ His appeal is to "let disputes and questions, enimies to pietie, abatements of true devotion and hitherto in this cause but over patientlie heard, let them take theire rest".²⁶ And in an attitude suggestive of Herbert's "The H. Communion", Hooker resolves the controversial subject of the doctrine of the Eucharist by moving beyond the intellect to the realm of devotion and prayer:

What these elementes are in them selves it
skilleth not, it is enough that to me they are
the bodie and blood of Christ, his promise in
witnes hereof sufficeth, his word he knoweth
which way to accomplish, why should any
cogitation possesse the minde of a faithfull
communicant but this, O my God thou art true. O
my soule thou art happie?²⁷

The value of Hooker, therefore, extends beyond any individual doctrine. His merit lies in his comprehensiveness, his reasonableness, and in his

²⁴Hooker, Works, Vol. II, 343 (V, 67.12).

²⁵Hooker, Works, Vol. II, 343 (V, 67.12).

²⁶Hooker, Works, Vol. II, 343 (V. 67.12).

²⁷Hooker, Works, Vol. II, 343 (V. 67.12).

moderation, all of which contributed to defining the method and attitude of Anglicanism.

Herbert is clearly an inheritor of this temper, and some even regard him as the principal representative of Anglican spirituality. Bishop Michael Marshall calls him "that distinctively Anglican writer"²⁸ and Stephen Neill's praise is unbridled: "Herbert is par excellence the poet of Anglicanism. . . . One who wishes to know what Anglicanism is and has not much time for study cannot do better than to pay attention to the life, the poems, and the prose of George Herbert".²⁹ It is ironic but nonetheless accurate that this seventeenth-century poet, about whose theology no one is exactly sure, is still widely recognized both by critics and clerics as representative of everything that is good about the Anglican Church. It should thus be safe to assume that strict conformity to doctrine and creeds is not distinctively Anglican; indeed, belief in credal formulations is never a prerequisite for faith. In "Divinitie", for example, Herbert is explicit in his scorn for theological hair-splitting, "for curious questions and divisions" (l. 12), and for learned men who "cut and carve"

²⁸Michael Marshall, The Anglican Church Today and Tomorrow (London: Mowbray, 1984), p. 109.

²⁹Stephen Neill, Anglicanism (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 149.

(1. 7) with their wit "Divinities transcendent skie" (1.6):

Could not that wisdom, which first broacht the wine,
Have thicken'd it with definitions?
And jagg'd his seamlesse coat, had that been fine,
With curious questions and divisions?

But all the doctrine, which he taught and gave,
Was cleare as heav'n, from whence it came.
At least those beams of truth, which onely save,
Surpasse in brightnesse any flame. (11. 9-16)

The emphasis on the intellectualization of religion, and a disregard for the balance between reason, tradition, and Scripture, can create a situation in which "Reason triumphs, and faith lies by" (1. 8). Herbert's religion, like Hooker's, must therefore be appreciated for something more than theology alone, for he is capable of transcending some of the most contentious theological disputes of his age with a comprehension that renders those disputes relatively unimportant. I do not, however, intend to perpetuate the myth of the pious, some would say saintly, and therefore naive George Herbert. He was a man of the Court, whose wit, intellect, and rhetorical skill earned him position and popularity, and he must have been a man of considerable determination to abandon that life in order to accept the small country parish at Bemerton and to be content with that. What I am advocating, however, is a genuine appreciation for the context within which Herbert lived and moved and had his being: the Church of England, its doctrine, its devotion, and its particular spirituality. It is not that Herbert lacks conviction in

terms of certain principles and doctrines; it is rather that his religious commitment demanded that his allegiance move from the mundane and contingent to the divine. God, not theology, is the substance of his faith.

An alternative approach to Herbert, therefore, may be less specifically theological and more fundamentally religious. Such an approach, I hope, will have some benefit for the study of Herbert's theology, but my present concern is to confront the layer of religious experience that lies deep within Herbert's person through an examination of the symbols which express it. The distinction between theology and religion may most easily be summarized as the distinction between the idea of God and the experience of God, or between the rational and the nonrational. The source of religious awareness exists below the rational self, and the core of religion cannot be reduced to such conceptual products of the mind as philosophy, theology, or science. Thus Rudolf Otto, in The Idea of the Holy, maintains that "religion is not exclusively contained and exhaustively comprised in any series of 'rational' assertions",³⁰ although this does not imply that there is no place for the rational in religion; indeed, "the very mark and criterion of a religion's high

³⁰Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 4.

rank and superior value"³¹ is its ability to admit and accommodate the rational. Herbert's sense of the sacred or of the numinous should not, therefore, be the exclusive domain of theology. The employment of critics in the pursuit of Herbert's theological convictions is not wrong; it merely presents only one part of Herbert's religious profile.

An investigation into Herbert's understanding of some traditionally significant symbols may be of some use in completing such a profile, revealing the deeper sense of being and reality as Herbert understood them. [Symbols, according to Mircea Eliade, constitute an important part of religious expression since it is through such phenomena that the sacred is made manifest.³² They are concrete representations of what, for the religious person, is an abstract reality, a reality which, because it is sacred, contains a world of truth and power. The sacred world, the world of symbols, is the only real world because it is an absolute; indeed, it is through man's participation in the sacred world that life in the profane world becomes possible.] Thus for Herbert, symbols are sacramental, for

³¹Otto, p. 1.

³²My discussion of the nature of religious symbols has been influenced by Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

it is through them that communion with the divine is established, and the symbols on which I will focus - water, fire, and blood - are intimately associated with the Christian sacramental rituals of Baptism and Holy Communion. [It is important to realize that the sacraments are closely related in Herbert's mind with the notion of order, so that a life without sacraments is a life without relief from chaos, sin, and defilement.] In this connection, Joseph Summers writes: "[Herbert] valued symbols and order for the sake of the thing symbolized and for the reasonableness of order in an ordered universe. He never defended any specific rite as divinely inspired or essential to salvation, but as 'just' or beautiful or reasonable".³³ Anything which violates order is therefore defiled, and the primary image of defilement is a stain, an inner stain, a symbolic impurity which can only be removed in symbolic ways. Herbert uses the sacramental signs of water, fire, and blood to effect such a change, to remove the stain, and to reestablish order. Moreover, each of these symbols is expressed in purposely ambiguous or paradoxical terms: water destroys as it cleanses; fire consumes as it purifies; blood symbolizes life as it issues out of death. And while the vehicle of expression is

³³Summers, p. 56.

poetry, the compelling force behind it is Herbert's commitment to a reality which is somehow inherently attractive and meaningful, which orders his life and shapes his universe. These symbols may provide a glimpse into that life and universe.

Chapter One

Water: "The Mystical Washing Away of Sin"

The importance of renewal in religious life is fundamental, and provisions for its fulfilment are widespread, for it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the process of renewal involves monumental matters. Renewal implies a change not only in one's immediate situation but also in one's metaphysical status, and in the Christian Church the Sacrament of Baptism bears the responsibility for signaling such a change. Through this ritual, the initiate begins an existentially decisive process in which the temporal concedes to the eternal, in which one set of loyalties is exchanged for another, and in which one system of order, one vision of the world, is replaced with something far more satisfying, something far more ultimately significant. The transformation is drastic and, in the context of the liturgy, dramatic. Richard Hooker conveys something of the importance of Baptism:

For as wee are not naturallie men without birth, so neither are wee Christian men in the ey of the Church of God but by new birth, nor accordinge to the manifest ordinarie course of divine dispensation new borne, but by that baptisme which both declareth and maketh us Christians. In which respect wee justlie hold it to be the doore of our actuall entrance into Gods howse, the first apparent beginnings of life, a seale perhapes of the grace of election before

received, but to our sanctification heere a step
that hath not anie before it.¹

The image of renewal, with its death to one life and birth into another, is a common part of any interpretation of Baptism, unique neither to Hooker nor Herbert. In "The Reprisall", for example, Herbert vows to "overcome / The man, who once against thee [God] fought" (ll. 15-16), and in "Aaron" the poet prays "That to the old man I may rest, / And be in him [Christ] new drest" (ll. 19-20). But with its symbolic richness, its reliance on the Bible and typology, and its emphasis on order and life at the expense of chaos and death, the ritual of Baptism exerted a major influence on Herbert's understanding of the symbol of water, with its ability not only to cleanse and purify but to punish and destroy, as well. In fact, Herbert seems to suggest that the contradictory directions in which the symbol of water points may actually indicate that the source of these contradictions is the same. In the waters of Baptism, life and death meet; indeed, at the very heart of death is life, at the very centre of sin is absolution, in the very action of punishment is love. The poetic use of water is imbued with Herbert's finest religious sentiments.

The meaning which Herbert attaches to water must

¹Hooker, Works, Vol. II, 256 (V, 60.3).

ultimately trace its roots to the beginning of the Old Testament and to the beginning of Creation itself. In the Authorized Version of the Bible, on which Herbert relied,² the Creation story clearly associates water with primordial chaos when it recounts that "the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2). In the Geneva Bible the commentary on this passage solidifies the connection between the deep and the waters of chaos: "Darkenes covered [the] deep waters: for as yet [the] light was not created".³ The watery deep gains added significance in view of contemporary cosmology, in which the waters above, below, and on the earth surround and confront man's world. The commentary in the Douai Old Testament explains: "The firmament is al the space from the earth to the hieghest starres, the lowest part divideth betwene the waters on the earth and the waters on the ayer. . . . Likewise heaven is al the space above the earth, in whose lowest part are birds and waters in the higher part

²Chana Bloch, Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. xiii. All biblical quotations are from the Authorized Version except for citations from the Psalms, which are from The Book of Common Prayer.

³All references to the Geneva Bible are taken from The Geneva Bible: A facsimile of the 1560 edition, ed. Lloyd E. Berry (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

starres the hieghest is the Emyrial heaven".⁴ The ability of God to overcome water and chaos is made clear elsewhere in the Old Testament, as in Job, where God "divideth the sea with his power" (26:12). Thus one characteristic of water is firmly established: it is essentially chaotic, and out of it creation takes place. God subdues the water in order to create life, and out of water come all the possibilities of existence.

God, however, can also use water to bring death. The story of the flood is the primary biblical myth in which the power of water to purify through destruction is explored, and in it the figure of Noah becomes a conventional type for Christ. The sense of defilement amongst the inhabitants of the earth is strong, resulting from an unlawful sexual encounter between the sons of God and the daughters of men: "God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt" (Gen 6:12a). God's decision to destroy the earth, saving only those under the protection of the ark, is an unequivocal sign of punishment and judgement on man for contempt of the divine order. Yet, at the very same time, the waters of the flood also symbolize absolution, for it is through the destruction of the

⁴All references from the Douai Old Testament are taken from The Holie Bible Faithfully Translated into English (Old Testament: Volume One) 1609, ed. David Rogers (London and Ilkley, Yorkshire: The Scolar Press, 1975).

corrupt that the earth is restored to its original purity. The sense of a new, second creation is very strong throughout the priestly account of the flood, and many passages recall the language of the Creation story in the first chapter of Genesis.⁵ Water thus becomes a powerful if somewhat ambivalent symbol of death and life, of sin and purification. And in no sense is this quality of water confined to the story of the deluge, for it reappears as a sign of purification in Psalm 51:

Have mercy upon me, O God, after thy great goodness: according to the multitude of thy mercies do away mine offences. Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness: and cleanse me from my sin. . . . Thou shalt purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. (1-2, 7)

It is interesting to compare this passage with the story of the purification of Naaman the leper, which, according to

⁵ Compare Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 9:1: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (1:28); "And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (9:1). Compare also Genesis 1:29 and Genesis 9:3: "And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat" (1:29); "Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things" (9:3).

Tuve, is yet another type for the experience of Baptism.⁶ Naaman is cleansed from his leprosy by washing in the healing waters of the Jordan, and the story concludes with a confrontation between Elisha and his servant Gehazi, who is caught deceiving his master. Elisha punishes Gehazi: "The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed forever. And he [Gehazi] went out from his presence a leper as white as snow" (II Kings 6:27). It is significant that both the experience of purification and the experience of punishment can render the individual as white as snow. In Isaiah, God promises that although "your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow" (1:18), and yet in Numbers, after God rebukes Miriam and Aaron for questioning the authority of Moses, "Miriam became leprous, as white as snow" (Num. 12:10). The suggestion that water can be both a sign of sin and absolution, and that both sin and absolution can be given the qualities of white snow reflects the fundamental identity between such opposites. In the centre of one is

⁶Tuve, p. 184. Tuve focuses on extra-biblical materials to emphasize quite successfully the traditional nature of Herbert's typological associations: the Sarum Missal, medieval literature, the illustrated Books of Hours, and ancient hymns, to name a few. As Bloch points out, however, Tuve does this at the expense of acknowledging Herbert's own reading of Bible, so that one is left "with the impression that Herbert knew the Bible at two removes" (p.66).

found the other; this is the power of an ambivalent symbol. It is this identity which is the foundation of Herbert's religious understanding of Baptism and of his poetic understanding of water.

The ambiguous nature of water and its importance as both a symbol of life and a means of death is common throughout the Old Testament. First of all, the waters of the Red Sea, another traditional baptismal type, mark the point of passage between the chaos of Egyptian enslavement and the promised land of Canaan, where life begins anew.⁷ Secondly, having passed through the Red Sea, and under the guidance of Moses during their wilderness trek, the people of God are given yet another opportunity to experience the regenerative power of water when Moses strikes the rock at Horeb and water flows from its side. In this instance, water is firmly associated with life, and the entire episode becomes another type for the sacrament of Baptism. In "The Sacrifice" Herbert alludes to this event through the ironic lament of Christ:

Why, Cesar is their onely King, not I:
He clave the stonie rock, when they were drie;
But surely not their hearts, as I well trie:
Was ever grief like mine? (ll. 121-124)

The identity between Christ and Moses becomes even stronger:

⁷Tuve, pp. 39, 115.

Then with the reed they gave to me before,
They strike my head, the rock from whence all store
Of heav'nly blessings issue evermore:
Was ever grief like mine? (ll. 169-172)

The rock struck by Moses, and Jesus, the living rock, both release from their sides the waters of life, and in the case of Jesus, the flow of water and blood becomes a traditional symbol of the sacraments. Thirdly, the River Jordan not only cleanses Naaman from his impurities, but it is also the way through which the people of ancient Israel must pass in order to reach the promised land. Indeed, in all three cases, water regenerates and renews God's people, delivering them from past sins and former ways of life in order to begin again. And yet the waters of life can also be the waters of death. Although the Red Sea, for example, represents renewal for the Israelites, it also spells death for the Egyptians who represent all that is evil and impure in the Israelites' lives. Moreover, Moses and Aaron are condemned by an offended God after striking the rock: both of them doubt whether God will actually release water from the rock. It would thus appear that the moment of their salvation is also the moment of their doom.

The early Christian Church did not ignore the potential of pre-Christian water symbolism but, in fact, relied heavily upon it, although new meanings in addition to those which were already understood were attached to it

in light of the ministry and life of Christ.⁸ Christ, for example, is the new Noah, emerging after his Baptism in the waters of Jordan in order to create a new order and to herald a new age; and as we have already seen Christ is the new Moses. Paul makes these connections, as well, interpreting the Old Testament in light of the New:

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. (I Cor. 10:1-4)

Herbert employs the same method as Paul in "The Bunch of Grapes" as he makes further analogies between the past and the present:

Then have we too our guardian fires and clouds;
Our Scripture-dew drops fast:
We have our sands and serpents, tents and shrowdes;
Alas! our murmurings come not last. (ll. 15-18)

It is in the death of Christ, however, that Herbert's present becomes sacred, and that the ritual of baptism becomes significant; the image of death is inextricably linked with the image of water. Christ's death marks the transitional state between his fixed identity as Jesus of Nazareth and his as yet unrealized new identity as the Christ. He is stripped in his death, both literally and

⁸Eliade, p. 137.

figuratively, to a state of nothingness and a condition of emptiness, and, as in the first Creation when God swept over the waters of chaos to create life, so God sweeps over the empty form of Jesus in order to create new life. The experience of Christ, therefore, becomes the experience of baptism, where each individual dies into a similar state of nothingness in order to be raised to new life by God.⁹ Death becomes the ultimate purification by water; at the same time as water destroys it creates new forms of life and order. Thus the emphasis in John is on new life, where he says "except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:5), whereas the emphasis in Paul is on death and resurrection:

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3-4)

The ambivalent meaning of water established in the Old Testament is carried through to the New. Water is neither death nor birth, but both. Thus the waters of baptism transform the meaning of death and life itself: death is no longer the extinction of life but the source of authentic life. The symbol of water reveals the reality of

⁹Eduard Lohse, The First Christians, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 69.

the sacred through this powerful transformation so that, in a unique way, the mundane makes the transcendent transparent.

One further biblical understanding of water associates this symbol with the breath or Spirit of God, where both water and Spirit are received as traditional sources of life. Isaiah, for example, promises that God "will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: [He] will pour [his] spirit upon thy seed" (44:3). That the Spirit of God is compared to water is emphasized once again by Jeremiah, who calls the Lord "the fountain of living waters" (2:13) and who rebukes his people for preferring broken cisterns "that can hold no water" (2:13), that do not contain the Spirit. Paul claims that "by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body" (I Cor. 12:13) and Jesus says, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink" (Jn. 7:37) and he goes on to promise "rivers of living water" (Jn. 7:38). John himself explains this passage for his readers by making the connection between water and the Spirit clear: "This spoke he [Jesus] of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive" (Jn. 7:39). And, of course, when Jesus is struck on the cross, as Moses struck the rock, water and blood pour out of his side as a final release of his spirit. Those who are baptized, therefore, receive the Spirit of God through the baptismal waters in the same way

that Jesus received God's spirit in the form of a dove after his baptism in the Jordan.¹⁰ In the ritual of baptism, the sign of the Spirit's presence is the anointing with oil, which in its most literal sense christens the initiates, that is, the initiates become Christs, the anointed ones.¹¹

All of this culminates in the baptismal order of The Book of Common Prayer, which John E. Booty suggests was an important influence upon Herbert and The Temple, although that influence is too often taken for granted.¹² The practice of placing one's entire heart in the new life of God is made dramatic by the vows of renunciation, in which the priest asks: "Dost thou forsake the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, the carnal desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow nor be led by them?"¹³ The emphasis on death is made clear in several prayers, as

¹⁰Lohse, p. 68.

¹¹Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Faith and Belief (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 73, Smith discusses the part of the ceremony called chrism in the rite of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, ca. A.D. 315-386).

¹²John E. Booty, "George Herbert: The Temple and The Book of Common Prayer", Mosaic, 12 (1979), p. 75.

¹³I am using the 1604 version of The Book of Common Prayer as it appears in William Keeling, ed., Liturgiae Britannicae, or The Several Editions of The Church of England (London: William Pickering, 1851), p. 244.

is the hope of renewal and rebirth:

O Merciful God, grant that the old Adam in these children may be so buried, that the new may be raised up in them. Amen.
Grant that all carnal affections may die in them, and that all things belonging to the Spirit may live and grow in them. Amen.¹⁴

Furthermore, the significant role of typology is established in the preparatory prayers and continues throughout the service to provide a constant reminder of the unity of Scripture, the fulfilling actions of Christ, and the power and depth of meaning connected to the symbol of water:

Almighty and everlasting God, who of thy great mercy didst save Noah and his family in the ark from perishing by water, and also didst safely lead the children of Israel thy people through the red sea, figuring thereby thy holy baptism; and by the baptism of thy well-beloved Son Jesus Christ, in the river Jordan, didst sanctify water to the mystical washing away of sin; we beseech thee, for thine infinite mercies, that thou wilt mercifully look upon this child; wash him and sanctify him with the Holy Ghost; that he being delivered from thy wrath, may be received into the ark of Christ's Church; and being stedfast in faith, joyful through hope, and rooted in charity, may so pass the waves of this troublesome world, that finally he may come to the land of everlasting life, there to reign with thee world without end; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹⁵

It is interesting that even here water is both a cleansing, restorative agent and a hostile, deadly force: the water

¹⁴The Book of Common Prayer, p. 246.

¹⁵The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 236, 238.

which is sanctified "to the mystical washing away of sin" stands in contradistinction to the less promising "waves of this troublesome world". Finally, the movement of the prayer from the physical world, rooted in time and permeated by impurities, to the divine world, timeless and majestic, is an indication that baptism need only occur once and that it is sufficient for all time, just as Christ's sacrifice need only occur once. It is a ritual that touches the most vital aspects of life, and although it is continually recollected, and even Herbert recognizes that "one creation / will not suffice our turn" ("Giddinesse", ll. 25-26), the sacrament is nonetheless complete: "what ever future sinnes should me miscall, / Your first acquaintance might discredit all" ("H. Baptisme" (I), ll. 13-14).

This, then, is the necessary background for Herbert's use of the complex structure of water symbolism, and his understanding of this symbol was clearly shaped by daily contact with the two most important books he read: the Bible and The Book of Common Prayer. Water recaptures the experience of purification, cleansing, and regeneration within the very heart of sin, chaos, and death, a paradoxical experience which can be traced throughout the religious history of the Old and New Testaments. Chana Bloch explains Herbert's methodology:

The New Testament, which sets out to document how

the Scriptures have been fulfilled, may be seen precisely as an attempt to put new wine into old bottles. This is an apt figure for Herbert's process of transformation: he does not leave the old symbols behind but lovingly restores them, making them fit for use under the new dispensation. . . . Herbert's poetics are formed on the Gospels and the Epistles, from which he learns how to take liberties that do not destroy but fulfill.¹⁶

As a religious symbol, appealing to some religious need, water is replete with significance and meaning since it shows the sacred in its many forms. Bloch is quite right, I think, when she demonstrates how the revelation of Christ added new value to the symbol in a way which fulfilled its former manifestations, yet it remains true that its former manifestations conditioned its new value; the structure of water symbolism is an inherited property. Water belongs to the most distant religious past: it is the dwellingplace of God, and the bearer of divine and eternal life. It is ordinary, and yet it reveals the extraordinary. Thus, Herbert vows to God that he "will use the works of thy creation" ("The Thanksgiving", l. 35) so that through the visible the invisible might unfold.

The baptismal experience, as a ritual of purification, has its source in man's sense of sin and separation from God, and in his desire to be reconciled once again with God in a manner which will absolve such

¹⁶Bloch, pp. 86-87.

outbursts of spontaneous evil. Under the influence of St. Augustine, Herbert and his fellow Churchmen understood this interior corruption as an aspect of original sin, an inherited stain afflicting all of Adam's descendants.¹⁷ The poet is "disseized by usurping lust" ("Love" (II), l.12) which renders him "Full of rebellion", and he laments that his "rugged heart . . . Is saplesse grown" ("Nature", ll. 1, 13, 16). His memory is full of "pil'd vanities" which are "crosse to [God's] decrees", and the weight of his transgressions is so great that his "hard heart scarce to [God] can grone" ("The Sinner" ll. 5, 7, 13). The position of "Nature" and "The Sinner", in The Temple is itself an indication that man's natural inclination is towards sin. Following "The Sinner", Herbert carries the reader from the sorrowful depths of "Good Friday" through the promise of "Redemption" to the joyful heights of "Easter" and "Easter Wings" and offers the possibility of human participation in the divine scheme through "H. Baptisme" (I) and (II). All of this motion comes to an abrupt end, however, when the cycle is completed with a return to the human condition expressed in the following poems, "Nature", "Sinne" (I), and "Affliction" (I). The sequence of poems thus reinforces the reality which man

¹⁷William H. Halewood, The Poetry of Grace (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 46-7.

must confront: his own interior evil. Herbert becomes particularly scornful in "Miserie" where, after announcing that "man is a foolish thing" (l. 2), he suggests that man is more comfortable with swine than with angels, with wallowing in dirt than with singing praises (ll. 43-6). It is here that Herbert speaks of defilement and infection, a condition which can only be purified through ritual action:

As dirtie hands foul all they touch,
And these things most, which are most pure and fine:
So our clay hearts, ev'n when we crouch
To sing thy praises, make them lesse devine.
(ll. 37-40)

Since man is himself defiled, his contact with God is jeopardized; not even his songs of praise, carried by the breath of his very soul, are capable of alleviating man's sinful alienation from God. Sin is indeed a stain, affecting both the notorious Marie Magdalene ("she being stain'd her self", l. 7) and the devout believer alike. The human heart, like the marble floor of a church, is susceptible to corruption: "Hither sometimes Sinne steals, and stains / The marbles neat and curious veins" ("The Church-floore", ll. 13-14). Here, then, is the old Adam which must be destroyed, the corrupt world which must be flooded, the leper who must be purified, and, of course, one of the ways of accomplishing this is through the baptismal waters.

As water is present from the beginning of Creation, so too is water present at the beginning of The Temple

where the first poem, "The Church Porch", is subtitled "Perirrhanterium", thereby recalling the instrument used for sprinkling holy water. John E. Booty suggests that Herbert was referring to the asperges of the liturgy which are based upon the penitential psalms and which are designed to purify through contact with water.¹⁸ The specific biblical reference for this rite is Psalm 51: "Thou shalt purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (v.7). It has already been demonstrated that the condition of white snow as a reflection of individual morality is an ambiguous metaphor in its biblical context, and it is an ambiguity which is particularly appropriate at the beginning of the entire volume of poetry. While the sprinkling of water suggests the necessary ablutions for entrance into the sanctuary of the Temple, it also suggests the waters of baptism, which, Herbert reveals, are equally ambiguous. In the context of The Temple as a whole, water signifies both sin and purification, and in the single title, "Perirrhanteriam", Herbert is able to evoke all of the biblical waters from Creation to Baptism, and to reveal man's need for cleansing, and therefore his sense of

¹⁸John E. Booty, "Contrition in Anglican Spirituality", in Anglican Spirituality, ed. W. J. Wolf (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1982), p. 36.

defilement, at the same time as that cleansing is made available.

The best illustration of Herbert's understanding of water in The Temple is the first of his two poems on Baptism. The poem begins with a comment on the process of the symbolic experience itself in which the realities of the external world point towards a reality which transcends them. The direction, therefore, is from the immediate and particular to the pervasive and all-encompassing:

As he that sees a dark and shadie grove
 Stayes not, but looks beyond it on the skie;
 So when I view my sinnes, mine eyes remove
 More backward still. (ll. 1-4)

The notion of looking beyond the surface of an object towards its substance is also at the heart of the Anglican understanding of the Sacraments, where "an outward and visible sign" reveals "an inward and spiritual grace".¹⁹ Baptism is, in traditional theology, the mark of the Covenant between man and God, through which, in the words of the Prayer Book Catechism, "we are hereby made the children of grace". It is therefore important for Herbert to establish this principle at the beginning of his poem: he is concerned not with the sign but with what it signifies.

As a fundamental concern of the religious psyche,

¹⁹The Book of Common Prayer, p. 282.

and as a preliminary step in the water ritual, Herbert acknowledges his own sense of corruption in the first stanza, which betrays the concomitant emotions of despair and remorse. As his eyes "remove / More backward still" (ll. 3-4) there is a suggestion that he is brought to tears, and the parallel between looking upon his sins and looking upon the "dark and shadie grove" (l. 1) establishes an ominous identity between the two. The basis of this identity is death, which results from sin and which is identified by chaos and confusion; in short, the initial stanza represents the results of a life lived away from God. At the centre of this death, however, is found yet another death, and the tears of remorse for the poet's sins become the waters of purification issuing from Christ's side:

to that water flie,
 Which is above the heav'ns, whose spring and rent
 Is in my deare Redeemers pierced side.
 O blessed streams! either ye do prevent
 And stop our sinnes from growing thick and wide,
 Or else give tears to drown them, as they grow.
(ll. 4-9)

It is interesting to note that Herbert constructs a subtle atmosphere of confusion concerning the water of the first stanza which is only dispelled in the second. The natural conclusion reached after reading the first stanza is that the water refers to the speaker's own tears, provoked by a consideration of his own sins: "So when I view my sinnes,

mine eyes remove / More backward still, and to that water flie" (ll. 3-4). According to this reading, the tears result from a disruption of the divine order, and therefore become the image of that defilement. Continuing into the next stanza, however, the reader becomes aware that those original waters of defilement are now the holy waters of purification, the "blessed streams" (l. 7) which issue from "my deare Redeemers pierced side" (l. 6). Thus the same symbol is capable of holding its contrary interpretations in a complex but subtle tension. This is further emphasized by the fact that the water which absolves the speaker has its source in the waters above the heavens. In biblical cosmology, those waters are to be feared because of their chaotic nature: they are unmeasured, threatening, and formless. But those same waters are also the springs of life, as seen in Genesis 1:2, and their life-giving, spiritual quality is made explicit by associating them directly with the sacrifice of Christ: the speaker flies to that water "which is above the heav'ns, whose spring and rent/ Is in my deare Redeemers pierced side" (ll. 5-6). The waters of baptism contain all of these contradictions. For Herbert, sin and absolution, death and life, confront one another in baptism.

This becomes even clearer when Herbert speaks of the waters directly, for here it is revealed that baptism represents not only the death of sin, but death to sin, and

the actualization of birth to a new life. The streams of baptismal water, according to Herbert, can either "stop our sinnes from growing thick and wide, / Or else give tears to drown them, as they grow" (ll. 8-9). The struggle between life and death is evident here, between the sins that grow and the water that destroys, and within the paradox that a healthy and vibrant life of sin is in reality the loss of authentic life. More importantly, however, water becomes more than simply the water that cleanses; it becomes the water that drowns, and through death, the water that leads to new life.²⁰ The baptismal process marks the transformation from a life of sinfulness and darkness to a life of purity and illumination, and such a life is qualified by an entirely new perspective: "In you Redemption measures all my time" (l. 10). The speaker's participation with Christ ("In you") extends even to the act of redemption, where baptism becomes a reenactment of Christ's death and resurrection. The initiate is stripped, like Christ, of his former identity in order to be reduced to a minimal state, and from there to be brought back to

²⁰ This concept is certainly a reflection of Paul's understanding of baptism in Romans 6:1-13. In particular, Paul claims that "if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection. . . . Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him" (Rm. 6:5, 8). Death is a necessary part of new life, and the authority for this concept is Christ's own death which heralds new life.

life. By sharing in the death of Jesus, the speaker is sharing in the ultimate means of purification, and is made worthy, therefore, to have his name added to "the Book of Life" (l. 12).

The prospect of death to sin is a particularly fearful one, although, as Herbert demonstrates in "H. Baptisme" (I), it need not be. The religious individual, dreading his sin and fearing the vengeance of God, is faced with the even greater threat of a loss of his identity, and therefore a loss of his personal existence, the existence of the self, in the cleansing waters of God. Baptism demands nothing less than this; redemption must measure all of Herbert's time. In baptism, however, something as fateful and potentially disastrous as death is replaced by another possibility, which is death in love. Death may be confronted fearlessly because of the sacrifice of Christ; thus the reference to the "Redeemers pierced side" (l. 6), which is a reference both to tragedy and victory, represents the transformation of death from a hopeless end to a dramatic beginning. It is not by accident that the poem moves from the the gloom of the "dark and shadie grove" (l. 1) to the promising heights of Heaven (l. 5), for baptism, if nothing else, most certainly suggests transformation. In the ritual of baptism, all of the ambiguities and confrontations suggested by the symbol of water are recognized and then transformed. Life becomes

real in the presence of death, and death becomes the channel of life; sin is punished and then absolved by the very means of punishment; tears of sorrow are wiped and replaced by tears of love. Symbolically, water represents the realm of the dead, the realm of potential life, and the realm of absolute life, all at the same time. Water is therefore a victorious and powerful entity, and because it is itself imperishable, it conveys imperishability. Aware of his own corruption, and fearful of the consequences, it is precisely what Herbert needs in order to satisfy his religious sensibilities. Absolved and purified, he can now meet God on common ground.

One of Herbert's most interesting examinations of the encounter between the human and the divine can be found in "Marie Magdalene", a poem which is commonly, though perhaps unfairly, viewed with critical dismay. Chana Bloch cautiously objects to the poem, writing that "for all its earnestness, [it] lacks the stamp of lively personal involvement that otherwise distinguishes Herbert's use of biblical materials".²¹ Helen Vendler's comment is far more forthright: "Herbert, so seldom graceless, becomes in this poem positively incoherent".²² While Bloch condemns the

²¹Bloch, p. 30n.

²²Helen Vendler, The Poetry of George Herbert (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 162.

poem on the grounds of Herbert's apparent uninterest, and Vendler on the grounds that he could probably "never conceive a tarnished female sympathetically, even one who was to become a saint",²³ the poem itself may have seemed far less objectionable had both critics understood the significance of Herbert's understanding and use of water. In "Marie Magdalene", the central action on which Herbert concentrates is not the anointing of Jesus with the costly perfume but the washing of Jesus's feet by Mary. Mary's tears become the sign of her purity at the same time as they are the acknowledgement of her guilt, and her actions become all the more powerful when considered in relation to the purity and guiltlessness of Christ. There is no contradiction here: the waters of God point towards both defilement and purification and are transformed into the means of new and absolute life. Mary, therefore, can be both stained and blessed without unduly shocking her critics, either biblical or literary.²⁴

Part of the critical difficulty in appreciating "Marie Magdalene" is the failure to understand that for

²³Vendler, p. 162.

²⁴Vendler believes that these attributes of Mary are a "shocking contradiction" (p. 162), and she is undoubtedly as amazed at this event as the biblical Pharisees. Perhaps Herbert is accusing his readers of being too quick to fall into the trap of moral judgement on repentant sinners, as Vendler has done.

religious man, the physical world and the moral world are fused. Because the two worlds are one, and there is no distinction between the parts of the universe, the actions of a single human being have the ability to affect all aspects of that universe; indeed, when a religious law is broken, the order of the universe is disrupted.²⁵ It is not inappropriate, therefore, that Herbert should claim that Mary's "sinnes did dash / Ev'n God himself" (ll. 14-15). Here, the moral condition of sin is described in physical terms, and elsewhere it is described as "filth" (l. 14). And if sin is described as a symbolic stain in physical terms, its effect upon God is equally physical and equally symbolic. Absolving Mary's defilement requires the purifying action of water, therefore, and rather than being an obstacle to action, her filth is precisely what motivates her. Moreover, Herbert's religious understanding of the unity between ethical and physical realms propels this simple cleansing into a cosmically significant event: "In washing one, she washed both" (l. 18). If her world is disorderly because of her transgressions, it is ordered once again because of her actions.

²⁵Richard Strier notices the distinction between the physical and the ethical in the poem but he does not recognize their essential unity as an aspect of the religious consciousness. Describing moral qualities in physical terms is merely paradoxical to him. See "Herbert and Tears", ELH, 46 (1979), pp. 230-31.

In the intriguing second stanza, Herbert questions the authenticity of Mary's motives and consequently questions the efficacy of water purification:

She being stain'd her self, why did she strive
To make him clean, who could not be defil'd?
Why kept she not her tears for her own faults,
And not his feet? Though we could dive
In tears like seas, our sinnes are pil'd
Deeper then they, in words, and works, and thoughts.
(ll. 7-12)

The issue here is one of perspective. Herbert's argument seems to be that when an action is viewed in relation to the world of "words, and works, and thoughts" (l. 12), it can be assessed relatively according to its results and motives. To question Mary's act towards Jesus is to judge as the world judges, and to serve this judgement is to evaluate Mary in terms of good and evil consequences. It is foolish, if not hypocritical, for a sinner to wash her Redeemer, according to the men of the world, and therefore it would seem wrong for Mary to "strive / To make him clean, who could not be defil'd" (ll. 7-8). It would also be wrong for Jesus to allow Mary to do this, although Herbert avoids this aspect of the biblical account in order to focus exclusively on Mary. But the fact is that Jesus does allow Mary to do it and Mary wholeheartedly seizes the opportunity to serve her Lord because both belong to a realm which transcends the judgements of the world, and which is not timebound but eternal. Her action bears an eternal witness; she participates in the absolute as

assuredly as the symbol of water reveals the absolute, and thus, by definition, she turns her back on the relative perspectives of the world. She is aware of her defilement, but it is completely subordinated to her awareness of purification. The tears are signs of her sins, but they are also the signs of her forgiveness, and this is what the questioner cannot understand: he is mistaken to believe that "Though we could dive / In tears like seas, our sinnes are pil'd / Deeper then they" (ll. 10-12). Tears, and the water they represent, are somewhat shallow in comparison to the depths of defilement possible in man, but as tears of absolution they are sufficient to restore and reconcile God and man. Thus, from the perspective of the absolute, which is always the perspective of the sacred, Mary is doing what indeed she must:

Deare soul, she knew who did vouchsafe and deigne
To bear her filth; and that her sinnes did dash
Ev'n God himself: wherefore she was not loth,
As she had brought wherewith to stain,
So to bring in wherewith to wash:
And yet in washing one, she washed both. (ll. 13-18)

The moral and the physical, the human and the divine, sin and absolution are everywhere present together; Mary's will, in so far as it exists, exists only in surrender to or through identification with the will of God. Her participation with the divine is, not surprisingly, experienced in the washing with water, representing the chaos of her sins and the creative source of new life: "In washing one, she washed both" (l. 18).

The material, then, is sufficiently clear to establish a pattern for Herbert's use of water symbolism. Water can destroy man and punish his corruption, much as the flood destroyed the earth, and in both instances the waters are a sign of defilement itself. In "The Sacrifice", therefore, Herbert evokes the memory of Noah as he portrays the sinfulness of man with a reference to the waters:

My silence rather doth augment their crie;
 My dove doth back into my bosome flie,
 Because the raging waters still are high:
 Was ever grief like mine? (ll. 93-96)

Here, water is a sign of death in a world which is not ready to receive the life-giving Spirit of God as symbolized in the dove. The flood has not yet abated; the sin has not yet been absolved. Elsewhere in The Temple, Herbert prays for the descent of the dove once again using the image of water; whereas in the passage from "The Sacrifice" water is the means of death, in "Grace" it is the means of life. The poet's world is dark and dry, and his parched garden becomes an image of spiritual destitution:

My stock lies dead, and no increase
 Doth my dull husbandrie improve:
 O let thy graces without cease
 Drop from above! (ll. 1-4)

Each patterned stanza repeats the prayer for grace, except for one which asks not for grace but for dew:

The dew doth ev'ry morning fall;

And shall the dew out-strip thy dove?
 The dew, for which grasse cannot call,
 Drop from above. (ll. 9-12)

Sin is "hammering [his] heart" (l. 17) and death is "working like a mole" (l. 13); the speaker realizes that his salvation depends on the grace of God, the dew which falls from the sky, and the water which renews. It is interesting that the stanza concentrating on dew comes after two stanzas which focus on physical signs of decay and before two stanzas which focus on spiritual signs of decay. The symbol of water is able to hold these tensions together without minimizing their force or resolving their contention into facile moralisms. The speaker is left in the end demanding relief for his misery; if the dove will not come to this world, the speaker asks to be taken to the dove in another world. But for the present, the dew from above discloses divine grace.

The pattern of death and resurrection continues in two other poems of The Temple, and both of them employ baptismal imagery to convey this pattern. In "Love Unknown" the speaker relates a "long and sad" (l. 1) tale which, according to C. A. Patrides, is analogically related to Psalm 51, on which the asperges are based, and in which the purificatory aspect of water is made clear.²⁶ The

²⁶Patrides, p. 140.

first episode of the speaker's story involves the gift of a dish of fruit in which his heart is placed, a gift which is designed to please his Lord. The Lord's servant, however, acts surprisingly:

The servant instantly
 Quitting the fruit, seiz'd on my heart alone,
 And threw it in a font, wherein did fall
 A stream of bloud, which issu'd from the side
 Of a great rock: I well remember all,
 And have good cause: there it was dipt and di'd,
 And washt and wrung: the very wringing yet
 Enforceth tears. (ll. 11-18)

The font is clearly baptismal, and the speaker is reminded of his defilement: "Your heart was foul I fear" (l. 18). His heart is taken in an almost violent way, seized by the servant and then thrown into the font, as a result of his corruption. The waters of the font are therefore waters of punishment since he has no doubt displeased his Lord. Once in the font, his heart is dipped and dyed in the blood which issues from a rock, and in this mixture of blood and water, his heart is washed and wrung. The font at this point is a channel of death, and the connection between "dyed" and "died" is certainly intentional. The reference to the Mosaic rock, which is typologically associated with the death of Christ, reinforces the connection: the speaker dies Christ's death in order to be raised into Christ's life. The fruit of this death by water is a "well, / And clean and fair" (ll. 22-23) heart, one which is restored and regenerated by the very means of its destruction. This same paradoxical process is presented in

"The Glance", a poem which Richard Strier suggests is baptismal but without explaining his reasoning.²⁷ Here, the speaker is aware of a "sugred strange delight" (l. 5), unlike anything he has experienced, "Bedew, embalme, and overrunne [his] heart" (l. 7). The reference to dew would suggest the quickening of Herbert's soul, but because of the following word, "embalme", the waters are clear indications of death. Thus, from life to death, and then to life again, for the following words suggest activity and renewed vigour. His heart is "overrunne", that is, it is infused with delight, but the connotations of movement would also indicate animation in the sense of resurrection.²⁸ Once again, in the waters of baptism, life and death meet.

I began this chapter by suggesting that the contradictory aspects of water may in fact be false distinctions, that sin and absolution, punishment and love, and life and death may have a common centre. That centre, of course, is the symbol itself, but it would be wrong to mistake the symbol for the term of its reference; symbols

²⁷Strier, Love Known, p. 160.

²⁸The OED defines "overrun" (I, 1, b): "To flow over, overflow". The definition suggests the notion of flooding which, in the context of baptism, is resonant with biblical, typological, and symbolic meaning. Baptism and the Flood are intimately related.

are only the vehicle of communication, so no matter how interesting and revealing they may be, they remain no more than convenient means of expression. [And the symbol, as a particularly religious symbol, is always a revelation of the sacred, of its qualities and attributes, and of its mystery. Therefore, the symbol, never absolute itself, points towards a reality which is absolute, and for Herbert that absolute is God.] If the symbol of water expresses a variety of dichotomies and divisions, all of them contradictory, it is because Herbert, and many before him, have penetrated a central truth about God which he must know and love if he is to be purged of the contagion of sin and death. In God the many become one; God binds and contains the totality of the revelation that is life. For religious man, any attempt to resolve the paradox of God is an unnecessary error, leaving him not with an image of something mysterious and wholly other, but with a shallow and superficial morality beyond recognition. Beneath the realm of theology and theories lies the hidden depth of religious experience, which can only be indicated symbolically, and occasionally these symbols seem sheer paradox. When Herbert writes that God is "both Judge and Saviour, feast and rod, / Cordiall and Corrosive" ("Sighs and Groans", ll. 27-28), he is identifying the obscure and elusive qualities, the paradoxes, that characterize his religious experience. It is the task of the theologian to

explain his God; it is the task of the poet to keep his God translucent.

It is possible, therefore, to turn from the symbol of water to the symbol of fire, and although the two elements seem to bear little relation to one another, both are used in a similar way to explore the nature of the sacred. In both symbols, Herbert expresses his intuitions and feelings of something divine in the world around him, and although both symbols indicate a similar principle, that principle is neither overt nor explicit, but hidden and unclear. The symbol is thus a reminder of something greater than itself at the same time as it constitutes its outward analogical form. It is the representation of the religious experience.

Chapter Two

Fire: "Inflamed with Heavenly Desires"

Symbolic ambiguities in The Temple are not restricted to the image of water. Indeed, the appeal of ambiguity and paradox to Herbert, both as a man of art and of religion, was so great that Mary Ellen Rickey has observed that it was "one of the poet's most important instruments of language".¹ Certainly an awareness of the verbal ambiguities is vital to an appreciation of Herbert's poetry, but Rickey would be wrong to underestimate the power of an ambiguous image. While Herbert may marvel at the ability of the English language to "give one onely name / To parents issue and the sunnes bright star" ("The Sonne", ll. 5-6), he is equally impressed with the variety of meanings associated with a symbol such as water. This is the key, I would suggest, to understanding Herbert's religious consciousness. He is attracted to the mystery that surrounds him, and attaches primary significance to that which eludes conceptual understanding; his is not the

¹Mary Ellen Rickey, Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert (Lexington: University of Kansas Press, 1966), p. 59.

world of the philosophers who "have measur'd mountains, / Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, and kings, / Walk'd with a staffe to heaven, and traced fountains" ("The Agonie", ll. 1-3). He recognizes the rational, as an Anglican should, but he values the irrational as it is revealed in paradox, ambiguity, and mystery. Tuve recognizes this important element of Herbert's poetry in her discussion of "The Sacrifice":

The tension of ambiguities and serried meanings . . . is precisely what Herbert owes to the tradition, and it is our appreciation of these which is deepened by a knowledge of what he built upon. Herbert's poem is full of minute shocks, of unexpected connexions, sudden recoils in the emotion described or produced - and it is this temper or tone, along with the ironic contrasts which usually bring the shock to bear, which he inherited. . . . The importance of the sacrificial ideal with its reach into primitive levels of feeling, the almost savage implications of impending retribution, the profound doubleness of meaning which will not yield to a reconciliation except of the heart of the Mystery - these are what Herbert found ready to his hand.²

Tuve emphasizes the debt Herbert owed to traditional sources, but it is quite probable that his debt to the Bible was as great. The biblical, indeed the religious, understanding of fire, for example, is similar to that expressed in such poems as "Love" (II), "Vertue", and "The Starre", and the juxtaposition of defilement and

²Tuve, p. 41.

purification is as important here as it was with the symbol of water. Fire reveals the mystery of the sacred, both in its negative and positive aspects, and as such becomes not only an instrument of authentic life, but of absolute, imperishable, and even divine life, as well. To be a master of fire is to meet God face to face.

As a manifestation of divine glory or as a sign of God's action and presence, fire is an important image in the Bible. It is an indication of God's presence in many instances, as are its associated qualities of heat, light, and power: "And the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel" (Ex. 24:17). During the flight from Egypt, God is made present in the pillar of fire, and the most dramatic theophany is the appearance of God in the fire of the burning bush: "And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and [Moses] looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed" (Ex. 3:2). The holy fire of God is of a wholly different order, burning the bush and yet not consuming it. Elsewhere, however, fire often functions as an instrument of destruction, punishment, and ordeal, and is a particularly important weapon of God and indication of His wrath. After banishing Adam and Eve from Eden, God places a group of Cherubim at the east of the garden, and gives to the angel, "a flaming

sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24). Paradise is therefore rendered inaccessible by the fire that surrounds it, so that whoever desires to reach its centre, must pass the flaming sword. The parallel between the purification of the soul and the purifying fires of Paradise is thus firmly established. The annulment of the Fall, the transcendence of the human condition, and the reestablishment of the immortal state of Paradise are all possible only through purificatory fire.

The fire of God is also the means by which retribution for defilement is dealt, and this becomes especially clear in the mind of the psalmist:

The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Highest gave his voice; hail stones and coals of fire. Yea he sent out his arrows and scattered them; and he shot out lightnings and discomfited them. (Ps. 18:13-14)

Fire removes that which is evil and hostile towards the will of God, and through fire impurity is avenged. But at the moment that fire destroys and punishes, it also cleanses and protects, and the psalmist continues by explaining his delivery from God's wrath:

The foundations of the world were discovered at thy rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of thy nostrils. He sent from above, he took me . . . he delivered me from my strong enemy. . . . The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me. (Ps. 18:15-17, 20)

The distinction between defilement and purity is made even more explicit in a passage from Isaiah. Here, the stain of

defilement is seen as something which penetrates deeper than what mere washing can remove; the stain is so deep, in fact, that it penetrates the very centre of his moral being. It is not to water that Isaiah turns, therefore, but to fire:

Then said I: Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. (Is. 6:5-7)

For the finite, the mortal, and the fallible to confront the Infinite, the Eternal, and the Infallible, purification is necessary. Isaiah is unclean not only in his lips but in the expression of his life, and therefore is out of keeping with God's character. Yet out of his despair comes a vision of a seraph carrying a purifying coal, one which is taken from the holy altar of God. Both the coal and the seraph denote fire, and its appropriateness as an image of God is evident. Fire destroys and cleanses, attracts and repels, fascinates and terrifies, and even though it consumes, it devours only the unrighteous. By the fire of God's own purity, the evil are at once punished and redeemed. It is in the moment of recognition and confession of defilement that Isaiah is purified, and although he feels as inadequate as the speaker in "Love"

(III) ("I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare, / I cannot look on thee", 11.9-10), all he can do, indeed all he must do, is "sit down . . . and taste my meat" (l. 17).

In the New Testament, the image of fire and light gains added significance in that Jesus himself becomes the true light of the world. In John's hymn to the Logos, it is asserted that the activity of the Word as light begins with Creation, thus attesting to its positive, creative, life-bearing qualities. The light which is associated with life becomes the divine vital energy which reveals itself in the darkness: "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (Jn. 1:4-5). Elsewhere, Jesus strengthens the notion of light as a sign of purity by identifying it with himself. Fire and light are not only godlike but are manifestations of divine life: "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (Jn. 8:12). The identity between Jesus and fire extends even beyond death, where, on the road to Emmaus, two disciples encounter the spirit of their crucified Lord: "Did not our hearts burn within us, while [Jesus] talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Lk. 24:32). Herbert plays with such notions of light and life and darkness and death in "The Call", which defines Christ variously as Light and Life. The speaker asks: "Come, my

Way, my Truth, my Life" (l. 1) and explains these familiar attributes of Christ. As the Way, for example, Jesus "gives us breath" (l. 2), and the breath of God is traditionally a sign of the Spirit, the source of life, also symbolized by fire; as this Life, Jesus "killeth death" (l. 4). In the second stanza, in fact, Jesus is now the Light of that hymn to the Logos which dispels darkness; he is also "such a Light, as shows a feast" (l. 6), the divine gift of nourishment and sacramental purification. The connection between the symbol of light and the condition of purity and life is thus established in the person of Jesus himself.

If fire is a creative element associated with life and the beginning of time, it is also a destructive element associated with death and the end of time. The word "fire", for example, appears twenty-five times in the apocalyptic book of Revelation where the end of history is envisioned as an ultimate and disastrous conflagration.³ The eschatological vision includes a series of calamities, a time of extreme decadence, and the triumphant rule of evil and darkness, all of which announce the approach of the end by demonstrating the need for renewal. Those who are defiled by the stain of evil are to be punished and

³Bryan W. Ball, A Great Expectation (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), p. 110n.

tormented with fire and brimstone and there, in the lake of fire, they will be joined by the beast, false prophets, Satan, and death itself.⁴ This, according to John, is the second death; it is not a physical death, but a spiritual death, an apocalyptic death of the world and its representatives. Herbert is well aware of the need of two deaths, and looks forward to this spiritual purgation with fear: man "of all things fears two deaths alone" ("Man's Medley", l. 30). Those who are defiled, those who know not "Who di'd for thee" ("Businessse", l. 16), those who live outside of the Light, must pay for their actions with their

If he had not lived for thee
Thou hadst di'd most wretchedly;
And two deaths had been thy fee.
("Businessse", ll. 20-22)

But even as the destructive flames "[come] down from God out of heaven, and [devour] them" (Rev. 20:9), it must not be forgotten that such action is, in fact, consoling; out of the ashes of the fire emerges a new paradise and a new world, purified and established by the very means of its punishment and destruction. After explaining the defeat of evil therefore, the Book of Revelation launches into a description of the new heaven and the new earth, where "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall

⁴Rev. 19:20; 20:10; 20:14; 21:8.

be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Rev. 21:4). It is a world where spiritual purity can only be described in physical terms, where the stain of defilement no longer exists, and where time no longer heralds death. Indeed, the end of history restores man to the condition of eternity, and the instrument of this restoration is the ambivalent symbol of fire.

It might be appropriate at this point to consider the liturgical use of light and fire which, according to Tuve, commonly represents Christ.⁵ The fact that The Book of Common Prayer provides little instruction for the observance of Holy Saturday, which is probably the most significant celebration of light and fire in the Christian Church, does not deter Tuve: the variety of symbolic interpretations of the Holy Week ceremonies current in sixteenth and seventeenth century England reminds us "that even the considerably later audience of Herbert's [poems] was schooled to think in symbols".⁶ Her analysis of the

⁵Tuve, p. 51.

⁶Tuve, p. 44. The feast of Pentecost is another major Christian celebration in which fire, as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, plays a prominent part. In "Whitsunday", Herbert asks: "Where is that fire which once descended / On thy apostles?" (ll. 5-6). The fire of the spirit shines brighter than the light of stars or the sun, but Herbert's emphasis is on the contrast between the apostolic era and the present age which has lost the immediacy of contact with God, rather than on the symbol of fire itself.

propers for Easter Even is penetrating, and her suggestion that the Israelites' pillar of light in the Egyptian wilderness was at the same time a dark cloud for the Egyptians, is particularly appropriate to the depiction of fire as an ambiguous symbol.⁷ But Tuve fails to understand the particularly religious conception of defilement and purification that is associated with fire. The Paschal Candle of the Easter Vigil appeals to the most primitive levels of religious experience since it conveys the simplest but most important expressions of dramatic action: light triumphing at the height of darkness, life emerging at the moment of death. To participate in the Easter Vigil is to acknowledge the defilement of Good Friday, and although Pilate can wash his hands of Jesus's blood, the disciple of Christ cannot: the sense of defilement is too great and the stain too deep. The new fire of Holy Saturday becomes the fire of God, a fire which purifies by destroying the old life and by creating the new. In several ancient prayers for Easter Eve, God is seen as the one who can "renew by the mysteries of regeneration",⁸ and the prayer is that those who "celebrate the Paschal feast,

⁷Tuve, p. 51.

⁸Charles Plummer, trans., Devotions from Ancient and Medieval Sources (Oxford: B. H. Blackwell, 1916), p. 76.

may be inflamed with heavenly desires".⁹ The similarities with the practice of baptism are striking, so it is not entirely surprising that the Prayer Book Collect emphasizes the parallel. The creation of fire is the creation of new life, a life which will burn by the power of God's spirit from within, not unlike the experience related by the travellers on the road to Emmaus.

In "The Starre" the association between fire and the Spirit is clear, although to insist on the exact identity of the two would weaken the power of the symbol of fire. To claim, for example, as Sister Thekla does, that the star is virtually a synonym for grace is to enter the contentious waters of theology while ignoring the vagaries of religious experience and mystery.¹⁰ There is no doubt that the star could represent the concept of grace, as it could represent the Spirit of God, but both representations would be derivations from conscious, if not theoretical, thought. "The Starre" reveals, however, elements of the religious experience which give rise to the symbols of defilement and purification in much the same way as it is experienced in the Bible and in the liturgy. The bright

⁹Plummer, p. 79.

¹⁰Sister Thekla, George Herbert: Idea and Image (Filgrave: The Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Assumption, 1974), p. 53.

spark of the star, as a symbol of fire, speaks to something that comes prior to theology, and although theology often buries that necessary antecedent, it can never abolish it. To understand "The Starre", therefore, it is best to refrain from philosophical discussions of grace as it is received in Catholic or Puritan circles, and to focus sympathetically on the symbols which express the movement from the chaos of defilement to the moment of purity and meaning in the act of absolution.

Although the general tenor of the poem is light and confident, the speaker is nonetheless aware of his separation from God and his alienation from the holy. He is plagued by "Folly, and worse then folly, lust" (l. 10), and asks the bright spark to relieve him from the torment of "sinne and sicknesse" (l. 13). He invokes the star as an instrument of punishment since fire can consume that which is evil, and the speaker's initial desire is to be destroyed in his corruption: the star's "fire-work" will "burn to dust" all that is staining his spirit. He invites the star to "Take a bad lodging in [his] heart" (l. 6) and, through its purgative powers, "make it better" (l. 8). But while the star is given the qualities of "fire-work" and burning, it is also seen as a bearer of "celestiall quicknesse" (l. 14), full of the light that illumines (l. 11) and of the love that saves (l. 16). It destroys and creates and the speaker calls on both of these aspects.

Whereas he once desired to be consumed, he now desires to be regenerated in the very same process:

First with thy fire-work burn to dust
Folly, and worse then folly, lust:
Then with thy light refine,
And make it shine:

So disengag'd from sinne and sicknesse,
Touch it with thy celestiall quicknesse,
That it may hang and move
After thy love. (11. 9-16)¹¹

The similarities between this last stanza and the passage from Isaiah are extremely suggestive. Both Isaiah and the speaker of "The Starre" share a sense of impurity, and in both instances their impurity is relieved by the descent of fire, which, by touching them, absolves them. Indeed, the star could be equally representative of a seraph, like the angel in the passage from Isaiah, as it is of Grace, or the Holy Spirit. To be concerned about such matters, however, detracts from the essential symbol of fire, for it is here, in the sign of punishment, that purification is achieved. Once the transformation of character is

¹¹The refining light referred to in line 11 is similar to the refining light in Zech. 13:9 where God, after destroying the corrupt, intends to purge the rest: "And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined". Refining is a necessary process in which the defiled are purified and made acceptable in the sight of God: "But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' sope: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness" (Malachi 3:2-3).

*'God is light.' In
Christ as 'Day Star'
in morning star
cf. Revelation*

*1 Cor. 3:
Be as Judgment Seat
- sins are burned*

completed, the speaker is ready to meet God on holy ground, and his plea for purification now becomes a preparation for glorification.

The second half of the poem presents the speaker's wish that the bright star should reverse its motion and carry him upwards to a "place / Among the beams" (ll. 21-22) surrounding Christ's head, and it is now apparent that the star contains a wonderful ability to bring all of the diverse elements of the poem together. First of all, the process of purgation allows the speaker to consider himself of the same element as the star itself. Together, with their "trinitie of light, / Motion, and heat" (ll. 17-18), the speaker and the star take "[their] flight / Unto the place where thou / Before didst bow" (ll. 18-20). The use of the possessive plural pronoun testifies to the unity realized between the speaker, who is of this world, and the star, which is heavenly, and prepares the way for the ultimate unity of man with God. Secondly, as Helen Vendler points out, the star and Jesus "become temporarily indistinguishable"¹² in that both the star and Jesus have the ability to combat sin and purify the speaker's heart.¹³

¹²Vendler, p. 254.

¹³Christ is traditionally referred to as the day star, as he is in sermons by Lancelot Andrewes, for example, or as in II Peter 1:19: "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts".

cf. Rev. 22

The parallel is suggested by the language itself: the star "disengag'd" the speaker's heart "from sinne and sicknesse" (l. 13) just as Christ "dy'd to part / Sinne and my heart" (ll. 23-24). Finally, Christ and paradise are equated in the final stanza, where Herbert reverts to the biblical images of the promised land in his description of the aura surrounding his Lord. He convinces the star:

Sure thou wilt joy, by gaining me
 To flie home like a laden bee
 Unto that hive of beams
 And garland-streams. (ll. 29-32)

The stanza recalls the land that "floweth with milk and honey" (Num. 13:27; Dt. 31:20), and in the centre of this image, Herbert places the figure of Christ. In order to pass to the centre of paradise, therefore, the speaker must pass through the fires of the spark in much the same way that one must encounter the flaming swords surrounding the garden of Eden. In both cases, the process is the same: the purifying fires of paradise represent the necessary purification of the soul of all those who wish to enter.

The three equations between the speaker and the star, the star and Christ, and Christ and paradise are not separate entities of the poem; they are each connected to the other so that the effect is not an impression of the many but of the one. It is perhaps paradoxical that the speaker should desire to be a flaming star, to become, in fact, the very fire that destroys him, yet when that star

is seen as an illustration of Christ, the paradox is resolved.¹⁴ The fire reveals the mystery of the sacred, and its destructive qualities merely allow the soul of the speaker, which is itself traditionally signified by a flame, to be set free in order to acquire a knowledge of its affinity with God. The speaker's desire to get a "place / Among the beams" (ll. 21-22), once fulfilled, will allow him to "Glitter, and curle, and winde as they: / That winding is their fashion / of adoration" (ll. 26-28). Unity with the star reveals the speaker's essential unity with Christ, who is one with paradise; such an insight resolves all tensions and truly transforms the speaker. Even the metre of the first and last lines of each stanza reflects the desire for disparate reality to be reduced to unified being, for the first line contains double the number of iambs as the last. It is not enough to suggest, as Diana Benet does, that the falling lines imitate the falling star, since only the first half of the poem traces the descent of the star, while the second half explores the star's ascent.¹⁵ If the parallel between the physical arrangement of the lines and the motion of the star were

¹⁴God, in fact, makes "his ministers a flame of fire" (Heb. 1:7).

¹⁵Diana Benet, Secretary of Praise: The Poetic Vocation of George Herbert (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), p. 137.

true, one would expect the final stanzas to expand. But the formation of the stanzas is consistent with the speaker's joyful desire for union with his God which is a desire for a reduction of the many into the one, a sentiment Herbert expressed elsewhere in "Clasping of Hands": "O be mine still! still make me thine! / Or rather make no Thine and Mine!" (ll. 19-20).

There is one final point raised by Diana Benet in her analysis of "The Starre" which cannot be sustained in light of the nature of a religious symbol. For Benet, the star is no more than a missionary, enticing converts and working actively to engender praise and adoration amongst them. But she disclaims the notion that the star has any real power: "The star may not really be able to transform and transport him, yet it serves by enticing him to think of God."¹⁶ In fact, however, the star does much more than that. The speaker gives it an active role and a real presence in the process of his transformation: it alone can "make a debter, / And make it better" (ll. 7-8); it can "burn to dust" (l. 9) and refine with light; and it can touch his heart "with [its] celestiall quicknesse" (l. 14). All of this is possible because the symbol of fire, represented by the star, makes the divine manifest in the

¹⁶Benet, pp. 138-39.

speaker's world. It reveals the nature of the sacred and the holy and it shows forth what really is, and by doing so it establishes a world which is no longer chaotic and disorderly, alienated and incomprehensible, but meaningful and, indeed, transformed. In other words, the speaker's defilement is truly absolved, his corruption is truly consumed, and the star is truly able to transport him towards the absolute. As Mircea Eliade suggests, the "immediate reality" of a profane object such as fire "is transmuted into a supernatural reality. . . . For those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany".¹⁷ Benet misunderstands the star when she sees it simply as a profane rather than a sacred reality. Indeed, when the star punishes and redeems the speaker it performs not only a religious but a divine act, as well.

In "Love" (II) fire and God are once again intimately connected in a way which reveals the paradoxical nature of each: God is the eternal fire and the fire of new life, but he is also the fire of the apocalypse and of judgement. The poem itself is a prayer or supplication and during the course of this petition, the speaker, as he

¹⁷Eliade, p. 12.

must, acknowledges his sinfulness. He is blinded by "Dust blown by wit" (l. 10), and his heart is preoccupied with the false desires of lust, so that his initial depiction of fire is one of retribution: he calls upon those fires "which shall consume the world" (l. 3) and asks them to punish his heart by first making it tame and subdued (l. 3). His condition is marked by a moral sickness, indicated by the ambiguous term "disseized" (l. 12), which, Patrides explains, is a legal term, but which can also serve as a fortunate homonym for "diseased".¹⁸ The stain of his defilement is the sign of a crippling and ultimately fatal disease, unless it can be erased and consumed by the fiery wrath of God. Yet at the moment of destruction, the speaker is cleansed by the very same fires, which no longer "consume" (l. 3) but "kindle" (l. 4), and which soften from the imposing image of the "greater flame" (l. 1) to the more comfortable image of "Immortall Heat" (l. 1). Christ, of course, is the transcendent figure of Immortal Heat, as he is the radiant light in John's Gospel, and as he is the star's "trinitie of light, / Motion, and heat" (ll. 17-18). But it can never be forgotten that this pleasing image of God contains within its very centre the fearsome element of fire. In this sense, it would perhaps be correct to say

¹⁸Patrides, p. 73.

that for Herbert Christ is never the Ideal; he is the Real. Christ is never simply purifying or attractive or fascinating without also being destructive, repelling and terrifying. As Tuve suggested it is only in the Mysterious that such tensions could successfully be maintained.¹⁹

If the first stanza of "Love" (II) depicts a limited conflagration within the soul of the speaker, it would not be surprising to find a description of the new heaven and the new earth towards the end of the poem. There are several phrases used by Herbert to suggest biblical depictions of life lived in the presence of God, that is, of the resurrected state:

Our eies shall see thee, which before saw dust;
 Dust blown by wit, till that they both were blinde:
 Thou shalt recover all thy goods in kinde,
 Who went disseized by usurping lust:

All knees shall bow to thee; all wits shall rise,
 And praise him who did make and mend our eies.

(ll. 9-14)

The dust which blinds the speaker in the first line of this passage may be a reference to man's mortal and physical condition since it echoes Abraham's summary of his own similar condition: "Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes" (Gen. 18:27). The commentary in the Geneva Bible is revealing, because it emphasizes man's sense of defilement in the

¹⁹Tuve, p. 41.

presence of God, explaining that "[the] nerer we approche unto God, the more doeth our miserable estate appeare, and the more are we humbled". But, according to Herbert, in the purified state, "our eies shall see" (l. 9) God, and his reference to clear vision recalls Paul's comparable description in I Corinthians: "For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face" (13:12). Purified by fire and absolved of his sin, the speaker is now capable of entering the new life in which he is able to see more perfectly the mysteries of God. Indeed, it is another vision of paradise accessible only by a path of fire, where, as in Philippians, "All knees shall bow" (l. 13), and where all who enter shall "praise him who did make and mend our eies" (l. 14).²⁰

The potential danger of any symbol which belongs to an inherited tradition is that its meaning becomes too facile and its force too weak. As one of those symbols, fire can become no more than a commonplace, tamed and controlled by centuries of familiarity. According to Arnold Stein, this is precisely the fault of "Love" (II). In his discussion of a group of four poems, all of which

²⁰Compare Phil. 2:10-11: "At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, and of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father".

show Herbert's disapproval of secular love poetry, and of which the two sonnets on love are a part, Stein argues that all of them lack literary distinction:

Everything is externalized, as if a safe imaginative distance were the only proper course. . . . In making the case against their sincerity one would have to point out that the attitude assumed by the author, however eloquently expressed, does not cost him very much. It is an attitude easily learned by the young, or by the new convert; he may receive, repeat, and vary it without ever opening the package in which it came. . . . When we speak of Herbert's plainness or sincerity, it is not with these poems in mind.²¹

It is difficult to agree that "Love" (II) is neither plain nor sincere, although it is not conventionally considered to be one of Herbert's best. The poem does achieve a resolution which appears too familiar, but in reality it is achieved at a considerable cost. The speaker, for example, does not hide what is essentially human in himself as he acknowledges his lusts, his blindness, and his disease, and he never seeks to avoid retribution but rather to be transformed by it. Moreover, "Love" (II) is positioned within a series of poems in The Temple which, beginning with "Repentance", attempts to bridge, not create, any imaginative distance which appears between the poet, his art, and his God. By "Repentance", through "Faith" and

²¹Arnold Stein, George Herbert's Lyrics (Baltimore: The

"Prayer", and while participating in "The H. Communion", the speaker is led towards a state of reconciliation with God, for which his "Antiphon" of praise is a thanksgiving for the mercy and "Love" of God. The sequence demonstrates a struggle, the desire is sincere, and the resolution, though painful, is ultimately pleasing. While the formula may be too familiar to command Stein's respect, the experience of fire, in which the death of the old man signifies the birth of the new, is nothing less than the experience of absolute reality: "Our eies shall see thee, which before saw dust" (l. 9). Joseph Summers penetrates the significance of the purifying fires of Herbert's Immortal Heat when he suggests that only through this process does Herbert find the true subject of his verse: "The desire to which sincere expression is to be given does not come from the old self, but from the consumption of that self by divine love".²² That consumption is achieved in the fires of "Love" (II).

While there may be some doubt about the artistic value of "Love" (II), there is no doubt about the merits of "Vertue", a significant poem with similar apocalyptic imagery. Stein, for example, believes that "'Vertue' may pass for one of the purest lyrics in the language"; Mary

²²Summers, p. 111.

Ellen Rickey claims it is a brilliant adaptation of the carpe diem tradition; and Helen Vendler devotes an entire chapter to a sympathetic reading of the poem.²³ Whatever its inherent qualities are, and they appear to be many, "Vertue" belongs to the group of poems which illustrates Herbert's use and understanding of the symbol of fire, an understanding which exploits the symbol's ambivalence and mystery. Whereas in "The Starre" and "Love" (II) the speaker's sense of defilement is expressed in moral terms, "Vertue" presents the stain of defilement as a much more profound and subtle mark. The speaker desires to be purified not of his sins but of his mortality, and invokes the flames of Revelation to redeem his humanity. The fires in "Vertue", therefore, conform to the biblical tradition but on a much larger scale, allowing the speaker to transcend his unworthiness in order to assume the eternal spiritual state. The stain of defilement thus extends beyond mere morality to that which is essentially and unavoidably a part of a human being, perhaps purified only in death, which is not to be feared, but which is now "grown fair and full of grace" ("Death", l. 15). The largest encounter with death, of course, is the cataclysmic death of the entire world, realized through the eschatological fires which, in the act of destruction,

²³Stein, p. 170; Rickey, pp. 21-23; Vendler, pp. 9-24.

express the completion and totality of life.

The argument of "Vertue" is simple rather than complex. In each of the first three stanzas, Herbert presents an image of beauty which is nonetheless flawed by its own mortality, but in the final stanza, he turns to the soul which "though the whole world turn to coal / Then chiefly lives" (ll. 15-16). For example, the "sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright" (l. 1) must concede to the fall of night; the "sweet rose" (l. 5) must soon wither and die; and the "sweet spring" (l. 9) is restricted in its effect and must eventually come to a close. The poem is designed to move from death to life, from a single day to the expanse of eternity, and from the weakness of tears to the strength of a soul which "never gives" (l. 14). There is even a sense in which the imagery of the poem develops from the singular to the plural, as in the single day of stanza one to the many days of a season in stanza three, or from the single rose in stanza two to the many roses of stanza three. This gradual effect of expansion and fulfillment in the material world is effectively reversed by the singularity of the fourth stanza which, from its beginning, explodes the reader's expectations with the word "onely":

Onely a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like season'd timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives. (ll. 13-16)

Herbert thus reduces the many to the One. The sweet world

is consumed by flames, which signify the corruption of mortality in the natural world, the eradication of its presence, and the purification of the soul, all at the same time.

Any consideration of life and death and the apocalyptic fires must eventually broach the subject of time, and, in "Vertue", Herbert succeeds in bringing all of these matters together. For a religious man such as Herbert time is not merely a succession of moments which can be regulated by a clock, but rather there are certain moments and experiences which have much greater value than others; time is no longer homogeneous, but broken by periods of great significance or value. In fact, time becomes sacred. At such moments, man is able to meet God more directly or more intimately, as he does in his encounter with fire, and he may even regain a glimpse of the unfallen condition of prelapsarian man:

Religious man periodically finds his way into mythical and sacred time, reenters the time of origin, the time that "floweth not" because it does not participate in profane temporal duration. Religious man feels the need to plunge periodically into this sacred and indestructible time. For him it is sacred time that makes possible the other time, ordinary time, the profane duration in which every human life takes its course.²⁴

During this sacred time, the religious individual

²⁴Eliade, pp. 88-89.

experiences a heightened awareness of himself and of his possibilities through an increase in his power of perception. The world is transformed, as it is in "The Flower", by the presence of the holy:

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! ev'n as the flowers in spring;
To which, besides their own demean,
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.
Grief melts away
Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing. (ll. 1-7)

In such an exalted state, the poet is able to enter another, more innocent world, where experience becomes meaningful and where the ordinary progression of time is interrupted; as we have seen, fire provides that entrance into purified innocence. Such a longing for Eden represents the desire to recover that prelapsarian state of freedom and to restore direct communication between man and God; it is nothing less than an attempt to abolish all the changes made in the nature of human life since the Fall. As Herbert explains, it is the desire for a time when he could act "as if heav'n were mine own" ("The Flower", 1. 30).

One further illustration which illuminates the role of time in "Vertue" is St. Augustine's Confessions, which has been considered by many critics to be a notable influence on Herbert.²⁵ For Augustine, time is a

²⁵ Stanley Stewart, George Herbert (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), p. 101.

subjective, perhaps illusory, entity which is measured in the mind:

It is in my own mind, then, that I measure time. I must not allow my mind to insist that time is something objective. I must not let it thwart me because of all the different notions and impressions that are lodged in it. I say that I measure time in my mind.²⁶

Unable to define precisely what the past and future are, Augustine is nonetheless certain that man's condition in the mutable world can only be alleviated by the eternal goals of heaven:

You, my Father, are eternal. But I am divided between time gone by and time to come, and its course is a mystery to me. My thoughts, the intimate life of my soul, are torn this way and that in the havoc of change. And so it will be until I am purified and melted by the fires of your love and fused into one with you.²⁷

He is thus aware that the escape from time is not an option for the Christian, and that the possibility of reclaiming the world of paradise lies not in the past but in the future, when, as in Herbert, he is "purified and melted by the fires" of God's love. Thus paradise and the apocalypse fuse into a single place of refuge surrounded by fire. He declares that God alone is "the eternal Creator of all time"²⁸ and he warns that "no time and no created thing is

²⁶St. Augustine, Confessions, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), XI, 27, p. 276.

²⁷St. Augustine, XI, 29, p. 279.

²⁸St. Augustine, XI, 30, p. 279.

co-eternal with God".²⁹ Augustine suggests that the creations of man's mind and the products of his experience can only find relief in God and Christ, who is paradoxically both eternal and historical. Through Christ's existence in time, all of human history is given purpose and direction, and through Christ's death, grace and salvation become timeless possibilities. "Vertue" presents this paradox: the eternal enters time in order to offer the means of escaping time.

A first reading of the poem seems to indicate that Herbert is juxtaposing the limitations of the mutable world, represented by the day, the rose, and the season of spring, with the virtues of the immutable world of the soul. It is as though he were setting before his reader life and death and admonishing him to choose life. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that each image used by Herbert is surprisingly, although consistently, ambiguous. The day will indeed be replaced by the night, but the night will eventually be replaced by a new day; the rose's "root is ever in its grave" (l. 7), but that grave, the earth, is also the womb for new roses; and the spring, although it has its closes, or conclusion, will yield to other seasons until the cycle is completed and ready to be renewed. It cannot be denied that in these stanzas, death is explicit,

²⁹St. Augustine, XI, 30, p. 279.

but life is always implicit, hiding beneath the surface ready to transform the decaying processes of nature. The view of time expressed at the beginning of the poem is thus a cyclical one in which the world is periodically regenerated because the world, in various ways, periodically dies. The final stanza, however, posits an alternative to the endless repetition of time by suggesting that historical progress is, in fact, linear. The distinction is immense. Death, it seems, cannot be overcome in a theory of time which is based on a cycle, for although life often follows death, death always follows life. Whether Herbert begins with the day or the night, with Spring or with Fall, one implies the other, and one will always include the other. Time becomes a tyranny from which there is little hope of escape. According to the linear view, however, man's temporal and transient state can be overcome by a variety of historically significant events. Even in the face of death, Christ's historical entry into time is able to sustain the life of man so that the reality of death is, paradoxically, only apparent. Thus the "season'd timber", as an allusion to the Cross, recalls Christ's existence in time when death was embraced in order to be transcended, once for all. If death is explicit in the first three stanzas, it is in marked contrast with the last stanza where death is only a backdrop for the source of authentic and absolute life.

Placed in time, man is capable thus of defeating time through the mystery of the Incarnation, as St. Augustine suggested. For Herbert, time, change, and death are in a sense illusory; the reality lies not in profane duration but in the hope of sacred time, the ultimate moment when "the whole world [will] turn to coal" and the soul will "chiefly [live]" (ll. 15-16). When this awareness is gained and when the ravages of the temporal world are confronted, man comes finally to rest in the eternal world of paradise.

Given Herbert's understanding of fire, his desire to transcend the historical world through the Incarnation, and his quest for purification in order to seek solace in paradise, it is difficult to be concerned, as Helen Vendler is, with the horror of Herbert's invocation of the apocalypse. She writes:

Springs, days, and roses are gone, so it is time for it [the soul] to call on its other qualities: to be staunch, to be stoic, to be seasoned timber. No image of sweetness would do in this all-consuming end. There can be no natural appeal to sweetness in the fire which . . . turns the world to a cinder. Why this energetic holocaust at the end? Herbert may seem cavalier in his over-severe "punishment" of the beautiful, in burning up, in his penultimate line, the "whole world" of his poem.³⁰

Vendler does not realize that Herbert dissolves his world because it is defiled and stained and in need of

³⁰Vendler, p. 20.

redemption; for all purposes it is essentially mortal, subject to the process of change and the inevitability of decay. The blazing fires are a sign of punishment, and yet at the moment of Herbert's awareness that all things are transitory, he is purified. Once the mortal trash falls aside and the human spirit encounters the fire of God, the human in a sense becomes divine, sharing in Christ's resurrection like a seasoned timber, and placed in the company of the eternal. The myth of the apocalypse and the myth of creation are thus united in the symbolic action of fire; all that separates them is the illusion of time itself.

Again, it is possible to see the juxtaposition of defilement and purification, sin and absolution, and death and life in the same image. Fire first of all destroys that which is corrupt as an act of punishment, and such retribution conceals a second but equally important action; to punish is not only to destroy, but by destroying, to recreate. Herbert uses this image in the biblical way, and by defeating the realm of sin and the world of time, he anticipates the passage through fire into a new and eternal state which is at one and the same time in the past, in the memory of Eden, and in the future, in the joy of the new Jerusalem. Heat, warmth, light, and fury are common images in Herbert's poetry, attesting to that religious experience whereby the individual surpasses the profane human

condition and becomes an embodiment of the sacred. Thus the pattern is similar to that of water, and it is reinforced through one of the most important Christian symbols: blood. Blood comes to represent the most severe defilement, the greatest sign of sin, and the most common image of death, but here, as with the other symbols, there is relief. At the worst moment of chaos and moral disintegration there is the greatest hope: the sacrifice of the sacred, the death of Christ. It is this image which has the most profound, certainly the most significant, effect upon George Herbert, for when all else subsides, "Wine becomes a wing at last" ("The Banquet", l. 42).

Chapter Three

Blood: "That Takest Away the Sins of the World"

In Sermon 2 of the Passion preached at Whitehall on Good Friday 1604, Lancelot Andrewes explores the central paradox of God's plan of salvation through the death of Christ. For Andrewes, the event is marked by torment and shame, and yet it is out of this black tragedy that hope and joy emerge:

For, not onely by his death, as by the death of our sacrifice; by the blood of his Crosse, as by the blood of the Paschal Lambe, the Destroyer passeth over us, and we shall not perish: But also by his death, as by the death of our High Priest (for hee is Priest and Sacrifice both) we are restored from our exile, even to our former forfeited estate in the lande of Promise. Or rather (as the Apostle sayeth) Non sicut delictum sic donum: Not to the same estate, but to one nothing like it: (that is) One farre better, than the estate our sinnes bereft us: For they deprived us of Paradise, a place on earth: but by the purchase of his Blood, we are entitled to a farre better, even the kingdom of Heaven: and his blood, not onely the blood of Remission to acquite us of our sinnes; but the blood of the Testament too, to bequeath us, and give us estate, in that heavenly inheritance.¹

The presence of life in death; the singular role of Christ

¹Lancelot Andrewes, "Sermon 2 of the Passion: Good Friday 1604", in Sermons, ed. G. M. Story (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 162.

as both Priest and Sacrifice; the reversal of the Fall through the hope of Paradise; the use of blood to protect and to acquit, but also to symbolize death: all of this demonstrates that Andrewes was keenly aware of the mysteries of the Passion. It was precisely this appreciation which he shared with Herbert, for Herbert, as a sensitive register of the religious sensibility, was fascinated with the ironies and ambiguities involved in the death and blood of Christ. "The Sacrifice" is certain proof of this, since here, with an intensity that extends over more than sixty stanzas, the incongruities of the crucifixion are exposed: Christ's woe, for example, is man's weal (l. 250), and his blood is "the only way, / And cordiall left to repair man's decay" (ll. 158-59). Such examples may be extended throughout The Temple because Herbert's interest in the symbolic dimensions of blood is similar in essentials to his interest in water and fire. The sign of blood, like the signs of water and fire, can be an indication of defilement and sin, and yet it is through the shedding of blood that purification and absolution are made possible. Man's sin results in Christ's death, but Christ's death redeems man's sin so that out of death, life is ensured, both immediately and eschatologically. In the words of Andrewes, Christ's death was "all for this end, that what he was then, wee might not be; and what he is

now, we might be for ever".²

The traces of blood throughout The Temple are varied, and seem constantly to refer to the Passion and therefore to the Eucharist. Herbert recalls the agony when Christ's "heart's deare treasure / Drops blood" ("The Sacrifice", ll. 21-22), and when the crowds shout and cry "And therefore wish my blood on them and theirs" ("The Sacrifice", l. 107). The irony, of course, is that the stain of blood on the hands of the crowd is an image of defilement for abusing the Messiah, but the effect of blood on them, simply because it is the Messiah's, will have the power to absolve them of their actions. Christ's blood, therefore, is the means of salvation: man is restored "By this thy heav'nly blood" ("The H. Communion", l. 38) and he is redeemed "through thy blood" ("Trinitie Sunday", l. 2) because Christ's "drops of blood paid the full price" ("Sunday", l. 54). Christ's Passion "cleanseth me" ("Conscience", l. 15) in an act of purification, and it constitutes total and absolute life, even in the moment of death: Christ's own death "did put some blood" ("Death", l. 13) in the face of death itself. The image of blood as life is made explicit once again in "Prayer" (I), where prayer is "the souls blood" (l. 13), the vital and necessary quality for its survival. It is thus a

²Andrewes, p. 167.

mysterious symbol of death in life and life in death, a sign of hatred but also a sign which "show'd a strange love" ("Obedience", l. 27). In A Priest to the Temple, Herbert fluctuates among the paradoxes of Christ's ministry as he remembers the example of Paul:

He joyes, and he is sorry, he grieves and he gloryes, never was there such care of a flock expressed, save in the great shepherd of the fold, who first shed teares over Jerusalem, and afterwards blood.³

Tears and blood are both chaotic and reassuring, signs of joy and glory as well as grief and sorrow. Blood, then, is a holy symbol in which the agony of defilement is cleansed and overcome by the hope of purification. In his vocation as priest, therefore, and in his journey as a human being, Herbert's goal was always, with a minimum of distractions, "the heavenly altar" where he was "to be bathed, and washed in the sacred Laver of Christ's blood".⁴

The many contradictory and ambivalent attitudes towards blood in Herbert's poetry have their roots in the Bible, where blood is perceived as being simultaneously pure and impure, attractive and repulsive, sacred and profane; it is at once a life-giving substance and a symbol of death. In *Lamentations*, for example, defilement by

³Hutchinson, p. 234.

⁴Hutchinson, p. 231.

blood means social exile and moral impurity:

For the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests, that have shed the blood of the just in the midst of her, They have wandered as blind men in the streets, they have polluted themselves with blood, so that men could not touch their garments. They cried unto them, Depart ye; it is unclean; depart, depart, touch not: when they fled away and wandered, they said among the heathen, they shall no more sojourn there. (4:13-15)

The blood shed by the priests in the past is now avenged by the blood which stains the people. The spilling of blood intensifies the confusion and chaos of the moment as it symbolizes the corruption of the nation. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, blood defiles and pollutes the land, "and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it" (Num. 35:33). Blood is thus a symbol of the condition of disgrace, a condition that can only be redeemed by shedding more blood; defilement and purification are linked through the same image.

Of the three symbols which contain the experience of sin and absolution, blood is certainly the most serious, and the key to its primacy may be discovered in the ancient laws of Israel: "the blood is the life" (Dt. 12:23). For the religious individual, the mystery of life, found in the symbol of blood, is always a creation of God, and must not therefore be misused. But more significantly, that life is of the very nature of God, so that to touch blood is to

touch the sacred, and to touch the sacred is to be defiled. It is in part because of this that Moses shies away from the burning bush and that Isaiah is strongly aware that he is a man of unclean lips: the glory of God is somehow reduced by contact with the essentially sinful human being. Man stands defiled in the presence of God, and yet blood is also the image of purification, so that the sinfulness of man is somehow reduced by contact with the glory of God. The paradox of the situation is profound. The consecration of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood, for example, demonstrates how the blood of death may be transformed into the blood of new life. Aaron is instructed to sacrifice a bull and two rams and to sprinkle the altar with the blood of each:

And thou shalt take of the blood that is upon the altar, and of the anointing oil, and sprinkle it upon Aaron, and upon his garments, and upon his sons, and upon the garments of his sons with him: and he shall be hallowed, and his garments, and his sons, and his sons' garments with him. (Ex. 29:21)

Specifically, the blood is to be put "upon the tip of the right ear . . . upon the thumb of their right hand, and upon the great toe of their right foot" (Ex. 29:20), which is a very similar ceremony to that of cleansing lepers, also with blood, recounted in Leviticus (14:14). The defiled blood of an animal is thus transformed by contact with the altar during the ritual to become a purifying and cleansing agent, giving Aaron, or the lepers of Leviticus,

a new life wholly separate from their previously defiled and profane life.

In one final but important example of the biblical use of blood in the Old Testament, the elements of life and death and defilement and purification are once again prominent. In the story of the ten plagues on Egypt, the first plague and the last plague involve the symbol of blood, and although the first sign is clearly a punishment and an indication of corruption, the last sign becomes an image of protection and consecration. In the first instance, God promises to smite "the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood. And the fish that is in the river shall die, and the river shall stink; and the Egyptians shall lothe to drink of the water of the river" (Ex 7:17-18). The blood is thus an accusation against the Egyptians' defilement, and it is through blood that their defilement is avenged. In the note in the margin of the Douai Bible, God's actions are sanctioned according to a retributive concept of justice: "Because the wicked spil the bloud of Gods Saintes, he will geue them bloud to drinke". And in the Geneva Bible, the juxtaposition of death and life and destruction and creation are understood to be contained in the same image: "God plagued them in that, which was moste necessarie for [the] preservation of life". Thus in the final plague in which the Destroyer takes the life of the first born, the

symbol of blood becomes precisely this agent by which life is protected and preseved: "And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt" (Ex 12:13). Blood redeems God's people, releases them from bondage, and launches them into a new life of freedom, which is defined by service to God. Contact with blood may precipitate the condition of defilement, but it is also in the physical contact with blood, as with water and fire, that the defiled are purified, preserved, and protected.

The Old Testament concept of ritual purification, by which the blood of a sacrificial animal serves to absolve the individual of any sins, in effect to reestablish the intimacy between the human and the divine, and to return chaos to order, is, in the New Testament, transformed by the sacrificial death of Jesus, the Paschal Lamb.⁵ The sense of human defilement remains the same in the two Testaments: Paul is as conscious of his humanity as is Moses. But the purification of human life, though still originating in blood, is in Jesus made both human and more than human, and is therefore able to satisfy the needs of the temporal order and the eternal order. In

⁵Lohse, p. 74.

Jesus, the human and the divine, the sacred and the profane, time and eternity, and defilement and purification meet, because Jesus is himself both man and God. It is thus that the image of destruction and redemption emerges most dramatically and most forcefully because it occurs simultaneously in the single person of Christ. Paul's summary of the human condition points therefore to the corruption of Jew and Gentile alike, but concludes with an affirmation of the power of Christ's blood:

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God. (Rom 3:23-25)

The previous knowledge that "the blood is the life" is now deepened and made absolute by the knowledge that "we shall be saved by his life" (Rom. 5:10), through the vicarious sacrifice of "the meek / And readie Paschal Lambe" ("The Sacrifice", ll. 58-59). The central irony of the religious experience of blood amounts to the realization that in the ultimate act of defilement, the murder of God, the ultimate act of purification takes place. The locus of the experience is the same.

For Herbert, that locus frequently manifests itself in the elements of the sacramental ritual of Christ's Passion. The Communion service becomes, most literally, a

sacred time of union between Herbert and God, in which innocence is restored and purity reestablished. It is a moment when the "sourre juice" of man's defilement becomes the "sweet wine" of purification, and it is a process that is mediated through the physical touch, through contact with the holy: Herbert is reconciled with God through "the taste / of mine inheritance" ("The bunch of grapes", ll. 27, 19-20). Never, however, does Herbert forget the dual aspect of Christ's blood, especially as he remembers that "the bloudie crosse of my deare Lord / Is both my physick and my sword" ("Conscience", ll. 23-24). As a symbol of defilement, blood destroys like a sword, but as a symbol of purification it heals like a cure; both aspects not only occur at the same time, but they are also attributes of the divine itself: God is both "Cordiall and Corrosive" ("Sighs and Groans", l. 28). The paradox of sacred history pervades "The Sacrifice", as well, since Christ's repeated refrain instills the awareness that the joy and beauty of salvation is achieved through the grief and suffering of Christ, who deserved neither to suffer nor to die: "Never was grief like mine" (l. 261). As William Kerrigan suggests, the poem accentuates the notion that "we are forgiven when we have every reason to be accused".⁶

⁶William Kerrigan, "Ritual Man: On the Outside of Herbert's Poetry", Psychiatry, 48 (1985), p. 79.

The blood of the Eucharist thus condemns as it absolves:

Then weep mine eyes, the God of love doth grieve:

Weep foolish heart,

And weeping live.

("Ephes. 4.30", 11. 7-9)

This is a "spontaneous cry of the heart",⁷ a heart which knows its humanity and its salvation. Whether Herbert is seeking his God through the Communion wine or through the recollection of Christ's passion, he is discovering absolution at the very centre of defilement.

The theological controversy surrounding Herbert's appreciation of the Eucharist is a large subject with little direct evidence: its issues are complex and its limits well-defined. [Ilona Bell, for example, is confident enough to claim that the presentation of Christ's sacrifice in "The Thanksgiving" is "imitating the Anglican reforms and rejecting the Catholic mass and Catholic meditations".⁸ On the other hand, C. A. Patrides admits that the Anglican formulation of the Eucharist "became increasingly acceptable to Herbert", although his poetry was nonetheless "replete with words reminiscent in their literal dimension of Roman Catholic claims"⁹. Thus, given these two

⁷Bloch, p. 34.

⁸Ilona Bell, "'Setting Foot into Divinity': George Herbert and the English Reformation", Modern Language Association, 38 (1977), p. 18.

⁹Patrides, p. 18.

conclusions, one can be certain that Herbert was an Anglican, but one that was so theologically broad as to embrace what later became known as the Low and High Church elements. Clearly, the claims are mutually exclusive. But if one approaches the subject of the eucharist not as a rack on which to hang a theological position but as a door through which one encounters and experiences the sacred, then I suspect that the critic has come as close to Herbert's interest in the sacrament as one can possibly get. What the critic will discover is the religious and symbolic experience as Herbert knew it, an experience which is an ancient element of biblical narrative. Isaiah expresses a common belief that the act of eating and drinking can mediate a vision of God:

And in this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the Lord hath spoken it. (Is. 25: 6-8)

The passage looks forward to an eschatological feast when the veil covering the sight of the people will be removed, and when the knowledge and presence of God will be

immediate.¹⁰ The banquet is thus a symbol of ultimate communion with God, expressed nowhere more poignantly than in "Love" (III), but the banquet is also, as it is in "Love" (III), a symbol of the present and real experience of God. The speaker of "Love" (III), even though he is "Guiltie of dust and sinne" (l. 2) and therefore deserving of punishment, is confronted with the Love that "bore the blame" (l. 15) so he is therefore forgiven. The embrace of the human and divine, the present and the future, the temporal and the eternal occurs in the moment of eating: "you must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat: / So I did sit and eat". (ll. 17-18). The poem ends here in the symbolic meal without revealing the vision that the speaker is granted, thereby accentuating the tension between the limits of this age and the expectation of the age to come. "Love" (III) gives rise to thoughts and desires for the final manifestation of God that will take place in the time to come without denying the condition of temporal man. And while the poem itself may not be concerned exclusively with

⁹Patrides, p. 18.

¹⁰The symbolism of the meal is also reflected in the feeding of the five thousand (Mk. 6:30-44), the parable of the wedding feast and its reluctant guests (Mt 22:1-14), the promise in the Beatitudes to the hungry who will later be satisfied (Lk 6:21), and in Jesus's announcement in Luke 22:18: "For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come." Herbert feeds on this tradition: "Thy delight / Passeth tongue to taste or tell" ("The Banquet" ll. 5-6).

the Eucharist, both the poem and the Eucharist express the traditional belief that it is in a banquet that the sacred is revealed, that through such elements as bread and wine, man may come to know God and temporarily to transcend the boundaries of the temporal.

The Communion liturgy of The Book of Common Prayer reflects a similarly paradoxical attitude towards the blood of Christ. In a series of exhortations prior to the prayer of confession, it is stressed repeatedly that although participation in the service ensures the "remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion"¹¹ it is possible that participation may also provoke God's condemnation:

For as the benefit is great, if with a true penitent heart, and lively faith we receive the holy Sacrament; (for then we spiritually eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood; then we dwell in Christ, and Christ in us; we are one with Christ, and Christ with us); So is the danger great, if we receive the same unworthily. For then we are guilty of the Body and Blood of Christ our Saviour; we eat and drink our own damnation, not considering the Lord's body; we kindle God's wrath against us; we provoke him to plague us with divers diseases, and sundry kinds of death.¹²

To come to the Eucharistic feast is to come defiled by the shedding of innocent blood, and to receive the blood in an

¹¹The Book of Common Prayer, p. 222.

¹²The Book of Common Prayer, p. 198.

unworthy manner is to be accused and punished for such corruption; however, to receive Christ's blood in a penitent and faithful manner is to be cleansed and purified. It is a pattern which occurs frequently in the Prayer Book service: the defiled communicants "are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under [God's] Table"¹³ but purification is possible through contact with blood. The communicants thus ask God to grant that they may "eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and . . . drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us".¹⁴ Once purified through the symbol of his defilement, the communicant looks forward to a mystical identification with Christ in both a present and future state. Not only are the participants "very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son" but they "are also heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom".¹⁵ The eschatological dimension of the Eucharist thus renders purification by blood eternal; not only does Christ's blood point to the final redemption at the end of all

¹³The Book of Common Prayer, p. 212.

¹⁴The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 212, 214.

¹⁵The Book of Common Prayer, p. 224.

time, but, because purification is eternal, Christ's blood also points to the present redemption of human nature itself. The present age and the age to come are thus as interrelated as defilement and purification; each penetrates the other, each is found in the midst of the other.

The most striking presentation of the symbol of blood in a religious context is found in "The Agonie", where the common denominator in the definitions of both sin and love is Christ's sacrificial blood. The first stanza of the poem is a virtual rejection of the concerns of a mundane group of academics who in their pursuit of knowledge have forfeited the truth. Their interest in the measurement of natural forces and objects is in some sense an evasion of the weightier and more difficult task of measuring the moral forces of sin and supernatural love:

Philosophers have measur'd mountains,
Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, and kings,
Walk'd with a staffe to heav'n, and traced fountains:
But there are two vast, spacious things,
The which to measure it doth more behove:
Yet few there are that sound them; Sinne and Love.
(ll. 1-6)

For Herbert, sin and love are in fact so vast and spacious that together they constitute the totality of experience, incorporating into this tension all the tensions of the human condition; all that is repulsive and attractive, impure and pure, profane and sacred can be found in this dichotomy. More specifically, however, all such tensions

can be found in the image of Christ who is both man and God, both time-bound and time-transcending, so it is in an illustration of Christ that Herbert sounds out the meaning of sin and love. Christ is the paradigm for human experience:

Who would know Sinne, let him repair
Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see
A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,
His skinne, his garments bloudie be.
Sinne is that presse and vice, which forceth pain
To hunt his cruell food through ev'ry vein. (ll. 7-12)

The rack of torture by which Christ takes upon himself the sins of the whole world leaves him suffering in pain and covered with blood. Blood represents the defilement of his accusers; sin, like blood, seems to course through their veins, corrupting them at the very heart of their being, defiling all they touch with a hungry appetite. Herbert's description of the night at Mt. Olivet is strikingly similar to Lancelot Andrewes's:

No maner violence offred him in Body; no man touching him, or being neere him, in a colde night (for they were faine to have a fire within doores) lying abroad in the ayre, and upon the colde earth, to be all of a sweat, and that sweat to be Blood; and not as they call it. Diaphoreticus, a thinne faint Sweat; but Grumosus, of great Drops, and those, so many, so plenteous, as they went through his apparell and all; and through all, streamed to the ground, and that in great abundance. . . . And truly it should seeme by this fearefull Sweat of his, hee was neere some fornace, the feeling whereof, was able to cast him into the Sweat, and to turn his Sweat into drops of Blood.¹⁶

¹⁶Andrewes, p. 151.

The blood of life which pours from Christ's soul is for both Herbert and Andrewes the blood of violence and pain, and as Andrewes says elsewhere, "the very soule of Sorow and Paine, is the soules Sorrow and Paine".¹⁷ Blood at Mt. Olivet is the symbol of the stain of defilement.

In the final stanza of "The Agonie", Herbert turns his attention towards the task of defining love, and uses the Passion of Christ at Calvary, which the Church commemorates in the Eucharist, as his model. The stanza continues in part the sentiments of the second stanza: the sinless Lord assumes responsibility for sinful man; the one who is not subject to death embraces it willingly. But while the second stanza presented blood as the sign of sin and corruption, the third stanza explores the reality of purification and absolution:

Who knows not Love, let him assay
And taste that juice, which on the crosse a pike
Did set again abroach; there let him say
If ever he did taste the like.
Love is that liquor sweet and most divine
Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine.
(ll. 13-18)

The blood of the crucifixion, here indicated by the pierced side of Christ, does not collect into the bitter cup of Gethsemane, but is transformed into a "liquor sweet and most divine". If at Olivet Christ experienced the means

¹⁷Andrewes, p. 150.

by which the sins of the whole world were committed, at Calvary he is the means by which the sins of the whole world are forgiven, and blood is the medium of each. Once again, Andrewes's sermon is helpful:

That to us hereby, all is turned about cleane contrary: That by his Stripes, we are healed: by his Sweat, we refreshed: By his forsaking, wee received to Grace: That this day, to Him the day of the fierceness of Gods wrath: is to us the Day of the fulnesse of Gods favour, (as the Apostle calleth it) A day of Salvation. In respect of that hee suffered (I denie not) an evill day: a day of heavinesse: But, in respect of that, which He, by it hath obtained for us: It is, (as we truely call it), A good Day, a Day of Joy and Jubilee.¹⁸

Christ's blood becomes the sign of humanity's defilement, provoking "the fierceness of God's wrath", but at the same moment and in the same sacrificial act, it becomes the purifying blood of God, instituting the "Day of Salvation". Love is felt by God as blood and by man as wine. No longer are the measurements and calculations of the astronomer's world significant; the true act of measurement is to "assay / And taste that juice" which in the conjunction of the human and the divine becomes the blood of Christ. The religious individual is touched by the symbols of defilement and purification, and in that touch transcends the limits of the physical through participation with the

¹⁸Andrewes, p. 162.

eternal. As Herbert writes in "The Banquet", it is through the cup of wine, or blood, that he can fly

To the skie:
Where I wipe mine eyes, and see
What I seek, for what I sue. (ll. 44-46)

What Herbert sees with his unclouded vision is the reward of his lifetime: his God.

The crucial realization of "The Agonie", however, is not that the stanzas on sin and love are distinct and wholly unconnected to each other. The pain is powerful precisely because the description of love and the description of sin are so much alike that they are virtually indistinguishable. Richard Strier, in fact, claims that the two stanzas are "disturbingly similar",¹⁹ but he is mistaken if he does not understand that the religious experiences of sin and love, or of defilement and purification, are necessarily similar. The picture at Olivet is as painful and as bloody as the picture at Calvary even though they represent the "two vast, spacious things" (l. 4) of sin and love. At the very heart, therefore of the blood of sin is found the blood of love, and both sin and love make the cross necessary if not inevitable. Helen Vendler accurately identifies the paradox of the poem: "The beholder can point to either and

¹⁹Strier, Love Known, p. 44.

say, with equal truth, "'This is Sin' or 'This is Love'. . . . Two distinct mediations are possible when one looks at a picture of Christ's passion: first, how Sin has caused this event; second, how Love has caused this event."²⁰ But Vendler errs where she refuses to make one element of the paradox a reality. The two images of blood, she suggests, can be differentiated by the degree of personal participation: "The second fashion is a more wholehearted way of entering into an emblem and silently corrects the first way, the way of the bystander".²¹ The difference between seeing the blood in the second stanza and tasting the blood in the third is not, however, as great as it may seem. Defilement is achieved by contact with that which ought not to be touched, whether that contact is tactile, visual, or verbal. Looking at the holy may thus be as grave as touching the holy. But no matter how such contact is expressed, it is once again through physical contact with blood, or with water or fire, that the defiled is purified. If the second stanza is an image of defilement by blood, then the third stanza must be an image of purification by blood. Indeed, it is the speaker's visual participation at Gethsemane that makes his physical

²⁰Vendler, pp. 73-74.

²¹Vendler, p. 74.

participation at Golgotha necessary. The sin and pain which run through the veins of blood in stanza two are as real and as wholehearted a depiction as "the liquor sweet and most divine" (l. 17) which runs through the speaker's veins in stanza three. Whoever desires to know the meaning of sin must "repair / Unto Mt. Olivet" (ll. 7-8) as assuredly as he who desires to know the meaning of love must "assay / And taste that juice" (ll. 13-14). To suggest otherwise is to minimize the speaker's humanity, for if he is simply a bystander to sin and defilement, then he has no need for absolution and purification.

The portrayal of Christ's final days on earth in "The Agonie" is closely followed by a meditation on his death in "Good Friday"; only one poem, "The Sinner", comes between the two. As in "The Agonie", the symbolic paradox of blood as defilement and purification assumes an important significance in the poetic and religious context of "Good Friday". And not only does blood represent both moral conditions, but it becomes the means by which human contact with the divine is mediated. In the first part of the poem, the speaker attempts to establish such contact, but his method is misguided:

O my chief good,
How shall I measure out thy blood?
How shall I count what thee befell,
And each grief tell? (ll. 1-4)

With the first stanza of "The Agonie" as an example, it

should be remembered that Herbert is sceptical of the empirical approach to understanding essential truths. His speaker's intention to measure, to count, and to tell Christ's blood, therefore, is equally as inappropriate as the philosopher's concern for measurement in "The Agonie". Nor is his desire to number (l. 6), to show (l. 7), and to score (l. 10) a suitable method by which the sacrifice of Christ is made vital and absolute in his own life. In fact, the entire first half of the poem seems no more than a "narcissistic self-aggrandizement"²² in which the speaker proudly enumerates a variety of ways in which he can personalize the Passion. The only true way, however, involves the acknowledgement of his own defilement, for as a sinner, the speaker has not only forced Christ to suffer, but to "measure out [his] blood" (l. 2) as well:

Or rather let
My severall sinnes their sorrow get;
That as each beast his cure doth know
Each sinne may so. (ll. 17-20)

The cure for defilement by blood is purification by blood, and the second part of the poem concentrates on this aspect with a certainty that was lacking in the first part. Moreover, where the speaker failed to appropriate the reality of Christ to himself in the first part, he is able to actualize initiation into divine life in the second.

²²Vendler, p. 74.

Herbert confronts the ambiguities of the symbol of blood almost immediately. Blood is the sign of Christ's sorrow (l. 22), and the blood of the speaker's heart harbours his sin (l. 24). Both are instances of destruction, one human and the other moral, but it is the destruction of Christ which is the ultimate act of defilement. It is a moment of utter chaos and the point of extreme separation between man and God, and the agony of such corruption is almost too much for Herbert to bear. In "The Thanksgiving", for example, Christ's words seem to become his own - "My God, my God, why dost thou part from me?" (l. 9) - and the poem ends with the exasperated realization that "for thy passion - I will do for that - / Alas, my God, I know not what" (l. 49-50). The responsibility is entirely humanity's alone: "My sinnes deserve the condemnation" ("The Reprisall", l. 4). But in "Good Friday", the remedy is made available through the very blood which represents man's defilement. The blood of sin and the blood of purification exist side by side in the speaker's heart; one is his punishment, the other is his redemption:

Since bloud is fittest, Lord, to write
 Thy sorrows in, and bloudie fight;
 My heart hath store, write there, where in
 One box doth lie both ink and sinne. (ll. 21-24)

The very instruments of the Passion, "Thy whips, thy nails, thy woes" (l. 26), all of which draw blood, become the

means by which sin is punished and destroyed in the speaker's heart. The blood of the Passion is clearly a punishment. It becomes the weapon that avenges any disruption of divine order and in the process becomes the image of that defilement. At the same time as blood destroys, however, it also purifies and regenerates the speaker. When Christ's blood lodges in the heart, "sinne may say, / No room for me, and flie away" (ll. 27-28), in almost the same way that the souls participating in the Anglican liturgy are "washed through his most precious blood".

Herbert is certainly aware of the purification symbolized by blood, but he is also aware that blood symbolizes initiation, as it did for Aaron and his sons, into divine life and service. Through the blood of Christ, the speaker of "Good Friday" looks forward to the mystical and sacramental encounter with the sacred, even if, within the confines of this life, it may only be a temporary event:

Sinne being gone, oh fill the place,
 And keep possession with thy grace;
 Lest sinne take courage and return,
 And all the writings blot or burn. (ll. 29-32)

Again, it is the same desire expressed in the Prayer Book service that "we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us", both of which are eloquent expressions of the hope of an existence which is at one with the eternal and transcendent. Thus this sacramental imparting of divine

life in the act of purification by blood means at the same time an end to the finitude of man's previous condition. In other words, the old man, the man of the first part of the poem who sought to incorporate himself into every emblem of Christ and therefore to glorify himself rather than the Lord he claimed to serve, is discarded in favour of the new man, the one who is possessed by the wholly other. In fact, it is helpful to see the distinction in terms of possession. The error of the old man and of the empirically minded is that both sought to possess the truth; for the new man, Truth possesses him, and because Herbert knows the truth, he is free. If Christ's death is to be measured at all, it must be measured as a paradox; the murder of God is man's defilement, but the sacrifice of God is his purification, and blood is the way of each.

Herbert conveys the agony of defilement and the paradox of the religious experience in the anxious petitions of "Sighs and Groans", a poem devoted almost exclusively to the punishment of human corruption. The speaker pleads, "O do not use me / After my sinnes" (ll. 1-2), for he realizes that he is no better than "a sillie worm" (l. 5), no more than "frailtie, and already dust" (l. 17). He has "abus'd thy stock, destroy'd thy woods, / Suckt all thy magazens" (ll. 9-10); his lust "Hath still sow'd fig-leaves to exclude thy light" (l. 16); and he deserves "an Egyptian night" (l. 14), as though he too were

experiencing the dark night of the soul in a spiritual wilderness. His reference to the fig-leaves recalls the plight of Adam, and the Adam in Herbert suffers in exile for the first disobedience; avoiding the light brings the shadow of his condemnation. But it is by man's second crime, the killing of Christ, that man saves himself, and the very blood of the crime is the guarantee of relief: "Since [Christ] di'd for my good, / O do not kill me!" (ll. 23-24). Elsewhere in The Temple, Christ's blood is, of course, a great source of strength and health: it opens the "way of nourishment and strength" ("The H. Communion", l. 7); it can "wash away my stubborn thought" ("Artillerie", l. 15); and it is

A balsame, or indeed a bloud
Dropping from heav'n, which doth both cleanse and close
All sorts of wounds; of such strange force it is.
("An Offering", ll. 19-21)

In "Sighs and Groans", however, the positive aspect of blood is balanced with its negative aspect, and it becomes something almost to be dreaded:

O do not fill me
With the turn'd viall of thy bitter wrath!
For thou hast other vessels full of bloud,
A part whereof my Saviour empti'd hath,
Ev'n unto death: since he di'd for my good,
O do not kill me! (ll. 19-24)

The mounting accusations of corruption culminate in this stanza with the reference to Christ's death, but it is Christ's grief which is man's joy, for in this act the defiled are purified. The speaker is purged of his sin at

the moment that sin is committed.

Thus reminded of Christ's sacrifice, the speaker of "Sighs and Groans" is able to approach God more directly if not more positively. The speaker's pleas are no longer expressed fearfully as negatives ("do not use me . . . do not bruise me . . . do not scourge me . . . do not kill me", (ll. 1, 6, 12, 24), but hopefully as positives: "O reprieve me! . . . O my God, / My God, relieve me!" (ll. 25, 29-30). The initial stanzas of repentance have been a purge in the same way that Christ's blood is a purge, so the petitions of the final stanza can afford to be more self-assured. And yet, a sense of ambiguity develops in the last stanza that, if not unexpected, is certainly a surprise:

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! (ll. 25-30)

The amazing paradox of this stanza is that while God is the Saviour and life of man, the feast and cordial of existence, he is also the Judge and the death of man, the rod and the corrosive source of punishment. These harsh alternatives defining the vast schism between everlasting torment and everlasting delight may actually represent, in an abstract sense, no alternative at all: their locus is the same, and that locus is God. Thus the nature of God is in complete accord with the nature of the symbols that

represent God, for both are inherently ambiguous and suggestive. The black and white opposites are equal halves of a single reality, each half penetrating into the other's area. Herbert's speaker may not understand the mysteries of this process when in fact all he desires is to be free of the pain associated with spiritual alienation: he quite naturally shuns the bitter box of punishment and pleads instead for relief. But if not in "Sighs and Groans", then shortly after in "Coloss. 3.3", Herbert accepts the paradoxes of the religious life, reflected in the biblical verse itself: "For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God". Death to the temporal world and release from the mortal nature is the necessary preliminary step towards life in the eternal and immortal realm of God. The blood of Christ, represented in the wine of communion, is one symbol through which the mystery is revealed. The very blood which elicits God's "bitter wrath" (l. 20) is the same blood which was shed "for my good" (l. 23); the very blood which damns him is the blood that saves him.

Herbert's more explicit Eucharistic poems can thus be understood in this light. The symbol of blood manifests the sacred within the world of the profane, and equally importantly, it initiates profane man into sacred reality. Blood represents at the same time both defilement and purification, sin and absolution, and life and death, and with its total balance and its suggestion of ultimate

reality, the symbol becomes a superb synthesis of the complexities of human and divine interaction. In "The Banquet", for example, union with God is the first and foremost desire of the poem: "With me, in me, live and dwell" (l. 3). Through contact with Christ's blood, man is purified and admitted into a sacred state that makes his own soul, as it were, divine:

O what sweetnesse from the bowl
 Fills my soul,
 Such as is, and makes divine!

("The Banquet", ll. 7-9)

The speaker is raised from the ground, from his corruption and humanity, and exposed to the power, influence, and source of life that is revealed in the symbol. He is absolved of his sin and purified of his defilement in a way which guarantees the relief so agonizingly desired in "Sighs and Groans":

Come ye hither all, whom pain
 Doth arraigne,
 Bringing all your sinnes to sight:
 Taste and fear not: God is here
 In this cheer,
 And on sinne doth cast the fright.
 ("The Invitation", ll. 13-18)

Blood is the passage from one mode of being to another, a paradox in itself which implies a break with the past and a transcendence of the present in anticipation of a sacred future. Access to the spiritual world, mediated in the feast of Christ's blood, always entails a death followed by a new birth into absolute and self-sustaining life which

even "After death can never die" ("The Invitation", l. 30). It is this knowledge which lends subtlety and complexity to the ultimate vision realized in "Love" (III).

This, then, is the religious and symbolic experience as Herbert knew it, and the traditions it embodied and upon which it relied were worth knowing, worth admiring, worth pursuing. The juxtaposition of paradoxical meanings within the same symbol reveals a specifically religious way of understanding reality, a way which is often misunderstood by its enemies or obscured by its theologians. Insofar as blood represents life and life is the nature of God, to touch blood is to be defiled by touching God; insofar as man took the life of Christ, and Christ's blood was shed not only for but because of the sins of the whole world, blood is the sign of the depths of man's corruption. Blood is punishment. But insofar as blood is the expiation for man's guilt, to touch blood is to be cleansed; insofar as blood represents initiation into sacred realities and an encounter with the divine, blood represents the purified and eternal state of the redeemed. Blood is salvation. Thus it is that Andrewes delights in the essential connection between diametrical opposites, much as Herbert does in "The Agonie":

It was Sinne then, and the hainousnesse of Sinne

²²Andrewes, p. 160.

in us, that provoked wrath and the fierceness of his wrath in God: It was love, and the greatness of his love in Christ, that caused him to suffer these Sorrowes, and the grievousnes of these Sorrowes, and all for our sakes.²³

To confront the symbol of blood is to confront ambiguities, to feel at one and the same time "our hearts pricked with sorrow, by consideration of the cause in us, our Sinne: And again, warme within us, by consideration of the cause in him his Love".²⁴ Herbert was touched by this powerful symbol in the Eucharist, and it is the Eucharist which Patrides identifies as "the marrow of Herbert's sensibility".²⁵ It pervades Herbert's life as it pervades his poetry, and it becomes for him an authentic and accurate expression of truth. The distinctions between the past and the present, life and death, and the sacred and the profane are transcended by a timeless relevancy. Though manifold and distinct, experience becomes one and universal, and it is through such a vision that the fallen world is redeemed. But above all else, the Eucharist is not a doctrine for Herbert but an impression, even a taste, of the mystery and reality of God.

²³Andrewes, p. 166.

²⁴Andrewes, p. 166.

²⁵Patrides, p. 17.

Conclusion: Content and Context

The gap between the twentieth century and the seventeenth century is more varied than that which can be measured by time alone. The modern reader of Herbert must certainly contend with over three hundred and fifty years; but he must also contend with an intellectual climate and a social milieu that stands in striking contrast to his own. Herbert's poetry embodies ideas and presuppositions which issue from within, and in terms of, a distinct conceptual environment in a distinct phase of its historical development, and it is this knowledge which Joseph Summers suggests is the privilege, or the burden, of the critic to reveal: "Today, as in the past, it is impossible fully to perceive or respond to Herbert's aesthetic achievement without an understanding of the religious thought and experience which is both its subject and its inspiration".¹ This is not to suggest that Herbert's faith was confused with the structures and dogmas which mediated it; "Divinitie" is is a case in point. Yet neither can his faith be understood without them. Herbert, I think, would agree that ideas, even religious ideas, are a part of this

¹Summers, p. 27.

world and of its transitory existence; they are never more than mundane conceptualizations but they are never less than windows overlooking a reality which others have known. It is the vision beyond the window, not the explication of ideas, that takes precedence in the end:

Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one
 When they combine and mingle, bring
 A strong regard and awe: but speech alone
 Doth vanish like a flaring thing,
 And in the eare, not conscience ring
 ("The Windows", ll. 11-15)

My goal in this thesis has been to contribute to our understanding of the windows out of which Herbert looked, of his "religious thought and experience", as Summers phrases it. The above chapters have attempted to place the content of a selection of Herbert's poems within the context of the biblical and liturgical expressions of his time; but more fundamentally, I have suggested that the enduring context of Herbert's poetry is not the theological but the religious, and therefore human, experience. That experience, reflected in the three symbols of water, fire, and blood, is in all cases defined by a death to one existence and a rebirth to another, wholly different, wholly transforming, wholly fulfilling.

It is significant, therefore, when Graham Parry observes that "the poems of The Temple never move far from the Passion, and the poems that deal directly with New Testament material rarely move outside the season of Easter

and Lent"²; and it is significant when Stanley Fish attaches a catechismal structure to The Temple, an element of church practice which is most common during Lent in preparation for the initiatory rituals of Baptism, Confirmation, and first Communion of Easter. Lent and Easter mark the tragedy of death and the celebration of new life, and nowhere are the three symbols of water, fire, and blood more closely connected than in the period from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. The defilement by blood on Good Friday, the symbolic destruction and recreation of life in the Baptismal waters of Holy Saturday, the apocalypse of the old world and the institution of the new in the Paschal candle of Easter Even, and the final purification by blood and impartation of divine life in the Eucharist of Easter express the religious experience of death and regeneration as it is repeated in preparation for the final and cosmic renewal. Each of the three symbols seems to be used by Herbert in anticipation of his death; each of the three symbols seems also to be used by him in expectation of new life. He is defiled and purified, dead and alive, human and divine, in the moment of contact with water, fire, and blood.

It is also significant that the paradox expressed

²Graham Parry. Seventeenth-Century Poetry: The Social Context (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p. 82.

by each of these symbols is reflected in the Anglican practice of contrition so pervasive throughout The Book of Common Prayer.³ Contrition is characterized by a highly penitential attitude in which the individual grieves over a temporary but devastating sense of God's absence, extending even to a sense of despair; the penitent feels himself to be stained symbolically by defilement:

From these considerations, setting before our eyes our inexcusable both unthankfullnes, in disobeying soe mercifull, and foolishnes in provoking, soe powerfull a God, there ariseth necessarily a pensive and corrosive desire, that wee had done otherwyse, a desire which suffereth us to forslowe noe tyme, to feelee noe quietnes within ourselves, to take neyther sleepe nor foode with contentment, never to give over supplications, confessions, and other penitent duties, till the light of Gods reconciled favour, shine in our darkened soule.⁴

At the same time, however, the penitential character of contrition is closely connected with what the Prayer Book calls the "sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving",⁵ for in the moment of despair there is hope and in the symbol of defilement there is purification: "The words of sorrow for sinne, doe melt the verie bowells of God remitting it, and

³My discussion of contrition is influenced by Booty, "Contrition in Anglican Spirituality", pp. 25-48, and Douglas L. Peterson, "John Donne's Holy Sonnets and the Anglican Doctrine of Contrition", Studies in Philology, 56 (1959), pp. 504-18.

⁴Hooker, III, II (VI, 3,4).

⁵The Book of Common Prayer, p. 222.

the comforts of grace in remitting sinne, carrie him which sorrowed rapt as it were into heaven with extacies of joy and gladnes".⁶ As with the symbols of fire, water, and blood, the prayers of contrition move from a painful and tearful purgation to the relief which is felt in the persistence of God's love:

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men; We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we, from time to time, most grievously have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; The burden of them is intolerable.

The sentiment of the prayer is strong, and so too is the reversal which immediately follows. The bowels of God begin to melt:

Have mercy upon us, Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; For thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, Forgive us all that is past; And grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please thee, In newness of life, To the honour and glory of thy Name.⁷

The intensity of the prayer is reflected in Herbert's "Repentance", which begins with a general confession: "Lord, I confesse my sinne is great; Great is my sinne" (ll. 1-2). The intolerable burden of his defilement is conceived in symbolically internal ways, striking at his

⁶Hooker, III, II (VI, 3, 4).

⁷The Book of Common Prayer, p. 202.

most central self: "Bitternesse fills our bowels; all our hearts / Pine, and decay" (ll. 27-28). But the sense of sin and self-hatred, which threatens to become excessive, is juxtaposed with the hope of God's love so that the penitent, who began in sorrow, now ends in praise:

But thou wilt sinne and grief destroy;
 That so the broken bones may joy,
 And tune together in a well-set song,
 Full of his praises,
 Who dead men raises.
 Fractures well cur'd make us more strong.
(ll. 31-36)

Herbert was surrounded by the paradox of the religious experience: it could be found in the biblical understanding of fire, water, and blood; it was evident in the symbols of the Anglican liturgy; it was reflected in the penitent and contrite character of Anglican worship; and finally it was fundamental to the symbolic structure of The Temple. In all cases, it involved newness of life.

Finally, the symbols of water, fire, and blood gave Herbert the freedom to pass back and forth across the division between the sacred and the profane. Through these symbols Flesh had dissolved to reveal the Word in a vision transcending the scope of normal human destiny and amounting to a glimpse of the essential nature of reality. He was condemned by these symbols but he also found his release in them, giving up his attachment to his personal limitations, his hopes and fears, and accepting the self-annihilation that is demanded for rebirth. As Jesus

succinctly puts it, "Whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt 16:25). Herbert's religion, his loss of life in pursuit of the sacred, was not an opiate, or at least that is not the impression left by the experience recorded in his poetry; but rather his faith was vital, effervescent, and growing, demanding all of his energy, all of his strength, and all of his will. It reflected an impression, amounting to a certainty, that ultimate truth was not totally out of touch with human living but neither could it be bound by cheap platitudes. The paradox of water, fire, and blood was a costly mixture of defilement and purification and ultimately of life and death, but once the paradox was embraced, the walls surrounding Paradise could be dissolved, the divine reality could be found and recollected, and wisdom could be regained. The symbols reflect Herbert's humanity but they reveal and impart divine life, as well, and it is in this process that perhaps the greatest paradox is encountered: the Father becomes the mother of a second birth. It is the paradox of the second birth and the mystery of the religious experience that was the source of many of Herbert's most resonant thoughts, his strongest loyalties, and his most genuine convictions. It was the religious experience which allowed Herbert to reclaim the essence of humanity itself.

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