# READING THE  BIBLE, WRITING THE SELF:

# GEORGE  HERBERT'S  THE  TEMPLE

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## ABSTRACT

*George Herbert's unified poetic text, The Temple, may be read as Herbert's attempt to gain wholeness through reading the Bible and the signs of God in the natural universe. For Herbert, holy insight is based on comparing the one with the many. In "Prayer (1)," for instance, Herbert provides a long list of prayer's functions. Yet the poem's final phrase, "something understood," suggests that Herbert has absorbed the learning represented by this list, has simplified and replaced prayer's multifarious utility. The relation of part (or function) to whole (or purpose) in people's lives, and in human history, is repeated in the mysteries of divine history, which Herbert studies in the two sonnets entitled "The Holy Scriptures." In the second of these poems, Herbert notes that "This verse marks that, and both do make a motion/ Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie." In reading the Bible, Herbert is writing his own version of Holy Scriptures. The pun on "lie" suggests his poetic feigning. Herbert's study of the relationship of reading to writing presents a complex and paradoxical evaluation of the ways of learning.*

I

George Herbert, poet (1593-1633), was also a country parson. A gentleman by birth, training, and personal demeanor, Herbert was related by blood to the family of Sir Philip Sidney and his poetic sister, the Countess of Pembroke. He moved as an equal with the patrons of his hitherto more famous, though low born contemporary, John Donne. His brother, known as Lord Herbert of Cherbury, was also a poet, but he paced the extremities of metaphysical obscurantism.

Right now, George Herbert is the darling of the critics. Except for those who imitated him, imperfectly, Herbert's poetic qualities are unique. His dense metaphoric patterns are neatly balanced by the simple devotional statements his

poetic personae reach at their poems' endings. A tension between the metaphorically complex and the aphoristicaily simple results in an interesting dialectic within each poem, fertile ground for the critic's ingenuity. In addition, this interplay between complex and simple, combined with the diversity of Herbert's interpretations of biblical passages, allows a glimpse into Herbert's singular interpretation of the Bible. And Herbert's complex attitude towards the Bible deserves special notice.

As Chana Bloch notes, George Herbert lived the Bible, and incorporated it within *The Temple* as the New Testament incorporates the Old. The word of God, Bloch argues, also is His will, and so "spelling" becomes an act of understanding the word and will of God. (1985:2-3) As so many recent readers of Herbert have claimed, a study of Herbert's relationship to the Bible can lead closest to the heart of *The Temple*.

Yet for me, what is significant about Herbert's interpretation of the Bible, if I may refer to *The Temple* as that, is his latitudinous approach to interpretation. Joseph Summers, quoting from Herbert's own *A Priest to the Temple*, (1954:246) summarizes Herbert's approach to reading and writing as a "middle way between superstition, and slovenliness." Herbert's attitude, Summers continues, enabled him to embrace "the significant inseparability of contemplation and action, of faith and reason … and to avoid the 'superstitious' rejection of the material and the 'slovenly' rejection of form. Herbert was never tempted to worship the 'idea' in its abstraction." (1954:86) In his construction of *TheTemple* too, Herbert continued to read the Bible as a resource for inter-connecting the activities of reading and writing. In what follows, I will present a model of Herbert's reading the Bible as expressed in *The Temple*.

II

To begin, let us consider the two poems whose stated theme is "The Holy Scriptures." In 1982, Barbara Leah Harmon provided a very insightful analysis of the sonnet structure of Herbert's two Holy Scripture poems. Harmon claimed that each poem, using the Bible as its "countertext," progressively involves the persona of the poem within the narrative and historical levels of the Bible. I wish to suggest that there is an additional countertext: In *The Temple*, each poem is countertext to the other. Moreover, the groupings of poems within *The Temple* reinforce a very complex and subtle contrapuntal quality of the entire book.

Harmon's analysis of the standard Herbert poetic structure is as follows. At a poem's beginning, the speaker writes his own plot. At first, we find the illusion of his own self dependence. Then, the speaker recognizes his own story in the

pertinent story of the Bible, and proceeds to participate in that story through a "translation of the speaker's life into Exodus language," for instance. (1982:177) This participative rewriting of sacred history counters the nasty alternative sometimes met in a Herbert poem. Regression, a reversal of experience, is the penalty for non-participation in the Biblical story.

And yet, at the end of "The Holy Scriptures," (I) as Harmon points out, "the distance between speaker – or mounter, or prayer -- and text collapses" as the speaker proceeds to walk into the space represented by the Biblical text. (1982:181-83) Harmon's interesting reading of "heaven lies flat in thee" prompts me to suggest, in addition, the collapse of many levels of the ideal ("heaven") and of representation within the acts of reading and writing. Embedded in a string of complicated conceits, this conceit suggests a flattening of the heavenly sphere onto the Biblical page, on which the mounter kneels in devotion, as his soul moves into the heaven represented by the text.

One could add to Harmon's analysis a consideration of the poem's imagery, which displays Herbert's typical ironic subtleties: images of sucking, of softness ("mollify"), of liquids and wells, and of panaceas and narcissism (the pun on "thankful glasse") present a babyish, self-absorbed but naively heroic search for a cure for the human condition.

In addition, other patterns are generated, patterns which are replicated in the interconnections between the two Holy Scripture poems. Hence, when "The H. Scriptures" (II) begins, "Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine," (Hutchinson, 1941:58) the alignment of patterns ("lights") refers to relationships, within the Bible, between the Old and the New Testaments, and between self and text as well as to interconnections between parts of the self, on the one hand, and between parts of the text (typology), on the other. In effect, Herbert constructs a typology of the self. Although each section of the text, "how each verse does shine," (II, line 3) has its own value, these independent qualities are counterbalanced by such words as "configurations" and "constellations." Both words suggest qualities of light (*figura* and *stella*): individual shine is transfigured to a collective shine. The parts work together.

Likewise, when Herbert refers to the self unification proceeding from Biblical cure, he refers to "dispersed herbs [that] do watch a potion" (II, line 7) -- a visual image which combines the active movement of the personal self and the witnessing function of the Christian self: a *wachet auf*. Moreover, whereas in the first sonnet the self is relatively passive, and even when active is a receptacle ("suck every letter"), in the second sonnet the self does actually create meaning -- although the concept is carefully couched:

> Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good,
> And comments on thee: for in ev'ry thing
> Thy words do finde me out, & parallels bring,
> And in another make me understood.
>
> (II, lines 9-12)

The reciprocal relationship between two active agents is central: the speaker's life comments on the Book in several ways. One's life is a narrative, a unity, and a series of meanings. The Bible, equally active, brings symbols, types and inspires the meditational understanding of the self.

Interpreting further, I find that the interaction of speaker and text configure each other. While the explanatory clause following the colon explains the sense of the main clause preceding, the preceding clause remains grammatically independent and therefore non traditional in its import. The reciprocal relationship of self and Bible is reinforced by the existence of an autonomous self, although (as Harmon points out repeatedly) autonomy is a dangerous illusion. Nonetheless, this reciprocal relationship supplants the final posture of the persona in "The H. Scriptures," (I) where the image presents a "mounter's bended knee," reflexive, subordinate, and yet, ironically, mounting. At the end of "The H. Scriptures," (II) the speaker is lighted "to eternal blisse," hence "mounting" but the ascension refers to the inner motion of self understanding in line twelve of that poem. Herbert depends on the point that all forms of combination have twin locations: in the biblical text and within the understanding self: "make me understood" to and for myself.

Because of the sanctity and validity of Herbert's struggle to express and to configure a self, it is no accident that he begins the next poem in his series ("Whitsunday") with a reference to his own song rather than to that of the traditional Whitsunday dove. Nor is it accidental that the poem preceding the Holy Scriptures sequence ends with a prayer for "consort," or the involvement of the self in wider employment: "give one strain to my poore reed." (1941:57, lines 23-24) The action of the self takes precedence over the sanctimonious veneration of Scriptures or of deity. Only an active and self-directing self, Herbert implies, glorifies the Lord -- a position more radically taken by Milton in *Paradise Lost* and the prose tracts.

### III

In many sections of *The Temple*, then, Herbert's life does not annotate meaning; rather it creates meaning. The Bible is living text because the good life, the energetic life, gives it life. Without paradox, however, such a claim as Herbert's

would be vainglorious. Nonetheless, Herbert's meaning is clear: it is more fraudulent passively to fit a pattern than to challenge orthodox meaning.

Other poems in *The Temple* reinforce and expand upon Herbert's approach to Scriptures, as examined thus far. Consider, for example, "The Temper," (II) where the verbal play suggests that human activity, rather than God's, unifies the universe. The baroque commonplace that one place is an everywhere dominates the poem's conceit structure.[1] This commonplace derives from the idea that God is a circle whose center is everywhere but whose circumference is nowhere. Herbert's ironic use of this commonplace is not iconoclastic, however, but does record his personalized emphasis in some sections of *The Temple*.

Moreover, the poem's title presents, among its complex references, the concept of a unified and strengthened mixture of elements. The added ambiguities of temper, meaning 'anger' and 'mettle,' inject the idea of Herbert's conflict with God, on the one hand, and with his own personal value, on the other. The fulcrum of meaning in the poem may be seen in its final lines:

> Thy power and love, my love and trust
> Make one place ev'ry where.
> (1941:55, lines 27-28)

"Thy ... love" balances with "my love," and both loves are co-equal. Human activity is co-equal and active. Of course, Herbert's yielding spirit (another use of the term "temper") does honor to God by balancing another pair of concepts, as seen in the sequence "power and … and trust" in the first of the above-quoted lines. The perfect symmetry of Herbert's metrics and sonics enhances, in a humble manner, the co-equality of man's and God's respective activities. God is powerful; man trusts. Although the poem's title word never appears within the poem, "temper" provides the hidden unity of the poem: the poem's theme and composition are expressed in terms of just composition and balance.

But other emotions impaired Herbert's quest for self integration. Herbert's fear of inactivity was well known by his biographers. This fear is represented in the two "Employment" poems in *The Temple*, as well as in "The Answer," where Herbert claims that always there is more to know than has been learned, that present knowledge is always insufficient. The concluding pun on "rest" (1941:169, line 14) -- 'remainder' or 'restful' -- suggests the contrast between knowledge gained and knowledge to be gained. Herbert's fear of procrastination ("in my prosecutions slack and small" (1941:169, line 7)) betrays the emotion which energizes the contrast. In addition, a series of conjoined antonyms enhances the

contrast between possession and loss: "thoughts and ends," (line 2) "fall and flow," (line 3) and "live and die." (line 11)

Inactivity and self doubt led Herbert to feel alienated from God, as from himself. Herbert's paraphrase of "The 23rd Psalme" emphasizes again the tension between Herbert and God. Here, Herbert turns to the theme of human activity. Herbert's paraphrase is a very free one which exaggerates the power of God, a power apparent in the original Psalm as available to Herbert in the Anglican prayer book and other versions.[2] To all these versions, Herbert invents outright the lines,

> Or if I stray, he doth convert
> And bring my minde in frame.
>     (1941:172, lines 9-10)

The words "convert" and "frame" suggest a constrained mind, as does the line,"... thou doth make me sit and dine." (line 17) Chana Bloch notes that the strength of "make me," together with "sit and dine," recalls the ending of "Love" (III): "You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:/ So I did sit and eat." (Bloch, 1985:294) These passages, and others like them, bespeak the opposite of autonomy, the perceived force of God's control. Or, in his weakest moments, does Herbert simply entertain the illusion of God's domination?

The final words of the paraphrase, however, emphasize Herbert's choice to praise. Indeed, "Love," (111) the final poem of the central section of *The Temple,* emphasizes Herbert's free choice and culminates in a reciprocal and free service between Herbert and Christ. Significantly, Herbert's "story" in this final poem is related in the past tense, as an accomplishment. Humankind, serving and eating, participates in the construction of God's ordered universe of love.

Herbert's frequent quotations from the Psalms, in particular, as Freer said, "provided a model for Herbert of a way to maintain both one's pride and humility ... ." (1972:244) His imitation of "the common and courtly Psalmodic translations" allowed Herbert to utilize his "pride and aggression" within the framework of an evolving consciousness which found a model in the Psalms themselves (1972:244-45).[3]

IV

For the persona of the poet, or perhaps for Herbert himself, reading becomes a complex act of interpretation, collation of variant texts (metrical psalms), translation of the Psalms, meditation on the Psalms and on liturgy itself. In turn, Herbert's writing is a record of his reading, but certainly more than that: for

Herbert's *The Temple* presents a collection of independent poems and a very flexible set of relationships between these poems. Each poem represents one moment in the construction of a self. Moreover, the reader's construction of a well-structured set of poems allows the reader to participate in and to emulate Herbert's writing a self. It is my argument that the interlocking structure of *The Temple*, including Herbert's theoretical statements about scriptures, provides the reader with a set of lenses by which to interpret Herbert's construction of the torments and triumphs of a Christian self.

Other "biblical" poems in *The Temple* reveal facets of Herbert's quest for self-created integration. In addition to the paraphrase of the twenty third Psalm, Herbert wrote several poetic "lectures" on scriptural passages from Paul's epistles. In the poem, "Coloss.3.3. Our life is hid with Christ in God," the title runs obliquely (in an italicized font) through the poem, but the concept appears in a metamorphosed form. Herbert's search for "an eternal *Treasure* " (1941:85, line 10) coexists as a counter to the biblical passage, and moves, as a fantasy, away from an interpretation of Paul's text. And, while Herbert's meditation refers to the same concepts as Paul's in *Colossians* 3:1-6, Herbert's complexly wrought language and thought is independent of Paul's and creates a new vision. The tortuous path of Herbert's vision dominates the poem's language and imagery, emphasizing a difficult process of gaining insight. Phrases like "double motion" and "obliquely bend" (lines 2 and 4) express the indirection and duplicity of vision, and of the unconstrained self, while reading "away" from holy text suggests the lonely independence of Herbert's inquiry.

In the poem, "Ephes.4.30. Grieve not the Holy Spirit, &c," Herbert again reads away from Paul's text. That text is a starting point for Herbert's journey into his own feelings. In the passage in *Ephesians*, Paul counsels the Ephesians to allow themselves to be reborn, to avoid malice, and to become kind and loving: "And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby yee are sealed unto the day of redemption." (AV 4:30) Although Herbert's opening conjunction ("And") connects Herbert's verse to Paul's directive, (Bloch, 1985:33) Herbert reverses the direction of the counsel by questioning the Holy Spirit:

> And art thou grieved, sweet and sacred Dove,
> When I am sowre,
> And crosse thy love?
> Grieved for me? ...
> (1941:135, lines 1-4)

Bloch notes that the syntactic connection between Herbert's poem and Ephesians "prompts us to go back and look at the verse [Paul's] again, and thus has the effect of placing us, for a moment, with Herbert in the act of reading the Scriptures."

(1985:33) For Herbert, reading becomes the point of origin for radical personal change.

Gradually, Herbert begins to grieve for God, who grieves for Herbert. The poem's meditation on grieving suggests a double motion between the reader and God. In what may be Herbert's most baroque verse, his meditation on grieving intensifies the world's unity around complex conceits:

> Or cry no more.
> Almightie God doth grieve, he puts on sense;
> I sinne not to my grief alone,
> But to my God's too; he doth grone.
> (1941:136 lines 15-18)

In a later passage, (lines 23-24) "marbles" and "strings" weep. Marble rock sweats in summer, while strings symbolize Herbert's weeping meditation. Despite an extravagance of grieving, Herbert speaks paradoxically of his inability to perpetuate his grieving. Or, if he grieve, there is likely to be mere failure and lack of relief. Herbert's inability, or ineffectiveness, finds resolution in Christ's blood, which replaces Herbert's tears:

> Lord, pardon, for thy Sonne makes good
> My want of tears with store of bloud.
> (lines 35-36)

In Herbert's hands, the questioning process replaces Paul's counsel, although in this poem, Herbert returns to Paul's theme by requesting pardon, possibly for the length or the personal focus of his own self-occupied meditation. Herbert's request for pardon must be read ironically, however, for self criticism would certainly have been included in Paul's intended use of his epistle.

"The Odour. 2. Cor.2.15" is Herbert's final meditation on biblical verses. Here, Herbert resolves his lack of employment. The resolution is symbolized by the redoubling of odorific sweetness. This enhanced sweetness is central to the poetic conceit:

> And so this new commerce and sweet
> Should all my life employ and busie me.
> (1941:174, lines 29-30)

Herbert's free meditation exists independently of Paul's epistle. Rather, Herbert's poem presents a thrusting, searching mind. Herbert takes the concept of "sweet odour" and the biblical words, "My Master," and generates the concept of a

perfumed human mind. Referring to the "odour" and the biblical text together, Herbert states:

> With these all day I do perfume my minde,
> My minde ev'n thrust into them both:
> That I might finde
> What cordials make this curious broth,
> This broth of smells, that feeds and fats my minde.
> (1941:175, lines 6-10)

The action of Herbert's mind takes center stage, even at the poem's end. It is clear that employment has been gained. We are, at this point, close to the end of Herbert's meditational book.

## V

In *The Temple*, Herbert used reading as a process approximating an evolving consciousness, a process which, together with composition, defined consciousness. The Herbert that emerges from my assessment is not the rebellious interpreter of the Bible, not the self-negating self of the mystic, and certainly not, in any simple sense, the submitting sinner.

Some critics present a less radical reading of Herbert's *The Temple*. In *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, Stanley Fish studies Herbert's reading as activity, although with an emphasis and findings quite different from mine. For Fish, Herbert's process of reading represents a progressive diminishment of self. In my reading, *The Temple* presents the progressive formation of a self. For Fish, Herbert's poetic process results in "the gradual narrowing (to nothing) of the distance between the individual consciousness (of both speaker and reader) and God." (1972:158) Dissolutions of the self occur in Herbert's verse, but they are experimental stages, not representations of Herbert's doctrine or of his subliminal self. Instead of surrendering identity, Herbert gains identity through participation in God's existence and God's word.[4]

In my view, Herbert is a clever reader whose reshaping of Biblical words and accounts allowed the fabrication of a self within the created bounds of God's word and God's universe. Herbert quotes, translates, collates, writes exegesis, paraphrases, reads and revises sacred history, interprets fourfold allegory – performs every act of reading he can. Finally, from all his acts of reading, he creates a series of poems which, in turn, are acts of reading and writing. *The Temple* is a text which exists between other texts, between reader and writer, a text which constantly collates, interprets, and reinterprets. Through it all, we, as readers, face

another reader who gains identity through his encounter with the complexity of words and texts, readers and writers, and reading and writing.

## VI

## LESSONS FOR A MODERN READER

Scriptural lectures, or "lessons" were readings from the Scriptures, or from Saint's lives, or from homilies, during the Mass. My lessons, however, are personal remarks (perhaps eccentric remarks) based on my reading of the scholarly text. But what we have here is one text commenting upon another, which itself is a commentary, and so on and on until we reach the pure energy of the Old Testament itself.

1. Reading is the act of incorporating the self into a text. Writing incorporates the text into the newly defined self.

2. In reading, one is challenged to move into a period of agonizing growth. A refusal to develop one's self leads to what Harmon calls self-extinction -- that is, what we call mediocrity or anonymity.

3. The two acts, reading and writing, are not discrete acts, but rather are identifiable phases of a spiritual combat. Reading and writing are "active" phases of human development. There is something touching in the deconstructionist's insistence on the process of reading and writing, and criticism (rewriting Herbert's text, though within certain bounds of taste) is an art form.

4. In contrast with such marvelous critics as Helen Vendler, Louis Martz, and Stanley Fish, I see Herbert as a reader and writer about ceaseless change, the self in constant peripeteia. This quality of change pleases me because it chastens me; for my native inclination is to find rest and salvation in a fixed meaning and in permanent values and situations.

**NOTES**

1.  The most celebrated appearance of this idea in England is in Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, 1.x, as a marginal note: "[Deus est] Sphaera cuius centrum ubique, circumferentia nullibi." See Huntley, (1962:109ff.) and *Religio Medici and Other Works*, (1964:190-91, n. 16) for the origin and development of this description.

2. As Hutchinson noted, (1941:537n.) Herbert must have been familiar with several paraphrases of the Psalms, including those in the Geneva Bible. The Sternhold and Hopkins version of the Psalms, Hutchinson claims, often was bound within the *Book of Common Prayer*. Although no evidence tells us what psalters were used at Herbert's chapel at Bemerton, Coburn Freer claims that Herbert must have been familiar with the Sidney/Pembroke psalter, which was widely circulated in manuscript. (1972:10-12) There were many metrical and interpretational variations among the versions arguably available to Herbert. It is likely that the sheer variety of versions, together with the Psalms themselves, offered Herbert what Louis Martz called the Psalms: "the primary model for the soul in meditation … ." (1962:279)

3. Freer goes so far as "to think that the principle of arrangement in *The Temple* ... is the same as that of the Book of Psalms. By design or not, both collections have scattered groupings of poems within a larger apparently random order. The order is one that invites rearrangement, and the recombining and reintegration of a large number of variables, by the reader, is the same process that the poet performed within individual poems. In both the Psalms and *The Temple*, as the poet faces the problem of his own unity of experience, he forces an analogous problem upon his reader." (1972:40) Freer's argument is consonant with mine.

4. In *The Poetry of George Herbert*, Helen Vendler argues against Fish's idea that, in *The Temple*, "Herbert's individuality is obliterated." (1975:291)

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