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George Herbert and the Phenomenology of Grace

by Michael Martin

Thus grace constitutes the most proper depth of the will –
interior intimo meo – as well as its most intimate stranger.

— Jean-Luc Marion¹

In both its architecture and in what can be called its metaphysical substance, George Herbert's *The Temple* is a profound and extended contemplation of the ways in which God works in (and into) the life of the Christian. In a manner perhaps unique in devotional poetry, in this carefully structured collection of poems Herbert attempts to transcend theological debate and, instead, strives to disclose the immanent qualities and experiences of a life in God, particularly in his poetic illustrations of the movements and permutations of grace. Herbert's spirituality is thoroughly *enstatic*, a term used by the Victorine theologian Thomas Gallus (c. 1200–46) to describe a spiritual state in which “Still contained within itself and sober, the soul yet desires that which exceeds its capacities and, indeed, even its nature.”² As opposed to ecstatic varieties of spirituality which take the believer out of himself or herself, Herbert's modest method of approaching God requires that he abide in himself, attending to and awaiting on the movements of grace when and as they come. *The Temple*, then, functions as a kind of spiritual picture book providing illustrations – and not explanations – of God's gentle theophantic entrances into the life of the Christian, tracing a simultaneously languaged and existential event that could be called “a chiasmic point where two extremes cross paths.”³

Taking a phenomenological reading of Herbert as my starting point, in this article I explore Herbert's *The Temple* as a space for a variety of encounters with God, encounters figured by a *double intentionality*: from Herbert's (the speaker's) side showing the struggles, anxieties, and uncertainties attendant to religious belief; and from “God's side” disclosing a “phenomenology of grace.” By calling what I find in Herbert a “phenomenology of grace,” however, I do not mean to suggest that the poet was working in a Husserlian

idiom *avant le lettre*, that he was in any way anticipating developments in early twentieth century philosophy. Rather, my claim is that Herbert was exploring the ways in which grace actually unfolds in the lives of believers, that he was interested in grace as phenomenon. In his attention to the phenomenology of grace in *The Temple*, Herbert opens for his reader an opportunity for thinking about the possibility of religious experience and, as we shall see in at least one documented case, access to religious experience itself. Like prayer, Herbert's poetry is nothing if not a dialogue with the absolutely Other.

Surprised by Grace

One of the ways that Herbert figures grace in the poems of *The Temple* is in the "element of surprise" that inhabits the verse. As readers of Herbert are familiar, nearly every poem in the collection somewhere holds a surprise, an "aha!" moment, so much so that the reader anticipates it. This phenomenon is most apparent, even prior to reading them, in the visual poems, such as "The Altar" and "Easterwings," whose clever construction and obvious charm awaken delight in the reader, a strategy also present in less anthologized poems such as "The Water-course," "Anagram of the Virgin Marie," and "Jesu." "Coloss. 3.3" performs a similar trick, showing how grace lies within the larger forum of what is ostensibly a rather straightforward stanza block. Indeed, the very "blockiness" of "Colossians 3:3" – visually a block of text – and the grace-full message contained within it work together to unfold this religious sensibility: that grace can be found, not only in the extraordinary (as in the more charmingly shaped poems) but also in the seeming ordinary. This is also the case in "Paradise," with its incremental pruning of letters from the final word of each stanza's first line in order reveal an insight hidden within the word. This religious aesthetic is most explicitly illustrated in the poem's fourth stanza, which moves from a contemplation of reduction and sacrifice ("SPARE," "PARE") to a discovery of being ("ARE"):

When thou dost greater judgements SPARE,
 And with thy knife but prune and PARE,
 Ev'n fruitfull trees more fruitfull ARE. (ll. 10-12)⁴

These poems unfold an immanent quality in writing, in nature, in language itself, and even in alleged human agency: God and God's grace lurk within creation – in terms of human art as well as of the natural world – and springs forth in moments of surprise and insight, of reassurance and delight. Despite Herbert's habitual meditations on affliction and suffering, these moments of grace in the poems disclose God's portion not only in the writing of them, but, more importantly for George Herbert the pastor, they also illustrate God's activity in the life of the Christian.

Another clever – and very subtle – manipulation of structure designed to reveal the immanence of God comes in the sonnet “H. Baptisme” (I). Here, Herbert modifies the conventional structure of the sonnet form to lead the reader into a cosmological-theological meditation on both the baptism of Christ and the baptism of the Christian.

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, and to the water flie,
 Which is above the heav'ns, whose spring and vent
 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.
 In you Redemption measures all my time,
 And spreads the plaister equall to the crime.
 You taught the Book of Life my name, that so
 What ever future sinnes should me miscall,
 Your first acquaintance might discredit all.

The interesting thing about this sonnet is that it is backward. The volta, which traditionally comes after the eighth line, here appears following the sixth which Herbert accentuates with the exclamation “O blessed streams!”²⁵ So, irrespective of the rhyme scheme, the sestet comes first, followed by the octave. This shift in perspective coincides with the poem's argument. The opening lines feature an observer of heaven. Quickly the speaker's attention turns to the water “above the heav'ns” descending from Christ. Then, rather than the observer seeking

heaven, heaven comes to the observer, performing a kind of poetic “contrary motion,” an idea Herbert would have known from his proficiency in music. When he writes “more backward still” (l. 4), Herbert not only constructs a line of verse, but he also wryly comments on his aesthetic for the poem.

The notion of running backward also has theological significance, and one which Herbert would have encountered in Aquinas’s *Catena aurea*, the collection of biblical commentary the Angelic Doctor collected from the Church Fathers – a handy resource for a preacher like Herbert. *Catena aurea*, along with Lyr’s *Postilla litteralis super totam bibliam* (1322–31) and the *Glossa ordinaria* (twelfth century), was one of the most popular patristic resources consulted by early modern preachers.⁶ Herbert’s friend John Donne sometimes turned to Aquinas’s collation, so it is not much of a stretch to suggest that Herbert did as well.⁷ In the book, Aquinas includes a passage attributed to Augustine’s teacher Ambrose on Matthew’s account of Christ’s baptism (Matthew 3:13-15):

Scripture tells of many wonders wrought at various times in this river; as that, among others, in the Psalms, *Jordan, was driven backwards*; [Ps. 114:3] before the water was driven back, now sins are turned back in its current; as Elijah divided the waters of old, so Christ the Lord wrought in the same Jordan the separation of sin.⁸

In both Herbert’s poem and in Ambrose’s commentary, sins are held in check or driven backward in baptism. In addition, the “blessed streams” of Herbert’s poem also have Eucharistic implications, being derived, as they are, from the “Redeemers pierced side” (l. 6). Herbert turns the theological and mystical insight of Ambrose into a clever performative strategy for constructing the poetry of religious experience.

The Still, Small Voice

A second way in which Herbert figures the movement of grace in the poems of *The Temple* comes in his representations of the experience of theophantic insight, the manifestation of the “still, small voice.” Herbert’s template for the experience is derived from 1 Kings, Elijah’s

grace.¹⁶ Herbert also utilizes the still, small voice in “Jordan” (II). But one of his more startling uses of the figure appears in “Artillerie,” where Herbert plays against his own still, small voice convention, figuring a kind of spiritual experience with a very different interlocutor.

The critical history of “Artillerie” is relatively skimpy, though both Richard Strier and Michael Schoenfeldt have given the poem some attention, the former reading it as Herbert’s argument against rationalism in matters of faith and the latter questioning the appropriation of military terminology as a mode for treating the “negotiations that occur between mortals and God.”¹⁷ Unlike “The Collar” and “Jordan” (II), the disembodied voice of “Artillerie” does not arrive with the spiritual resolution of a conflict at the end of the poem, but is accompanied by very real (though metaphoric) fireworks in the first stanza:

As I one ev’ning sat before my cell,
 Me thoughts a starre did shoot into my lap.
 I rose, and shook my clothes, as knowing well,
 That from small fires comes oft no small mishap.
 When suddenly I heard one say,
 Do as thou usest, disobey,
 Expell good motions from thy breast,
 Which have the face of fire, but end in rest. (ll. 1-8)

The words uttered by the voice here do not sound very “God-like.” Indeed, they come off as cavalier, a little sarcastic, absolutely counter to what one would expect from a loving God. Hutchinson reads the falling star of “Artillerie” as a “divine impulse,” made of fire and, therefore, suggestive of “danger and disturbance” (p. 526), whereas Robert Ellrodt sees God as the co-speaker.¹⁸ A close reading of the poem, however, points in another direction. My contention is that the voice does not belong to God. Rather, the speaker here is Lucifer, the fallen angel, in the guise of a fallen star. The poem clearly alludes to the “falling star” Lucifer of Isaiah and Luke: “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!” (Isaiah 14:12) and “I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven” (Luke 10:18). This, and not a mystical dialogue with God, is the poem’s *mise-en-scène*.

In the second stanza of “Artillerie,” the speaker resists the invitation of the Tempter:

I, who had heard of musick in the spheres,
 But not of speech in starres, began to muse:
But turning to my God, whose ministers
 The starres and all things are; If I refuse,
 Dread Lord, said I, so oft my good;
 Then I refuse not ev'n with bloud
 To wash away my stubborn thought:
 For I will do or suffer what I ought. (ll. 9-16; my emphasis)

Lucifer, like Satan in the Book of Job, also works – indirectly, so to speak – under Divine Providence as “a minister” (*angelos*). If not a member in good standing, Satan, despite his cosmic demotion, is still associated with the angelic hierarchy: “Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them” (Job 1:6). Herbert’s speaker knows what he is dealing with and resists the temptation to “expel good motions” from his breast: he turns *away* from the talking star and *toward* God. This explains why Herbert’s speaker is in such a hurry to shake the fallen star from his clothes, “knowing well, / That from small fires comes oft no small mishap” (ll. 2-3).

This is not to say that temptation is a bad thing in and of itself. As Herbert’s contemporary and fellow Anglican clergyman Jeremy Taylor has it and as Herbert would have agreed, “temptation is the opportunity of virtue and a crown.”¹⁹ God allows Lucifer (pride) to tempt the speaker. Lucifer, then, is God’s volley in the artillery of the poem. The only response the speaker can make – his “artillery” – is found in his “tears and prayers” (l. 19), as temptation successfully resisted, like affliction, leads one to rely more fully on God, a theme of Herbert’s verse. Importantly, for Herbert the encounter with God, though freely bestowed on the believer, *follows* a period of spiritual struggle. It does not precede it. As 1 Kings explains it and as “Artillerie” affirms, truly, “the LORD was not in the fire.” God, certainly, is present even in apparent absence, but, as Herbert suggests, the believer needs first to become aware of a need for God in order to appreciate the encounter.

Herbert and the Eucharist

The clearest examples of the Christian's encounter with God in *The Temple* are found in the many poems that describe that encounter in terms of the Eucharist. It is impossible to read through the body of poems comprising *The Temple* and avoid noticing the importance of the Eucharist to Herbert's spirituality. Though the Eucharistic aesthetic of the collection is impossible to ignore (or, perhaps, because of it), critical attention has attempted to problematize what does not appear to be very problematic for Herbert, at least (though he was certainly concerned with the debates concerning the Eucharist in his lifetime). Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt have examined the importance of debates about the nature of the Eucharist in early modern Europe, seeing in them a drive for dominance and control, while Richard Strier has tried harder than most to complicate Herbert's attention to the Eucharist, interpreting Herbert as a "thoroughgoing Calvinist" when it comes to the Lord's Supper.²⁰ In his influential study, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry*, Strier, in his own words, "militates strongly against a specifically Eucharistic reading" of Herbert, while acknowledging that "Herbert frequently uses Eucharistic-sounding language – metaphorically," and the critic has stuck to this interpretive position.²¹ R.V. Young has called Strier's "Calvinist hypothesis" into question, noting, among other things, that, in addition to Herbert's preoccupation with the Eucharist, his love for formal liturgy also puts him in opposition to Calvinism's distrust of ceremony.²² Heather Asals, similarly, has argued that Herbert's verse "is eucharistic because it concentrates the 'creature' of language as the ontological bridge to the divine" and Rosemond Tuve has identified "the blood of the Eucharist" as "a mystery always to the forefront of Herbert's mind."²³ Some critics, it is true, have argued for the primacy of scripture as an influence in Herbert's poetry,²⁴ and while it is hard to deny the importance of the Bible to his work, such a fact should come as no surprise – and acknowledging the importance of the Bible to Herbert does absolutely nothing to diminish the importance of the Eucharist to him. Though some scholars have followed Strier, the general consensus is that the Sacrament is the focal point of Herbert's religion.²⁵ The evidence is, quite simply, overwhelming. As Herbert's friend Lancelot Andrewes phrased it, and as Herbert's poetry testifies, "the

holy Eucharist . . . is the corner-stone of the Law and the Gospel.”²⁶ Adding to this critical argument, my claim is that, for George Herbert, the Eucharist stands as the most tangible proof of God’s presence in the world, the central and most readily available locus for access to grace.

Before examining the Eucharistic aesthetic Herbert upholds, it is important first to notice the difference between how wine is represented in “The Church-porch” section of *The Temple* as opposed to its many appearances in “The Church” (no reference to the Eucharist appears in “The Church Militant”). In “The Perirrhanterium” section of “The Church-porch” wine is a symbol of incontinence and a loss of self-control. “Drink not the third glasse,” Herbert warns readers, “which thou canst not tame, / When once it is within thee” (ll. 25-26). Twice more he emphasizes the same notion.²⁷ Herbert does not see any value in wine as a symbol for spiritual inebriation as is the case in Sufi poetry and in the Christian mysticism of John Ruusbroec and Francis of Assisi among others.²⁸ Herbert, grounded in an enstatic spirituality, wishes to avoid that kind of ecstatic religious experience. But the actual and metaphoric nature of wine changes once the reader enters into the precincts of both “The Church” and the Church. As the reader crosses the threshold, the poem “Superliminare,” he is invited to “approach, and taste / The churches mysticall repast” (ll. 3–4), and the first thing seen is “The Altar.”

There has been much debate about the significance of this poem. As Arthur L. Clements has observed, “‘The Church’ begins at an altar and ends at a table, another name for an altar. It begins with meditations on Christ’s bloody sacrifice and ends with a celebration of his bloodless sacrifice in a contemplative Eucharistic feast (i.e., in ‘Love’ [III]).”²⁹ Many critics, however, have accepted the assertion that the altar one meets at the opening of “The Church” corresponds to the altars of the classical period which were situated closer to the entrance of a temple (and not a Christian church) and not at the opposite end of the building, what is generally referred to in church design as “the East.”³⁰

While Herbert certainly would have appreciated the classical overtones these scholars have detected in the poem, his main intention was not to invoke the age of antiquity. If anything, he recognized antiquity as anticipating in some ways the coming of the Church: “Religion, like a pilgrime, westward bent, / Knocking at all doores, ever

as she went” (“The Church Militant,” ll. 29-30). But he has other things in mind with leading the reader’s attention to an altar. Quite simply, the architecture of a church (and the Anglican church buildings of Herbert’s time were almost entirely the Catholic churches of the pre-Reformation) is designed with the altar as *the* focal point. The altar may not be the first thing one *touches* when entering the nave, but it is surely the first thing one *sees*. And, as the body and structure of the poems repeatedly reiterate, the altar and all it signifies – Christ’s sacrifice, the individual’s need to approach him in the Eucharist and participate in his Mystical Body – are the reason for a church building in the first place, as Herbert implies in “The Sacrifice”: “For they will pierce my side, I full well know; / That as sinne came, so Sacraments might flow” (ll. 146-47). Taking this into consideration, it is difficult to argue with C.A. Patrides’s observation that the “Eucharist is the marrow of Herbert’s sensibility.”³¹ On the other hand, because of the centrality of the altar and the Eucharist to the poetry, it is difficult to accept Strier’s resistance to a Eucharistic reading of both Herbert and *The Temple* when he asserts that “The Altar” “does not in any way refer to the Eucharist.”³² Many of the poems in *The Temple*, on the contrary, argue that it does.

Herbert’s clearest poetic exposition of the centrality of the Eucharist as a real contact with Christ and channel of grace comes in the two poems entitled “The H. Communion,” one from *The Temple* and the other found only in the Williams MS. The poem from *The Temple* speaks directly to the communicant/speaker’s intimacy with God at receiving the Eucharist, telling his Lord, “To me dost now thyself convey” (l. 4). This is no memorial, but an encounter with the divine. “But by way of nourishment and strength,” writes Herbert,

Thou creep’st into my breast;
 Making thy way my rest,
 And thy small quantities my length;
 Which spread their forces into every part,
 Meeting sinnes force and art. (ll. 7-12)

Ryan Netzley has rightly argued that in this poem the poet figures “not a transcendent spirituality, but rather the very sacramental, even bodily, immanence that attends the Real Presence.”³³ Herbert knows that a

merely memorial Eucharist, a religious meal empty of the Real Presence, would not have the power to either bring Christ to the believer or transform the communicant in any way. Thus, he acknowledges,

Onely thy *grace*, which with these elements comes,
 Knoweth the ready way,
 And hath the privie key,
 Op'ning the souls most subtile rooms.
 (ll. 29-32; my emphasis)

Not only does Eucharistic grace permeate the soul, which thereby influences the body, as a result of its sanctifying grace it also opens the gates of heaven to the communicant so that "He might to heav'n from Paradise go, / As from one room t'another. / . . . restor'd . . . to this ease / By this thy heav'nly blood" (ll. 35-38). Just as the profane wine depicted in the "Perirrhaterium" cannot be controlled "once it is within thee" and transforms the partaker who "forfets Man, and doth devest / All worldly right, save what he hath by beast" (ll. 35-36), so the sacramental wine of "The Church" restores the communicant: "when ever at his board / I do but taste it, straight it cleanseth me" ("Conscience," ll. 14-15).

In "The H. Communion" poem found in the Williams MS, however, the soteriological concerns found in its companion poem in *The Temple* are pushed to the background.³⁴ In the Williams MS poem, which, if not an earlier work, does not seem to be as fully realized a poem as its counterpart in *The Temple* (Herbert obviously did not think it to be), the poet attends to the Sacrament as *mysterion*. The poem opens by considering how the speaker might believe in the Real Presence, "how shall I know / Whether in these gifts thou bee so / As thou art evrywhere" (ll. 1-3). Herbert, however, is not really interested in the question he poses. Instead, the poem argues for a trust in the *mysterion* of the Real Presence, not an explanation. Herbert refuses to enter into the debates over the Eucharist that so marked his age, writing in the second stanza, "ffirst I am sure, whether bread stay / Or whether Bread doe fly away / Concerneth bread, not mee" (ll. 7-9). And he further develops this notion throughout the poem, wondering in the third stanza "if that thou two stations makest / In Bread & mee" (ll. 16-17) and in the fourth whether "thou didst all those pains endure / To' abolish Sinn, not

Wheat” (ll. 20-21). The poem never strays from these ideas and never really develops beyond them, though the fifth stanza touches on the moderately theological notion of Impanation, the understanding that the body and blood of Christ are co-substantial with the species of bread and wine (which influenced Luther’s concept of Consubstantiation). Instead of entering into the fray of Eucharistic debate, Herbert concludes that *how* the Eucharistic elements become the Body and Blood of Christ is not nearly as important to know as the fact *that* they do. Thus, he ends this poem relying on trust in the Real Presence – no matter how it comes about:

This gift of all gifts is the best,
 Thy flesh the least that I request.
 Thou took’st that pledg from mee:
 Give me not that I had before,
 Or give me that, so I have more;
 My God, give mee all Thee. (ll. 43-48)

Herbert – at least in these two poems – avoids committing to either the Calvinist notion that the Eucharist, though Christ’s Presence is Real, is “spiritual” or the more sensuous Catholic understanding that Richard Crashaw would later exploit.

Though Ellrodt believes Herbert’s “mode of apprehension” (a telling phrase) regarding the Eucharist “was truly original” and that the poet “was more precise when he suggested a parallel action of divine grace on the soul and the material elements of the body,” a case can be argued that Herbert was more than a little consonant with Richard Hooker’s theology.³⁵ For one, Hooker does not think fretting about how the elements become the Body and Blood of Christ serves any real purpose:

This is my Body, and *This is my Blood*, being words of promise, sith we all agree, That by the Sacraments, Christ doth really and truly in us, perform his promise; why do we vainly trouble our selves with so fierce Contentions, whether by Consubstantiation, or else by Transubstantiation the Sacrament it self be first possessed with Christ, or no? A thing which no way can either further or hinder us, howsoever it stand,

The operative term here is “onely.” Herbert visits this idea in several other poems. In “Divinitie,” for instance, he writes

But he doth bid us take his bloud for wine.
 Bid what he please; yet I am sure,
 To take and taste what he doth designe,
 Is all that saves, and not obscure. (ll. 25-29)

Here he reemphasizes the “onely” proposition of “Peace” by asserting that the Eucharistic blood – mystically and actually identical with Christ’s blood poured out at the Passion – “Is all that saves.” Herbert also presents the Eucharist as central to Christian life in “An Offering,” “The Bunch of Grapes,” “Divninitie,” “The Priesthood,” and “The Banquet,” but perhaps nowhere as poignantly as in “The Collar” and “Love” (III).

In “The Collar,” in the midst of the speaker’s full-blown despair and resultant rejection of his vocation as a priest, Herbert gives us a perversion of the Eucharist, an idea anticipated from the poem’s first line “I Struck the board, and cry’d, No more,” the “board,” as many (but by no means all) have argued, indicating the Communion Table.³⁹ The poem’s Eucharist is perverted because the speaker perverts his vocation by his insistence on escaping God’s will:

 Sure there was wine
 Before my sighs did drie it: there was corn
 Before my tears did drown it. (ll. 10-12)

The speaker’s rage and blasphemy turn the Eucharistic elements to their opposites. Wine is not dry: bread (corn) is; bread, dry by nature, is destroyed by immersion in water. The speaker, then, by his disobedience has metaphorically inverted and destroyed the Eucharist. Herbert’s speaker could have rebelled against anything – scripture, ecclesia, ceremony – but he explicitly rebels against the priesthood as it relates to the Eucharist. Obviously, for Herbert the priesthood exists because of the Eucharist. Julia Carolyn Guernsey argues that in the poem Herbert imagines a speaker trying “to free himself from the constraints of religious life,” which is surely correct, but it is even more due to the fact that, for Herbert, the religious life

of the priest centers upon the Eucharist.⁴⁰ Herbert himself affirms this notion in “The Priesthood”:

But th’ holy men of God such vessels are,
 As serve him up, who all the world commands:
 When God vouchsafeth to become our fare,
 Their hands convey him, who conveys their hands.
 O what pure things, most pure must those things be,
 Who bring my God to me! (ll. 25-30)

The antimetabole “Their hands convey him, who conveys their hands” directly speaks the reciprocal and paradoxical phenomenon of consecration. Indeed, according to the poem, the priest holding a chalice – a “vessel” – is himself a vessel in the hands of God. Clearly, the priesthood, for Herbert, is unthinkable apart from the Eucharist.

Herbert’s ultimate statement on the Eucharist arrives with the final poem of “The Church.” In “Love” (III), a particularly affective poetic moment concludes a shorter sequence that begins with “Death” and proceeds through “Dooms-day,” “Judgement,” and “Heaven.” This short sequence (the “long sequence,” indeed, begins with the vision of the Communion Table provided by “The Altar”) serves as an imaginative account of the “Last Things,” the events leading through death and to the Beatific Vision.

“Love” (III) is Herbert’s take on the Beatific Vision, and, in keeping with his attention to enstatic as opposed to ecstatic religious experience, it is a low-key, modestly drawn picture of the encounter with God. It is also highly Eucharistic. The poem takes place in heaven, following the speaker’s death. “The Church,” then, ends in heaven with a Eucharistic celebration – just as “The Church” begins with anticipation of the earthly Eucharist intrinsic to “The Altar.” Bloch argues that the poem is not meant to take place in heaven, but that it is simply a Communion poem.⁴¹ Such a view certainly problematizes our reading of the poem, but many readers will find this difficult to accept in view of its placement.⁴² Michael Schoenfeldt, for his part, tries to politicize Herbert’s Beatific Vision by raising the Puritan/Anglican question about the proper posture for the reception of Communion, sitting or standing, and poem certainly does have the speaker seated.⁴³ But, as Regina Schwartz has observed, the communion that takes place

here is neither one informed by theological debate nor by scholastic definitions of terms and species.⁴⁴ Indeed, locating a theological or political debate in “Love” (III), I think, is to misread the poem entirely. Theology abides in rationalizing or explaining the *mysterion*, whereas in this poem and, arguably, throughout *The Temple*, Herbert is more interested the ways faith and the action of grace afford the believer the opportunity to transcend theological debate and enter into the *mysterion* itself. In heaven theological debate is superfluous, since, at that point, believing Christians will see God “face to face” and know him even as they are known (1 Corinthians 13:12). What we have instead of a political problem or a theological debate in the poem, then, is a picture of intimacy.

Feelings of inadequacy as yet burden the speaker, an example of what Arnold Stein has called “the human reluctance to accept love as a gift entire” in Herbert’s poetry.⁴⁵ And because he is still preoccupied with ego-centric notions (the emphasis on “I”) that he should somehow merit his Master’s friendship, the speaker receives a gentle reprimand from Christ, expressed with an exquisite paronomasia: “Who made the eyes but I?”⁴⁶ Indeed, Christ erases questions of inadequacy or merit, Herbert subtly argues in the poem, exactly as He erases doctrinal and theological distinctions in a heavenly Eucharist that figures a moment of homey comfort and a very real, very permanent Sabbath of rest.

What “Love” (III) articulates even above Herbert’s affection for the Eucharist is his trust in the presence of Christ in the Sacrament, and which, as *The Temple* illustrates, is synonymous with his presence in the Church, as well. The drama that unfolds throughout *The Temple*, then, is a drama of a Christian coming to terms with Christ’s presence, or, rather, with the gift of Christ’s presence. As Jean-Luc Marion describes it,

The presence of Christ, and therefore also that of the Father, discloses itself by a gift: it can therefore be recognized only by a blessing. A presence, which gives itself by grace and identifies itself with this gift, can therefore be seen only in being received, and received only in being blessed.⁴⁷

Throughout *The Temple*, Herbert repeatedly investigates the Christian life as it unfolds in the existential, mystical, and, above all, sacramental phenomenology of grace, and this grace always arrives in the form of a

gift: as insight; as the still, small voice; and, most reliably, in the Eucharist, all of which attest to the ways in which a phenomenological attention to presence opens to an experience of divine immanence.⁴⁸ George Herbert's poetry, indeed, opens itself to such an immanence and, as a result, distances itself from a Calvinist overemphasis on God's absolute transcendence.

As I have been arguing, Herbert traces the phenomenology of grace throughout the poems that comprise *The Temple*, leading his readers in a return to the primacy of a Christian religious experience that both transcends and, in its own way, corrects the theological. For Herbert, the primacy of the Christian religious experience unfolds in movements of grace: in moments of surprise or insight, in the awareness of the "still, small voice," in the Eucharist. And these moments appear in the poetry not for the speaker (or poet) alone. They can also manifest in the experience of the reader. Indeed, one of the many wonderful things about *The Temple* is the way Herbert provides his readers with a phenomenology of grace that also potentially enacts for them an experience of grace, a site of "double intentionality," the chiasmic meeting of two intentionalities. In what is perhaps the most striking recorded example of this phenomenon, in a letter she wrote to a priest, the philosopher and mystic Simone Weil articulates what happened to her through her engagement with "Love" (III):

There was a young English Catholic . . . from whom I gained my first idea of the supernatural power of the sacraments because of the truly angelic radiance with which he seemed to be clothed after going to communion. Chance – for I always prefer saying chance rather than Providence – made of him a messenger to me. For he told me of the existence of those English poets of the seventeenth century who are named metaphysical. In reading them later on, I discovered the poem of which I read you what is unfortunately a very inadequate translation. It is called "Love." I learned it by heart. Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines. I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my

knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me.⁴⁹

Sincere attention to an artifact, a work of art, a poem, a passage of scripture not infrequently results in a double intentionality, an opening to immanence, or perhaps to a “transcendent immanence,” an oxymoron providing what may be the best approximation for describing such an event. George Herbert’s poetry inhabits just such a space, exploring its permutations and possibilities and, even, experimenting with its practical applications. Weil’s deep attention to Herbert’s poem – even in translation – brought her to an encounter that surely would have pleased the seventeenth-century Anglican pastor: an awareness of the presence of Christ. Certainly, not every reader of Herbert has an experience along the likes of Weil’s. But neither, I think, can she have been the only one.

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Notes

1. Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 65.

2. Boyd Taylor Coolman, “The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition,” in *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 85-102, cited at 93.

3. John P. Manoussakis, “The Phenomenon of God: From Husserl to Marion,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (2004): 53-68, cited at 62. Manoussakis employs the term “inverse intentionality” to describe a phenomenon very similar to what I call “double intentionality” in the present essay.

4. F.E. Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941). All quotes from Herbert are from this edition, cited in the text of my essay by line number.

5. Sir Philip Sidney, among others, also played with reverse sonnets in, for instance, *Astrophil and Stella* 39, “Come Sleep, the certain know of peace.” See *Sir Philip Sidney’s An Apology for Poetry and Astrophil and Stella: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Glen Allen, VA: College Publishing, 2001).

6. Katrin Ettenhuber, "The Preacher and Patristics," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon*, ed. Peter McCullough, Hugh Adlington, and Emma Rhatigan (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 34-53, cited at 39. *Catena aurea* was popular from the Middle Ages through the early modern period. An edition appeared in the early seventeenth century as *Catena aurea, in Matthaeum, Marcum, Lucam et Joannem ex Sanctorum patrum sentiis* (Antverpiae: Apud Ioannem Keerbergium, 1612).

7. Katrin Ettenhuber, *Donne's Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 88-89.

8. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary of the Four Gospels Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Oxford: John Henry and James Parker, 1864), vol. 1, part 1:108.

9. The first collection of poetry published in English, indeed, was William Baldwin's *Canticles, or Balades of Salomon* (1549), and Noam Flinker suggests the volume had a direct influence on Herbert's religious poetics. See Flinker's *The Song of Songs in English Renaissance Literature: Kisses of Their Mouths* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 31-32. Barbara K. Lewalski connected Herbert to the Song of Songs long before Flinker, though he sets the context with extraordinary comprehensiveness. See Lewalski's classic text *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 68.

10. Herbert J.C. Grierson, "Introduction," in *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1921), p. xlii.

11. Ramie Targoff rightly observes that "in poem and after poem of *The Temple*, the speaker intertwines the expression of his inner self with the creation of skillful texts that might be shared by fellow worshippers." See her *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 88.

12. James Boyd White, "*This Book of Starres*": *Learning to Read George Herbert* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 153.

13. Martz examines the structural relationships of this sequence in *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), pp. 300-04.

14. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, p. 303.

15. Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (1954; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 90.

16. Richard Hooker describes the grace of sanctification (or, alternately, the grace of regeneration) as the state in which God participates in human life. "Seeing therefore that Christ is in us as a quickning Spirit, the first degree of Communion with Christ must needs consist in the Participation of his Spirit."

See Richard Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie, Eight Bookes* (London, 1632), 5.56, p. 307.

17. Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 99; Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 193.

18. Robert Ellrodt, *Seven Metaphysical Poets: A Structural Study of the Unchanging Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 49.

19. Jeremy Taylor, *The Life of Christ* in *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Jeremy Taylor, D.D.*, ed. Reginald Heber, rev. Charles Page Eden, 10 vol. (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1883), 2:204.

20. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 143-46; Richard Strier, "George Herbert and Ironic Ekphrasis," *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1 (January 2007): 96-109, cited at 98. As Frances Cruickshank observes, "new historicists have read the Eucharist as an analogy for the falsely hermetic art of traditional literary study: an object cut loose from temporality, process and intention, by cultural consensus miraculously or magically transcending circumstance." See her *Verses and Poetics in George Herbert and John Donne* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), p. 94.

21. Strier, *Love Known*, pp. 46-47, note 41. Strier reasserts this position most recently in "George Herbert and Ironic Ekphrasis."

22. R.V. Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan*, *Studies in Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 116-18, cited at 122.

23. Heather A.L. Asals, *Equivocal Predication: George Herbert's Way to God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 6; Rosemond Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 70.

24. Chana Bloch, following the path laid by Barbara K. Lewalski, has focused on the Bible as the source of Herbert's heavenly muse. See her *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985). Though she acknowledges the Eucharistic overtones in *The Temple*, she embeds them in the Bible at the expense of the liturgical life of the Church. See in particular pp. 100-04.

25. Esther Gilman Richey, "The Intimate Other: Lutheran Subjectivity in Spenser, Donne, and Herbert," *Modern Philology* 108, no. 3 (February 2011): 343-74. Among the studies arguing on behalf of the Eucharist as central to an understanding of Herbert are Regina M. Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 117-38, and Ryan Netzley, *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist in Early Modern Religious Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 23-65.

26. A sermon preached 24 March 1611, in Lancelot Andrewes, *Ninety-Six Sermons*, 5 vol. (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1871 – 75), 2:292.

27. “Stay at the third glasse: if thou lose thy hold, / Then thou art modest, and the wine grows bold” (ll. 41-42); and “Stay at the third cup, or forgo the place. / Wine above all things doth Gods stamp deface” (ll. 47-48).

28. John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, trans. James A. Wiseman (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986). Bonaventure, in his *Life of Saint Francis*, describes his subject returning from Communion “like one inebriated in spirit, and rapt out of himself in ecstasy.” See *The Life of St. Francis* (London: J.M. Dent and Company, 1904), p. 96.

29. Arthur L. Clements, *Poetry of Contemplation: John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, and the Modern Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 96.

30. Mary Ellen Rickey, *Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), p. 10; Summers, *Religion and Art*, p. 141. See also Bart Westerweel’s fascinating discussion of “The Altar” in his *Patterns and Patterning: A Study of Four Poems by George Herbert* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1984), pp. 53-139.

31. C.A. Patrides, “Introduction,” in *The English Poems of George Herbert* (London: J. M. Dent, 1974), p. 17.

32. Strier, *Love Known*, p. 191. Regina Schwartz calls Strier’s anti-Eucharistic insistence into question, pointing to some comments he made during an MLA debate on “Love” (III) in 1997. She thinks these contradict his take in *Love Known*, which she sees as an “otherwise consonant reading of Herbert.” I think he was being perfectly consistent. See her *Sacramental Poetics*, p. 177, note 33.

33. Netzley, *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist*, p. 29.

34. It does not seem right to call this poem a “version” of the poem of the same name found in *The Temple*, as Netzley does (*Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist*, pp. 33-35). They are completely different creations, save in name.

35. Ellrodt, *Seven Metaphysical Poets*, pp. 210-11.

36. Hooker, *Lawes*, 5.67, pp. 359–60.

37. See in particular Donne’s Whitsunday sermon (1630): “When the Church fell upon the *Quomodo* in the Sacrament, How, in what manner the body of Christ was there, we see what an inconvenient answer it fell upon, That it was done by Transubstantiation; That satisfied not, (as there was no reason it should) And then they fell upon others, *In, Sub, and Cum*, and none could, none can give satisfaction.” See *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vol. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953-62), 9:246.

38. Hooker, *Lawes*, 5.57.

39. Nevertheless, Herbert's statement in "Conscience," cited earlier, makes a pretty serious claim that the board of "The Collar" is, indeed, the Communion Table: "when ever at his board / I do but taste it, straight it cleanseth me" (ll. 14 – 15; my emphasis).

40. Julia Carolyn Guernsey, *The Pulse of Praise: Form as a Second Self in the Poetry of George Herbert* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1999), p. 103.

41. Bloch, *Spelling the Word*, p. 101.

42. Bloch is aware that the sequence speaks against her, writing that the poem "does not entirely belong to this sequence of impersonal eschatological poems (though it gains in complexity if we read it with the sequence in mind" (*Spelling the Word*, p. 101). Clearly, Herbert *wants* us to read it with the sequence in mind.

43. Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power*, p. 225.

44. Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics*, p. 135.

45. Arnold Stein, *George Herbert's Lyrics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p. 194.

47. Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, p. 129.

48. Adam Miller, *Badiou, Marion and St. Paul: Immanent Grace*, Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 65.

49. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), pp. 68-69.