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“STONIE HEARTS WILL BLEED”:  
GEORGE HERBERT’S DEPICTION OF SANCTIFICATION THROUGH THE METAPHOR  
OF THE STONY HEART IN *THE TEMPLE*

by

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## Abstract

Much of criticism on George Herbert's *Temple* has focused on categorizing the Anglican priest-poet in a denomination of faith; however, Herbert's theology, although it naturally saturates his poetic works, cannot be easily defined as Anglo-Catholic, Reformed, or *via media*. A more fruitful approach in engaging the devotional poems of *The Temple* is to consider how Herbert, who is concerned with heart-felt devotion, poetically portrays the heart, the fallen nature of man, and the process of sanctification as well as the methods by which he guides the reader in the practice of true inward devotion. In my study, I will examine how Herbert uses the metaphor of the stony heart drawn from Ezekiel 36:26 in key poems of *The Temple* and of his Latin collections, *Lucus* and *Passio Discerpta*, in order to illuminate the Christian's struggle with sin and grace and to urge readers out of a state of complacency and toward a course of action or contemplation: remorse and repentance for sin, prayer for help and relief, proper sacramental practice, and praise of God's grace and favor. Herbert's additions and alterations of the biblical metaphor provide notable insight on his views of the Christian life: namely, that sanctification is an ongoing and often strenuous process, involving both God and man. Herbert's poems ultimately offer meaning to suffering and assures readers that their "spiritual Conflicts" between them and God, when properly addressed, are integral to the practice of sincere devotion and lead them to a state of "perfect freedom."

*Boni parentes, ergo bona filia*

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## Introduction

Readers of George Herbert often compare him to his contemporary, John Donne. Both highly educated academics served as clergymen of the Church of England and wrote devotional poetry. However, unlike Donne who grappled with theology for many years, Herbert did not undergo an intense crisis of belief and remained devoted to the Church of England, in which he was raised. Because of his “sweet,” plain style in his poetry and his unshaken devotion to his faith, some scholars tend to characterize Herbert, in contrast to the more agitated Donne, as a “peaceful” poet, as one whose poems end, without much distress, in calm resolution. However, to overlook the “*spiritual Conflicts*” Herbert intended to depict in his poetry is to misunderstand the seventeenth-century poet. Izaak Walton, Herbert’s first biographer, records the poet’s stated purpose for his manuscript of poems, later to be published as *The Temple*, as he lay on his deathbed: “*Sir, I pray deliver this little Book to my dear brother Farrer, and tell him, he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master: in whose service I have now found perfect freedom.*”<sup>1</sup> Herbert’s poetry presents and narrates the battle between his sinful and rebellious nature and his Master, Love. Those who overemphasize the peace of his poetry neglect the raw and constant struggle with sin and suffering, which Herbert portrays as a prominent element of the Christian life.

*The Temple* is a series of episodes of the Christian life, deeply rooted in Herbert’s own experiences, doubts, and revelations, and arranged in an artistically diverse order. Using the physical to depict the spiritual, Herbert employs the architectural imagery and structure of *The Temple* to connect the physical building of the church to the interior religious life of the Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Izaak Walton, *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert, and Robert Sanderson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 314.

in order to reinforce the idea that the inward heart must be sincerely involved in the outward ceremony of religious obligations. Several poems, including “The Altar,” “Church-monuments,” “The Church-floore,” “Church-lock and key,” “Church-rents and schismes,” “Sepulchre,” and “The Windows,” are more explicitly architectural as they use elements of the architecture of a church to contemplate certain theological truths. The poet also incorporates the church liturgy and sacraments into the structure of *The Temple*: “Easter,” “Mattens,” “Lent,” “The H. Baptisme,” “The H. Communion,” “Prayer,” and “Good Friday,” to name a few. *The Temple* further gains shape and mass as he outlines and contemplates the struggle of the Christian to subject his corrupted will to that of his Master. The building blocks include the frequent illness and distress Herbert personally experienced: he portrays these in his multiple “Affliction” poems. Also necessary to the building’s structure are the frustration with the self-denial of the priestly occupation in “The Collar,” the indignation at the seeming one-sidedness of his relationship with God in “Artillerie,” the wrestling with his sinful nature in “The Sinner” and “Nature,” the relentless striving for holiness, the lessons in contrition and grief. Although Herbert’s aim is eventual resolution, not every poem resolves peacefully nor releases the buildup of tension, for Herbert understands that repentance is not a single event in a Christian’s life, but a daily practice. As the Christian wrestles with doubt, affliction, or sin, he must be drawn back to Love, learn, and desire to receive grace. *The Temple* serves to unravel the entanglement of self-deception and complacency, and to guide the reader in heart-felt devotion, just as the architecture of a church is designed to direct the eye toward heaven.

In this paper, although I will be engaging with George Herbert’s theological beliefs because his devotional poems are, by nature, saturated with his faith, I am less interested in categorizing the poet in one distinct doctrinal position, as scholars have already extensively



done. Concentrating on the tradition of meditative poetry, Louis Martz and Rosemond Tuve, for example, claim a medieval and Anglo-Catholic Herbert. On the other hand, Barbara K. Lewalski and Richard Strier question such a stance, arguing that scholars must not ignore the impact of the Reformation on seventeenth-century England. Strier, for example, reads the poetry of Herbert through a distinctly Reformed lens, constructed by the writings of Luther and Calvin. However, finding that dogmatic stances associated with Reformed writers Luther and Calvin are part of the broader Christian tradition, R. V. Young situates Herbert in *via media* between Rome and Geneva. As immensely well-read as he is, Herbert gleans wisdom from the wealth of medieval, Catholic, and Protestant writers preceding him. Furthermore, the issue with boxing Herbert into a clearly-defined denominational framework is 1) that Herbert's poetry eludes strict theological dividers that restrict him to one party or another, although some judgments of distinction can surely be made; and 2) outside his poetry and *The Country Parson*, a handbook on behavior and duties for Anglican priests, Herbert wrote very little that reveals his theological biases. However, it is necessary not to read *The Temple* with an overly Calvinistic lens, for it undermines what I believe is integral to Herbert's devotional poetry: the role of the Christian in the process of his sanctification and the role of one reading the poetry. Just as the Christian is not entirely passively receiving grace, the reader is not meant to read the poems passively and to remain unaffected by the conflict and the revelations the poet presents. Rather, Herbert's devotional poetry prompts readers to recognize and resist their sinful nature and encourages them to practice devout attitudes and behavior. Therefore, what is more important to my study is Herbert's portrayal of the Christian life, specifically of the heart, which is central to his understanding of true devotion. *The Temple* is, as he says, a "picture" of his own spiritual conflicts between God and himself. His devotional aim is to invite them into the state of conflict and to guide them to the resolution,

which is often the difficult, humbling truth. Herbert confronts the readers with the fact that the root of conflict is man's own sin. When guilt arises, the poet prompts the reader to repent and to long for grace. Herbert, in time, offers visions of hope of restoration and wholeness. The Christian life, then, is the struggle with and the purgation of sin, and Herbert's poetry reflects this struggle.

My study will focus on Herbert's preoccupation with repentance and the conflict of sin and grace in the metaphor of the stony heart, drawn from Ezekiel 36:26: "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you, and I will take away the stonie heart out of your flesh, and I will giue you an heart of flesh."<sup>2</sup> This metaphor recurs throughout *The Temple* as Herbert wrestles with the nature and effects of sin; the transformative power of grace, particularly in the participation in the Lord's Supper; and the daily Christian experience of the process of sanctification. Although Herbert emphasizes the work of God, he does not exclude the individual's cooperation by the very nature and purpose of his prayer-like poems to encourage the reader to recognize and battle the "stoniness" of his heart and continually seek the "remedy," grace, which transforms the heart of stone into a heart of flesh.

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the Bible will be from the King James Version, 1611 edition, unless otherwise noted.

## Chapter 1

### Sin and Stony Hearts

George Herbert's "The Altar" has garnered much scholarly attention—and rightfully so—as a shape poem and as the opening poem of the second and longest section of *The Temple*, "The Church." "The Altar" appears first in the Williams manuscript, which predates the published *Temple*, and its position remains untouched in the final product published in 1633. Though they differ in approach and conclusions, most scholars agree that "The Altar" is foundational for the theme of "The Church," as it is the first poem of the section. Richard Strier explains the significance of the position of "The Altar" in *The Temple*: "By placing 'The Altar' at the head of his volume, Herbert immediately presents the individual heart as the locus of the two great mysteries of Christian life, sin and grace."<sup>3</sup> Strier argues that since the speaker in "The Altar" asks for the blessings of Christ's sacrifice before the events are narrated in "The Sacrifice," Herbert is more interested in the "application" than the history of the sacrifice. But Strier does not expound upon this topic of sin and grace: what it means for the heart to be the locus of the two mysteries and how the poem addresses the question. By observing the imagistic theme of "The Altar," Louis Martz helps to answer this question. This poem, which pictures the heart of man as a stone altar, "introduces a strand of imagery that runs through several other poems of this section: the imagery of the stony heart of man, cut by the power of God."<sup>4</sup> Martz is only partially correct, however, when he claims that Herbert's image is based on the passage in 2 Corinthians 3:3, in which St. Paul declares that the members of the church "are manifestly declared to be the Epistle of Christ ministred by vs, written not with inke, but with the spirit of

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 153.

<sup>4</sup> Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (Forge Village: Yale University Press, 1965), 294.

the living God, not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.” Martz misses the fact that this passage pictures the heart not as stone, but as flesh. The more appropriate biblical image is that of Ezekiel 36:26, where the heart of stone symbolizes the sinful heart and God promises to remove sin from His people and instill virtue and life in them. I aim to examine the ideas that Martz and Strier propose together: the metaphor of the stony heart is Herbert’s tool to express and explore the Christian’s constant struggle between sin and grace, represented by the stony heart and the fleshy heart.

As we have proposed, “The Altar,” a shaped picture of the heart, lays the interpretative groundwork for the rest of “The Church.” Since “The Church” follows the first section of *The Temple*, “The Church-porch,” Herbert leads us to imagine that we are now inside of the church, and the first image we encounter is that of an altar. If Herbert is guiding his readers through a poetic architectural landscape, why does he place at the entrance of a “Church” an “Altar” when altars are traditionally positioned at the far end of the church opposite to the entrance? If the poem instead represents a Hebraic altar rather than a Christian one, as Jarrell Wright argues,<sup>5</sup> in the layout of Solomon’s temple the stone altar stands near the entrance of the upper court, outside of the temple that lodges the Ark of the Covenant. The altar on which purification sacrifices were offered Herbert makes representative of the human heart in “The Altar.” The image of an altar already establishes the poem’s link to the sin of mankind and the hope of his purification:

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<sup>5</sup> Jarrell D. Wright, “Altar of Print, Altars of Stone,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 91, no. 1 (2022): 5, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27118269>.



## The Altar.

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,  
 Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:  
 Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;  
 No workmans tool hath touch'd the same.  
 A HEART alone  
 Is such a stone,  
 As nothing but  
 Thy pow'r doth cut.  
 Wherefore each part  
 Of my hard heart  
 Meets in this frame,  
 To praise thy name.  
 That if I chance to hold my peace,  
 These stones to praise thee may not cease.  
 O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,  
 And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.



More obviously than an altar, the shape of the poem resembles the pronoun "I." By forming the poem to resemble the pronoun, the speaker establishes his identity as a heart, an altar. The speaker at first seems hesitant to proclaim his personhood and refers to himself as God's servant (1) and to his heart with an indefinite article "a" rather than clarifying the possession with the pronoun "my." However, by the second half of the poem, he begins to speak in first person. The shift does not indicate a rise of confidence; rather, the speaker acknowledges his responsibility for his fault and "hard heart" (10). Only when he claims this broken heart as his own, does the speaker pray to receive Christ's sacrifice and to be an altar sanctified to God. "The Altar" demonstrates the importance of knowing oneself, one's own heart, in relationship with God. Herbert divides self-knowledge into two categories: the present state of the heart ("broken" and "cemented with tears") and the function God designed man to serve ("to praise thy name" and to

belong to God). The heart is the starting point and the center of Herbert's devotional poetry, and thus we should first understand what the poet means by the heart.

“Heart” is a polysemous word; it exists in the English language with a somatic or scientific meaning and with a non-physical, spiritual meaning. In *The Book of the Heart*, which traces the metaphor of a heart as a book or other form of text throughout the ages, Eric Jager places Herbert among seventeenth-century Protestant writers who uphold the scriptural tradition with minimal modifications.<sup>6</sup> Jager explains the biblical stance: “Scripture, a preeminent authority, equated the heart with the innermost self, including conscience, memory, and volition.”<sup>7</sup> In the Psalms alone, the word “heart” occurs 130 times, often in reference to one's morality, the psalmist's deep emotion, desires, memory, or inner thoughts. It is the heart which God examines, and He judges the uprightness or wickedness therein, and it is the heart by which man devotedly serves the Creator.<sup>8</sup> George Herbert likewise upholds this tradition. According to “The Altar,” the heart is “cemented with teares” (2) and is therefore the seat of emotion. The heart is “hard,” the same adjective used to describe Pharaoh's heart in Exodus, and because it can choose to praise God or not (9-14), it is also the seat of the will. Finally, the heart is what the speaker asks God to “sanctifie” (16) and thus has a moral function. The place of sin and the place of transformation lies in the heart of man, in the emotional, volitional, and moral center.

In addition to depicting the shape of “I,” Herbert offers a visual image for the inward stone altar in the composition of the poem: each word is like a single unhewn stone, assembled into a shape after the manner of altars as instructed by God in Exodus 20:25.<sup>9</sup> The first piece of

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<sup>6</sup> See Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 146.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>8</sup> See 1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Samuel 12:24; Deuteronomy 10:12.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 20:25. “And if thou wilt make mee an Altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewen stone: for if thou lift vp thy tooles vpon it, thou hast polluted it.” A Hebraic altar was made of stone, and in the eighth century medieval Church altars were made of stone or marble, modelled

information that the speaker gives about the altar is that it is “broken,” that something is amiss. The metaphor in lines 5-6, “A HEART alone / Is such a stone,” echoes Ezekiel 36:26: “A new heart also will I giue you, and a new spirit will I put within you, and I will take away the stonie heart out of your flesh, and I will giue you an heart of flesh.” Both the image of stone and his brokenness point to man’s fallen nature. In the context of the biblical passage, the stony heart is a sinful one, one that is “filthy” and worships idols. Stone is, of course, inanimate, cold, and pale—the opposite of life and the opposite of what a heart is supposed to be. Since sin is related to stoniness, to an absence of being, the stony heart lacks the fullness of life and goodness.<sup>10</sup> It is emotionally, volitionally, and morally broken and corrupt. Tiffany Jo Werth argues that the metaphor of the stony heart was used in early modern English culture to describe godless blasphemers and to dehumanize nonbelievers.<sup>11</sup> However, Werth overgeneralizes the use of the metaphor; Herbert, for example, does not use the metaphor to contrast the godly/believers (fleshy hearts) with the ungodly/unbelievers (stony hearts). Rather, the stony heart in “The Altar” is that of a Christian, who prays that his altar-heart would be sanctified to God.

The second aspect of self-knowledge is the divinely-ordained function of the heart. In “The Altar,” Herbert “redeems” the stony heart in a manner different from the Ezekiel reference. Although the stony heart has not been transmogrified into living flesh, God has cut it into the shape of an altar and has repurposed it to serve the correct function of worship, to which the

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after the Old Testament tradition. For the medieval Church history of materials and shapes of altars, see Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation: Incarnation and Liturgy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 27: “The earliest [altars] were table-like in form, but none were replications of a table such as might be used in a simple Seder. By the eighth century, altars had come to be made normally of stone or marble, in the form of a box or block.”

<sup>10</sup> The lesser being of stone compared to flesh resembles Augustine’s definition of evil as nonbeing.

<sup>11</sup> Tiffany Jo Werth, “A Heart of Stone: The Ungodly in Early Modern England,” in *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature*, ed. Jean E. Ferrick and Vin Nardizzi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 183-4, 186.

Israelites in the Ezekiel passage failed to adhere and to which God promised to restore them. But an altar in Hebraic terms is nevertheless the place where innocent blood is shed for the purification of the sinner. Furthermore, the heart is still a stone, still sinful. How can such a thing be good? Herbert illustrates that even though a heart has not yet been transformed into flesh, it can belong to God. But the key word is “sanctifie.” The speaker prays for sanctification, understanding that his heart, though saved, is still sinful and is in need of God’s grace to transform his heart into flesh. Although published a year after *The Temple*, *The Devout Hart*, a popular devotional work which meditates on analogous images of a heart, demonstrates an additional example of a seventeenth-century Christian’s understanding of heart-felt devotion. *The Devout Hart* similarly pictures the heart as an altar devoted to God: “Take here possession of the hart deuoted to thee. Be this I pray a Temple, a Chapel, an Altar consecrated to the true and only Godhead.”<sup>12</sup> The author prays that his altar-heart would not be “defiled with sordityes or crimes, but rather may it euer and euer stand inuiolable and vntouched.”<sup>13</sup> The difference between this introductory prayer and Herbert’s is that Herbert’s altar is presently broken and in need of God’s grace.<sup>14</sup> Herbert’s shaped prayer for sanctification reveals the purpose of devotion: to recognize sin and side with God in the battle against the “old man.”

In this chapter, I will explore how Herbert portrays the stony heart and how he leads the Christian reader to respond to his “stoniness.” Since the stony heart imagery appears not only in *The Temple*, but also in Herbert’s Latin poetry, I will examine relevant Latin poems. When read

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<sup>12</sup> *The Devout Hart*, 23-24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that the author of *The Devout Hart* is not asking for purification or sanctification; in fact, the purpose of the work is to consider one’s own sinfulness and God’s grace to cleanse and heal the heart. Instead, for Herbert the stone, inseparable from the image of the altar, represents man’s sinful state.



alongside “The Altar,” “Homo, Statua,” for example, provides a deeper understanding of man’s nature and the conflict between these two great mysteries, sin and grace.

### **Man as a Marble Statue**

Although George Herbert is most known for his English poetry, and indeed his Latin poetry only sparingly attracts the attention of scholars, at the time of his death he was recognized as a Latin poet, “several of whose Latin epigrams had been circulating at least since 1618, and who had gained a reputation for his Latin verse while university orator at Cambridge between 1620 and 1627.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, Herbert himself seems to regard his Latin poems and his vernacular ones equally in terms of craftsmanship and character. W. Hilton Kelliher derives this impression from the fact that “*Passio Discerpta* and *Lucus*, copied in his own beautiful hand, are preceded in the Williams manuscript by a scribal transcript of sixty-nine of the poems that were published after his death as *The Temple*,” and therefore he believes that “the collocation suggests that [Herbert] acknowledged no significant distinction of medium in his poetry.”<sup>16</sup> Worthy of readership and of scholarship, Herbert’s Latin poetry is beautiful and complex on its own, but it also aids readers’ understanding of *The Temple*.<sup>17</sup>

Composed in the early 1620s, *Lucus* is “a miscellaneous collection of religious and moralizing epigrams.”<sup>18</sup> Editors have rightfully translated the title as “A Sacred Grove,” but

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<sup>15</sup> Victoria Moul, *A Literary History of Latin and English Poetry: Bilingual Verse Culture in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 228.

<sup>16</sup> W. Hilton Kelliher, “The Latin Poetry of George Herbert,” in *The Latin Poetry of English Poets*, ed. J. W. Binns (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 27.

<sup>17</sup> I agree with Victoria Moul, who writes, “The first and best reason for reading and thinking about Neo-Latin lyric must always be that so much of it is good poetry: beautiful, precise, and evocative; poetry that extends our sense of what Latin verse can be and can do,” in “Lyric Poetry,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Neo-Latin*, edited by Sarah Knight and Stefan Tilg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 54.

<sup>18</sup> Moul, *A Literary History*, 228.

*lucus* is also the old spelling of *lux*, meaning “light.”<sup>19</sup> Though Herbert intends the former translation of the title, as the epigrams are like trees varying in size and kind all gathered in a holy place, it seems likely that the latter meaning’s hint of spiritual revelation would not have been lost on the Cambridge graduate and his educated contemporaries. Referring to a religious location, the title alone suggests a kinship with “The Church” poems. To that point, Kelliher notices, “In metaphor and imagery Herbert’s Latin epigrams compare closely with his own vernacular poetry, and a similar line of development may be traced in each.”<sup>20</sup> If *The Temple* contains the porch and building of the church, *Lucus* is the forest surrounding it. Whereas *The Temple* suggests a Hebraic temple because of the shape of “The Altar,” *Lucus* suggests a sacred grove assigned to a pagan deity. In this way, Herbert uses both Jewish and pagan cultures for a Christian purpose. Opening *Lucus*, the elegiac poem “Homo, Statua” is the Latin counterpart of “The Altar.” The poem similarly addresses God and employs the stony heart metaphor:

Sum, quis nescit, Imago Dei, sed saxea certè:

Hanc mihi duritiem contulit improbitas.

Durescunt proprijs euulsa corallia fundis,

Haud secus ingenitis dotibus orbus Adam.

Tu, qui cuncta creans docuisti marmora flere,

Haud mihi cor saxo durius esse sinas. (1-6)

*I am—who does not know?—the Image of God, but certainly stony:*

*Iniquity joins this hardness to me.*

*Coral once extracted from its proper habitat grows hard,*

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<sup>19</sup> Logeion, “lucus,” accessed July 27, 2023, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/lucus>.

<sup>20</sup> Kelliher, “Latin Poetry of George Herbert,” 55.

*By no means differently does Adam, bereft of inborn endowments.*

*You, who creating all things have taught marble to weep,*

*By no means allow my heart to be harder than stone.<sup>21</sup>*

Herbert reprises the metaphor of stone, but visually in the form of a statue rather than an altar. Employing two common meanings of the word *imago*, he portrays man as a marble statue made in the image of God.<sup>22</sup> He reveals what he means by “*saxea*” in the following line: his sin (*improbitas*) hardens him. To illustrate how *improbitas* is like hardness, Herbert draws two parallels between a kind of stone and a human person in the last four lines: the first parallel (*corallia* and *Adam*) in lines 3-4 relates to the nature of postlapsarian man, the first Adam; the second (*marmora* and *cor*) in lines 5-6, to the speaker’s own heart and his desire for redemption. The first parallel between *corallia* and *Adam* relates how the Fall altered man’s original nature. Like coral which hardens when uprooted, Adam becomes hard and rock-like when separated from his original perfect state (*Imago Dei*) because of his disobedience.<sup>23</sup> Sin is portrayed as a lack rather than a stain: Adam is bereft of original perfection, of innate gifts, of feeling, of life—a very Augustinian articulation. In the last two lines, the speaker jumps into the present and, paralleling marble and his hard heart, requests a reversal of the effects of sin. He prays that God would not allow his heart to be harder than marble, a hard inanimate object to which the Creator has given the capacity to weep. The use of anaphora (*haud*) in line 4 and line 6 creates an additional parallelism between the two parallels (*corallia* and *Adam*; *marmora* and *cor*): the past and the present. The aural similarity in the words *corallium* and *cor* furthers the parallelism between the four lines. The speaker hopes that his *cor*, hardened by sin, will become soft and

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<sup>21</sup> “Homo, Statua,” in *The Works of George Herbert*, 410. The translation is mine.

<sup>22</sup> Logeion, “imago,” accessed July 27, 2023, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/imago>: “imāgō, inis, f.: an image, form, 2.560, et al.; figure, statue, 7.179.”

<sup>23</sup> See Genesis 1:27.

living (able to weep and feel emotion) like *corallium* before it is ripped from its natural habitat.

The title and first line indicate man as a whole, but in the final line Herbert narrows in on the heart (*cor*) as the moral and spiritual center, recalling the stony heart metaphor.

Both “The Altar” and “Homo, Statua” are written as prayers, but their tones are different. Whereas the speaker of “The Altar” seems to accept his state as an altar but wishes for sanctification, the speaker of “Homo, Statua” sounds more resentful of his “*duritiem*” and longs for a transformation from stone to flesh. Comparing the poetic devices of “Homo, Statua” as the opening poem of *Lucus* to the tradition of classical Latin poetry, Victoria Moul comments on the content and tone of the poem:

This unusual poem replaces several conventional opening gambits—such as the address to a Muse, a patron or dedicatee—with a prayer to God, requesting not inspiration but some softening of the heart which is reimagined as a partial reversal or at least limitation of the effect of the Fall. The emotional tone is complex: in a manner typical of Herbert’s English poetry, it suggests both frustration and resentment, as one might feel towards a recalcitrant lover.<sup>24</sup>

Instead of starting with praise to the Creator or even a prayer for divine inspiration, Herbert criticizes his own natural shortcomings. The speaker, frustrated with and ashamed of his “stoniness,” beseeches God to soften his heart, to reverse his fallen nature, to restore to him what he lacks. Surely God who is capable of causing marble to weep against its nature can reverse man’s nature, the speaker implies. Whereas the speaker of “The Altar,” understanding his stony

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<sup>24</sup> Moul, *A Literary History*, 244. Moul is unclear whether the “recalcitrant lover” is the speaker or God. I interpret her observation as that he feels himself unruly and guilty of hardening himself toward God.

nature, sees redemption in belonging to God, the speaker of “Homo, Statua” wants his stony nature changed.

The curious line, “*Tu, qui cuncta creans docuisti marmora flere,*” further reveals the speaker’s frustration with sin and the attitude of his prayer. Under certain conditions, marble does condensate, which could be thought of as weeping, but I believe Herbert employs the image of marble weeping for more than its association with natural phenomena. That specific image occurs twice in Herbert’s English poetry—in “The Church-floore” (15) and in “Ephesians 4.30: *Grieve not the Holy Spirit*” (23). The frequency of its appearance hints at its importance to the poet. The image could refer to the rock that poured forth water when Moses struck it at God’s command, but had Herbert wanted merely to allude to Exodus, the specificity of the word *marmor*, meaning “marble,” seems unnecessary when the word used in the Latin Vulgate for that incident is simply *lapis*, “rock.”<sup>25</sup> Herbert could be alluding to miraculous instances of religious statues weeping. But if that is the case, even though the miracle points to God’s involvement and power, it does not fully explain the speaker’s frustrated tone. He does not ask to be like weeping marble, but rather he asks that God should not allow him to be harder than marble that can weep. Instead, weeping marble could be—and, as I argue, is—a classical allusion. Tracing the classical allusions throughout Herbert’s poetry, Mary Ellen Rickey cites F. E. Hutchinson’s note on “The Church-floore”: a “probable source” of marble weeping is Vergil’s *Georgics* i.480: “*Et maestrum illacrimat templis ebur, aeraque sudant.*”<sup>26</sup> Hutchinson’s explanation remains uncontested.

Though the reference of the temple in the *Georgics* may make sense for “The Church-floore,” it

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<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, in “The Sacrifice” (170-171), Herbert compares that rock in Exodus to Christ’s head, which the Jews beat: “They strike my head, the rock from whence all store / Of heav’nly blessings issue evermore.” But here Herbert simply uses the word “rock,” not “marble.”

<sup>26</sup> Mary Ellen Rickey, *Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert* (University Press of Kentucky, 1966), 52. Rickey translates, “And the melancholy ivory of the temple weeps, and the bronzes sweat.”

is not quite a satisfactory explanation for “Homo, Statua,” especially since Vergil’s temple is made of *ebur*, meaning “ivory,” while Herbert intentionally writes *marmora*. Surely a poet so precise as Herbert would not mistake *ebur* for *marmor*—thrice. I propose Herbert is actually alluding to Ovid, whom he would have read extensively as a schoolboy and Cambridge student, rather than to Vergil.<sup>27</sup>

The image of weeping marble in “Homo, Statua” originates from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in which Niobe transforms into a marble statue that weeps. The poet recounts the tragic fate of Niobe, who angered the goddess Latona with her boasts of high birth and extraordinary fertility. The goddess sends her children, Apollo and Diana, to slay all twelve of Niobe’s children and her husband. Ovid vividly portrays the scene as the last living child is killed before the mother’s eyes:

dumque rogat, pro qua rogat, occidit: orba resedit  
 examines inter natos natasque virumque  
 deriguitque malis; nullos movet aura capillos,  
 in vultu color est sine sanguine, lumina maestis  
 stant immota genis, nihil est in imagine virum.  
 ipsa quoque interius cum duro lingua palata  
 congelat, et venae nec brachia reddere motus  
 nec pes ire potest; intra quoque viscera saxum est.  
 flet tamen et validi circumdata turbine venti  
 in patriam rapta est: ibi fixa cacumine montis  
 liquitur et *lacrimas etiam nunc marmora manant.*

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<sup>27</sup> John Drury, *Music at Midnight: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 56.

*And even while she prayed, she for whom she prayed fell dead. Now does the childless mother sit down amid the lifeless bodies of her sons, her daughters, and her husband, in stony grief. Her hair stirs not in the breeze; her face is pale and bloodless, and her eyes are fixed and staring in her sad face. There is nothing alive in the picture. Her very tongue is silent, frozen to her mouth's roof, and her veins can move no longer; her neck cannot bend nor her arms move nor her feet go. Within also her vitals are stone. But still she weeps; and, caught up in a strong, whirling wind, she is rapt away to her own native land. There, set on a mountain's peak, she weeps; and even to this day tears trickle from the marble.<sup>28</sup>*

Overcome with inconsolable grief, Niobe slowly transforms into stone, a mere shell of her original vitality. As a death-like marble statue, she has no other capacity except to weep in silence for eternity.

Herbert is not the first to allude to Niobe as weeping marble; “Ecce Homo,” a poem composed by a Jesuit poet named Bernhard Bauhusius, with whom seventeenth-century readers would have been familiar, similarly refers to weeping marble, the “stoniness” of man, and the myth of Niobe. Bauhusius uses Niobe as a figure of grief, whereas Herbert adds more depth to the allusion by considering the whole Ovidian myth. By comparing the two poems, we can more clearly see the frustration of Herbert’s speaker. Below is an excerpt of “Ecce Homo”:

Si mihi flet Libycum lapidoso in pectore marmor,  
 Et scissum è medio sit mihi cor Sipylo,  
 Nunc tamen vnda fluat, nunc se mea pectora scindant,

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<sup>28</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Book VI, 301-312. English translation by Frank Justus Miller (emphasis mine).

Nunc in aquas mea se marmora dissoluant...

*If only the Libyan marble could weep in my stony breast,*

*And my heart could be torn from the midst of Sipylus,*

*Now let the water flow, let my heart tear itself apart,*

*Now let my marble dissolve into water...*<sup>29</sup>

Bauhusius uses the words *marmor*, *cor*, and *fleo*, and Sipylus is the mountain upon which the petrified Niobe weeps. Although she makes no mention of the Ovidian allusion, Moul notices a similar use of imagery and language: “Though Herbert’s epigram is more concise and emotionally more constrained, the two poems make very similar use of the imagery of flesh as stone and water, and both contain a play upon the Hebrew meaning of the name ‘Adam’ (‘of the earth’), which resembles the Latin noun ‘adamas’ (‘adamant,’ a very hard stone).”<sup>30</sup> Whereas Herbert contemplates the nature of man, Bauhusius considers his stony heart in response to Christ’s crucifixion. Focusing on the sorrow of the mythological character, Bauhusius wants to weep with enough grief so as to dissolve his marble heart into water and thus outdo Niobe. On the other hand, the speaker of “Homo, Statua” wrestles with his “stoniness,” sees it as problematic, and requests God’s help to prevent him from being worse than Niobe, whose pride was her undoing and yet who, despite becoming marble, was able to weep for her loved ones. He

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<sup>29</sup> Bauhusius, *Epigrammata* (1616), sig. A2<sup>v</sup>–A3<sup>r</sup>, quoted by Moul, *A Literary History*, 244. The translation is provided by Moul.

<sup>30</sup> Moul, *A Literary History*, 245. Moul cites a few lines I exclude in the stanza above: “Ecce meus IESUS pro me, liuorque, cruorque, / Et tabum, & sanies! ECCE HOMO, nullus homo! . . . O pie CHRISTE, quis est, quem tu adamas? Adamas. [See how my Jesus is, for my sake, bruising, and blood, / Foul gore and bleeding! Behold a man, who is no man! . . . O saintly Christ, who is it whom you truly love? Adamant. (i.e. the man of stone, with play on ‘Adam’)]”



prays that he is not harder, more prideful, more godless than she, a *statua*. The speaker in “Ecce Homo” weeps out of grief whereas the speaker of “Homo, Statua” would weep out of contrition.

Additional evidence that the *Metamorphoses* is the classical allusion intended in “Homo, Statua” is the fact that Herbert borrows another image from Ovid: that of coral hardening. In the *Metamorphoses*, nymphs experiment with the decapitated head of Medusa, finding that whatever vegetation comes in contact with the Gorgon becomes hard and rock-like. This is the mythological origin of the phenomenon of coral as it is removed from water:

nunc quoque curaliis eadem natura remansit,  
 duritiam tacto capiant ut ab aere quodque  
 vimen in aequore erat, fiat super aequora saxum.

*And even till this day the same nature has remained in coral so that they harden when exposed to air, and what was a pliant twig beneath the sea is turned to stone above.*<sup>31</sup>

Herbert artistically condenses Ovid’s three lines into one: “*Durescunt proprijs euulsa corallia fundis.*” This Ovidian allusion reinforces Herbert’s theme of sin hardening the heart. The snake-like Medusa can be imagined as the embodiment of evil: once a beautiful woman, but now a terrible monster and a bane to the existence of all who encounter her. In Herbert’s poem, just as Medusa turns men into marble and vegetation into rock, sin figuratively turns hearts into stone.

In “Homo, Statua,” Herbert introduces an Augustinian view of evil as the absence of good, the absence of life (“*secus ingenitis dotibus orbis Adam,*” 4). As we shall see, Herbert’s English poem, “Nature,” further develops the understanding of the nature of man and the nature of evil, as the introspective speaker experiences it. The poet moves from an active state of sin

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<sup>31</sup> Ovid, Book IV, 750-752.

(rebellion) to a static state or spiritual death, portrayed in the metaphor of the heart of stone, and signifies that spiritual death is a loss of grace.

### **The Nature of Man and Evil**

In “Homo, Statua,” George Herbert portrayed the effect of original sin on Adam as the hardening of coral when it is removed from its habitat. Herbert portrays this change similarly in his English poetry: “sinne turn’d flesh to stone.”<sup>32</sup> In “Nature,” he further considers the nature of man in three different ways, one of which plays with the stony heart imagery:

Full of rebellion, I would die,  
Or fight, or travell, or denie  
That thou hast ought to do with me.

O tame my heart;  
It is thy highest art  
To captivate strong holds to thee.

If thou shalt let this venome lurk,  
And in suggestions fume and work,  
My soul will turn to bubbles straight,  
And thence by kinde  
Vanish into a winde,  
Making thy workmanship deceit.

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<sup>32</sup> “The H. Communion,” 29.

O smooth my rugged heart, and there  
 Engrave thy rev'rend law and fear;  
 Or make a new one, since the old  
                                   Is sablesse grown,  
                                   And a much fitter stone  
 To hide my dust, then thee to hold.

Although not technically a shape poem, the stanzas of “Nature” resemble three hearts turned sideways, but imperfectly formed. Herbert layers three different metaphors to portray three ways original sin and rebellion corrupt the nature of man. In the first stanza, the speaker, by nature, admits he is “full of rebellion” (1) against God, wild and fierce. His heart is like a soldier who defected from the army of God and then is fighting for the opposing army, that of sin. He wants God to conquer him, besiege his “strong hold” (6). Though rebellious, he still portrays himself as human. Not so, however, in the second stanza: his rebellion (sin) is imagined as a “venome” (7) that will cause his soul to fizz and “vanish into a winde” (11), just as the reaction of two chemicals eventually evaporates liquids into gas. His heart will become insubstantial, his will paralyzed, and God’s “workmanship” ruined. Herbert’s metaphor is reminiscent of Augustine’s view of the nature of evil. According to Augustine, evil is not a thing created by God, but is rather the absence of goodness and therefore of being: “*Mali enim nulla natura est; sed amissio boni mali nomen accepit.*”<sup>33</sup> Herbert seems to accept Augustine’s understanding of evil: his poem, “Sinne (2),” demonstrates a direct influence of Augustine: “Sinne is flat opposite to th’ Almighty, seeing / It wants the good of *vertue*, and of *being*” (4-5). Sin, lacking goodness and being, is invisible to the eye, and if it was in theory visible to men, they would be driven mad at

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<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XI.9. Translation: “For evil has in itself no substance; rather the loss of what is good has received the name evil.”

the sight of the hideous demon. Even though in “Nature” rebellion is portrayed as a venom, as a substance, the interaction between the venom and the heart leads to the deterioration of the heart. The more evil the heart becomes, the less substance it has.

The final stanza of “Nature” changes imagery once more: the heart is a rough stone, grown dry and lifeless like harvested coral. The speaker beseeches God to smooth his rock of a heart into a tablet and make it suitable for him to engrave the law of God. Herbert’s metaphor reinterprets the one that Scripture employs. The heart is portrayed as a tablet, reminiscent of the Ten Commandments whose words were engraved by the finger of God.<sup>34</sup> The heart knows and is constantly reminded of the law of God, words of wisdom, and principles of love and goodness, so that it may obey and prosper.<sup>35</sup> Herbert’s “The Sinner” also uses this biblical idea and claims that though his heart is hard as stone, God nevertheless has power to chisel away his hardness: “And though my hard heart scarce to thee can grone, / Remember that thou once didst write in stone” (13-14). But because his heart is so “saplesse” (16), so dead, so sinful, that it is more suitable as a sepulcher than a tablet in which to hide God’s word, the speaker asks God instead to make him a new heart altogether, echoing Ezekiel 36:26 and Psalm 51:10. This image of the heart-tomb, “a much fitter stone / To hide my dust” (17-18), connects sin with death, as Scripture does: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of euery tree of the garden thou mayest freely eate. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and euill, thou shalt not eate of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die” and “wee were dead in sinnes.”<sup>36</sup> Of course, Adam and Eve physically did not die the instant they ate of the fruit, but they did die spiritually. The consequences of their sin included a separation of their souls from God and loss

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<sup>34</sup> Exodus 31:18.

<sup>35</sup> See Deuteronomy 11:18, Jeremiah 31:33, Psalm 37:31, Psalm 40:8, Proverbs 3:3, Proverbs 7:1-3, Romans 2:15, and 2 Corinthians 3:3.

<sup>36</sup> Genesis 2:16-17; Ephesians 2:5.

of sanctifying grace and original justice. Two images in Herbert's "Grace" further link together sin and death. Spiritual death "like a mole... digs my grave at each remove" in the speaker's soul, and to avoid this kind of death, the speaker prays for grace to work on him (13, 14). In the following stanza, Herbert portrays sin as an ironsmith fortifying his hardness of heart: "Sinne is still hammering my heart / Unto a hardnesse, void of love" (17-18). The sinful heart lacks love—another echo of the Augustinian definition of evil. The spiritual death, caused by sin, reduces man closer and closer to nothingness and hardens him like stone—hard in the sense of a rebellious will against God's will, hard in the sense of spiritual death, and hard in the sense of resistance against feeling.

### **Weeping Marble: Grief and Contrition**

As aforementioned, the image of marble weeping occurs twice in Herbert's vernacular poetry; both "The Church-floore" and "Ephes. 4.30 *Grieve not the Holy Spirit, &c*" use this image to testify to the reality of redemption in the expression of weeping. In other words, the image of weeping marble is evidence of contrition and healing; one cannot be moved to tears and grief for one's sin unless by grace. As in "Homo, Statua," the poet contrasts his heart with marble in the two English poems. Whereas the tone in "Homo, Statua" is desperate and beseeching, the other poems are more hopeful. In "The Church-floore," the speaker is presumably conversing with an unnamed interlocuter (1) and contemplates the different types of flooring in the church. He attributes to each kind and color a virtue:

Mark you the floore? that square and speckled stone,

Which looks so firm and strong,

Is Patience:

And th' other black and grave, wherewith each one

Is checker'd all along,

Humilitie:

The gentle rising, which on either hand

Leads to the Quire above,

Is Confidence;

But the sweet cement, which in one sure band

Ties the whole frame, is Love

And Charitie.

These stanzas seem to imitate medieval allegory, in which a virtue or vice is personified: the color and shape of tiles symbolize the virtues of patience, humility, confidence, and charity. At first, it seems that the poet intends to contemplate through the visual aspects of the church the virtues of Patience, Humility, Confidence, Love, and Charity, by which the church ought to be governed. Stanley Fish observes that the analogies are “mechanically emblematic in a way uncharacteristic of Herbert,” and asserts that the image is static.<sup>37</sup> In the last stanza, however, the poet makes an unexpected turn—by the last two lines, the reader realizes that the church floor is actually a conceit for an individual Christian’s heart:

Hither sometimes Sinne steals, and stains

The marbles neat and curious veins:

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<sup>37</sup> Stanley Fish, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1978), 36.

But all is cleansed when the marble weeps.

Sometimes Death, puffing at the doore,

Blows all the dust about the floore;

But while he thinks to spoil the room, he sweeps.

Blest be the Architect whose art

Could build so strong in a weak heart.

A reader familiar with Herbert is not surprised by the revelation that the church floor the speaker is contemplating is the heart, but the poem creates a sense of surprise by the way the imagery slowly unfolds. Richard Strier emphasizes that the final word of “The Church-floore” “eliminates the visual and material from [the poem’s] concerns” and that “what we are left contemplating is not the capacity of a physical structure to suggest spiritual meanings but the unique ability of God to create imperishable spiritual virtues in the human heart.”<sup>38</sup> Although the contemplative speaker shifts away from the physical church floor to the spiritual heart, can we not say that this shift does not “eliminate” the visual but rather the imagery gives shape to the abstract and immaterial? At the end knowing the tenor of the metaphor (the heart), the reader recalls the vehicle (the floor) and reimagines the essential virtues, which grace instills in the Christian, and the ways the heart-floor is cleansed.<sup>39</sup>

Even though a person strives to maintain a virtuous life, he still falls short, and sin “stains” his heart, but his heart is cleansed when it weeps. In “Homo, Statua,” the poet recalls the petrified Niobe, grieving the loss of all of her loved ones. In “The Church-floore,” there is a faint

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<sup>38</sup> Strier, *Love Known*, 149.

<sup>39</sup> It is a method the metaphysical poet uses throughout *The Temple*. He depicts the various parts of the church—“The Windows,” “The Church-monuments,” “Sepulchre,” “Church-lock and key” and more—in order for the reader to meditate on the nature of the heart in relationship with God and sin.

echo of that myth: “when the marble weeps” and “Death” blows “dust,” indicating the death of individuals. However, unlike the tragic tale of Niobe, rather than damaging or petrifying the heart, contrition and grief cleanse it. For Herbert, it is the Architect’s design for that kind of sorrow to be ultimately purifying. The heart’s “weakness,” swayed by emotion or the source of emotion, actually has a vital role in keeping a person strong and virtuous. The last two lines recall the line “cemented with teares” from “The Altar”: the tears which harden the altar-heart indicate the brokenness of the individual, but in “The Church-floore,” a later poem which does not appear in the Williams manuscript, the tears—whether from contrition or grief—have a purifying, and therefore positive, effect on the “floor” of the heart. This seems to be a development of a more mature view than what Herbert had previously held. In a letter to his mother, “A Letter of Mr. George Herbert to his Mother, in her Sickness,” as Izaak Walton records, the poet claims that God and Grief cannot coexist in a person’s heart:

*Lastly, for those Afflictions of the Soul: consider, that God intends that to be a Sacred Temple for himself to dwell in, and will not allow any room there for such an in-mate as Grief; or allow that any sadness shall be his competitor.—And above all, If any care of future things molest you, remember those admirable words of the Psalmist: Cast thy Care on the Lord and he shall nourish thee.<sup>40</sup>*

Now Herbert does not mean that his mother, afflicted with pain and disease, should resist tears and sadness stoically, but that grief when it comes should be passed along to God, lest it dwell too long in the heart and become his “competitor.” Herbert seems to harbor the Protestant anxiety that “joylessness came to be seen as a sign of the Spirit’s absence from the life of the individual believer and from the corporate Church, a corollary of a lack of love for God and

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<sup>40</sup> Walton, *Lives*, 283.



neighbor.”<sup>41</sup> Anxious that she maintain evidence of faith and the Spirit’s presence, he admonishes his mother eventually to release her grief so as not to slip into that joyless state. The younger Herbert who wrote this letter does not express his later sentiment that grief is a tool of God to purify and strengthen the heart. Perhaps it is his prolonged battle with “ague” and his mother’s death that prompted a reconsideration of grief, which in turn led to the creation of “The Church-floore.”

Another poem, also not in the Williams manuscript, “Ephes. 4.30 *Grieve not the Holy Spirit, &c*” likewise reconsiders weeping and grief. The title refers to the end of the chapter of Ephesians, in which Paul exhorts the members of the church to avoid sin and live virtuously. Paul instructs them to put off the old man and live as the new man in Christ Jesus, for doing evil grieves the Holy Spirit, who has sealed them for the day of redemption. One familiar with the biblical passage might expect that the poem would be about avoiding sin as a Christian or about how God redeems. But Herbert’s angle is surprising: he focuses on the image of God grieving and decides that he should follow suit.

And art thou grieved, sweet and sacred Dove,

When I am sowre,

And crosse thy love?

Grieved for me? the God of strength and power

Griev’d for a worm, which when I tread,

I passe away and leave it dead?

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

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<sup>41</sup> Adam Potkay, “Spenser, Donne, and Joy,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 46, no. 1 (2006): 44.

Weep foolish heart,

And weeping live:

For death is drie as dust. Yet if ye part,

End as the night, whose sable hue

Your sinnes expresse; melt into dew.

The idea that an all-powerful God could weep so easily seems at first to the speaker a curious thing. Exaggerating Matthew 6:26, that God looks after the sparrow, the speaker considers that God even weeps for the death of so insignificant a creature as a worm. The specific choice of a worm seems to draw on Psalm 22:6, where the Psalmist esteems himself not a man but a worm. If God who is perfect and powerful grieves over the deadness of sin in the heart of man, how much more ought a man grieve his own spiritual death? Because “death is drie as dust” (10), weeping will water and revitalize his heart. Weeping in Scripture is often a gesture of contrition and repentance: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”<sup>42</sup> Noting this psalm, Fish quotes Daniel Rogers’ *A practicall catechism* (1632): “Not only is a broken and bruised heart acceptable, it is required: ‘That broken heart thou wouldst faine have in the searching and lamenting of thy sinnes, nourish daily; he that in a great frost would keepe the yce thin, must keep it broken everyday: so thou, thy soule-issues, lest thine heart harden.’”<sup>43</sup> Rogers warns that a heart that does not daily regret its sin will become hard.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Psalm 51:17. See also Joel 2:12.

<sup>43</sup> Fish, *The Living Temple*, 117.

<sup>44</sup> Lancelot Andrewes, who taught George Herbert at Westminster School, asserts a similar view of the necessity of contrition in his sermon, “Ash-Wednesday 1619”: “As in conversion the purpose of amendment must proceed from the heart, so in our contrition, the sorrow, the anger, for our turning away, must pierce to the heart; some *cardiaque* passion to be, the heart to suffer. And what must it suffer? Contrition—it should even *conteri*, be ‘ground to powder’” (83). The Latinate origin of the word “contrition” suggests a likening of the heart to stone, which can be ground into powder by the intensity of sorrow and remorse.

Herbert recreates that sense in his poem: whereas God weeps out of grief, man ought to recognize his sin causes death and weep with Him in contrition. In *The Countrey Parson*, Herbert clarifies that in order to repent, one needs not to physically weep; repentance is not a bodily act, but one of the heart.<sup>45</sup> “The essence of repentance,” he asserts, “consisteth in a true detestation of the soul, abhorring, and renouncing sin, and turning unto God in truth of heart, and newnesse of life.”<sup>46</sup> In the following stanzas of “Ephes. 4.30 *Grieve not the Holy Spirit, &c.*,” even though physical weeping is not necessary, the speaker still desires his heart-felt grief to be so deep as to manifest itself in bodily expression, in weeping and in music:

When sawcie mirth shall knock or call at doore.

Cry out, Get hence,

Or cry no more.

Almightie God doth grieve, he puts on sense:

I sinne not to my grief alone,

But to my Gods too; he doth grone.

Oh take thy lute, and tune it to a strain,

Which may with thee

All day complain.

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<sup>45</sup> See *The Countrey Parson*, 279, where Herbert the Parson reassures one who is worried that his repentance is not true: “And particularly, having doubted sometimes, whether his repentance were true, or at least in that degree it ought to be, since he found himselfe sometimes to weepe more for the losse of some temporall things, then for offending God, he came at length to this resolution, that repentance is an act of the mind, not of the Body, even as the Originall signifies; and that the chiefe thing, which God in Scriptures requires, is the heart, and the spirit, and to worship him in truth, and spirit. Wherefore in case a Christian endeavour to weep, and cannot, since we are not Masters of our bodies, this sufficeth.”

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

There can no discord but in ceasing be.

Marbles can weep; and surely strings

More bowels have, then such hard things.

Lord, I adjudge my self to tears and grief,

Ev'n endlesse tears

Without relief.

If a cleare spring for me no time forbears,

But runnes, although I be not drie;

I am no Crystall, what shall I?

Yet if I wail not still, since still to wail

Nature denies;

And flesh would fail,

If my deserts were masters of mine eyes:

Lord, pardon, for thy sonne makes good

My want of tears with store of bloud.

The speaker seeks out music as an avenue for his attitude of sorrow and contrition. He reasons that if "Marbles can weep," then "surely strings / More bowels have, then such hard things" are more able to weep (23-24). In other words, a lute, having "bowels" or the organ of feeling, has more of a capacity to feel and therefore to lament than marble has. The poet tucks a clever pun into the word "strings," referring to the musical instrument as well as to his own heart-strings, which, unlike an inanimate object made of wood, actually have the capacity of feeling. If

inanimate marble can weep, how much more so can an animate human person? The poem turns in the final stanza: if his flesh were to fail and his eyes be dry as a desert, he asks that God would forgive and that Christ would supply his lack of tears with His blood. In other words, the speaker may not be master of his body and may not be able to produce real tears, so he asks that Christ, taking upon Himself the sins of the world, would accept the speaker's repentance nevertheless and forgive his sins.

In both "The Church-floore" and "Ephes. 4.30 *Grieve not the Holy Spirit, &c.*," linked by the same image of marble weeping, tears are depicted as purifying. In the former, weeping from grief or sorrow serves to cleanse the heart of the stains left by sin, revealing the white marble "floor" of the heart. In the latter, weeping is more specifically an act of contrition, an imitative response to God's grief over one's own sin that is ultimately life-giving. But what saturation the speaker cannot produce on his own Christ supplies through His sacrifice, which is actually the main source of life.

### **Stones, Altars, and Sacrifices**

So far, the poet, faced with the reality of his hard heart, has admitted his sinfulness, has felt frustration with the lingering presence of sin, and tearful contrition for his transgressions against God. Herbert has portrayed redemption in "The Altar," which restores the proper function of worship by shaping his stony heart into an altar, a place of purification and sanctification. In these poems, stone represents death or frailty of the will to act righteously; one of Herbert's Latin poems gives further hope of spiritual regeneration and life. An elegiac poem in *Lucus*, "Λογική Θυσία," which means "a reasonable sacrifice," combines the nature of man, the death-likeness of sin, with the image of altars, but adds the element of resurrection in the final line:

Ararúmque Hominúmque ortum si mente pererres,  
 Cespes viuus, Homo; mortuus, Ara fuit:  
 Quae diuisa nocent, Christi per foedus, in vnum  
 Conueniunt; & Homo viua fit Ara Dei. (1-4)

*If you mentally wandered [pondered] the origins of Altars and of Men,  
 Living sod was Man; dead sod was an Altar:  
 These which having been divided do harm, through the covenant of Christ,  
 Come together in one thing; and Man becomes a living Altar of God.*

Herbert uses a Greek title, rather than a Latin one to match the rest of the poem, in order to reference more explicitly Romans 12:1: “I beseech you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, that yee present your bodies a liuing sacrifice, holy, acceptable vnto God, which is your reasonable seruice.” The title makes the readers anticipate a metaphor of man as a sacrifice to God, but Herbert surprises them by imagining man as an altar instead. “*Cespes viuus, Homo*” echoes Genesis 2:7, which explains that God created man from dust of the ground and breathed life into him.<sup>47</sup> Man is contrasted with the dead earth of an altar. Altars, by nature of being the rock on which animals are sacrificed, are a bloody place of death in order to save the living from the guilt of sin. Christ, through His ultimate sacrifice on the Cross, has redeemed man once for all, and thus has made null the use of blood sacrifices and altars in the Jewish custom.<sup>48</sup> Through the *foedus Christi*, man then becomes a living, breathing altar of God. Not only does this

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<sup>47</sup> “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, & breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a liuing soule.”

<sup>48</sup> See Hebrews 10:9-14.

metaphor mirror the one Herbert uses in “The Altar,” but also it implies that the body of Christ is the one sacrificed on this altar, pointing to Communion.

“The Altar” establishes not only the nature of man but also man’s relationship with God. With God as the addressee of the poem, the poem imitates a petitionary prayer. Even though the altar of the poem resembles the Hebraic one, “thy blessed SACRIFICE” (15) that the speaker mentions is Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. In the penultimate line of “The Altar,” Herbert foreshadows the following poem “The Sacrifice,” which details Christ’s crucifixion, in this phrase. By incorporating both an image of Old Testament practice and the New Testament fulfillment of it, Herbert captures the moment in history that Christ became the sacrificial Lamb and fulfilled the prophecies. In a sense, the modern-day Christian’s heart, portrayed as an altar, is transported to this time and abides there. The speaker wishes to possess the blessed Sacrifice, which occurred not at his present time, and to be sanctified to God. By foreshadowing Christ’s sacrifice in “The Altar,” Herbert places the sacrament of the altar in the center of worship.<sup>49</sup>

If, according to Ezekiel 36:26, the restorative work of God is to replace the heart of stone with a heart of flesh, why does Herbert so often maintain the stony aspect in the heart of a Christian? The heart of stone is at times associated with negative imagery—the spiritual deadness visualized as a sepulcher or an inanimate statue—whereas at other times the stone has a more positive association and purpose as an altar or church floor. It is because of a theological reason: though the Christian strives for transformation and growth, complete sanctification is not yet attainable in the mortal life. Longing to live virtuously, the Christian thus continually struggles with sin, or his stony heart. Jared Andrew Oakes distinguishes Herbert from John

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<sup>49</sup> See Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation*, 29-30. The architecture of churches changed in accordance with the Reformed conceptions of worship and of the celebration of the Eucharist. By 1215, “the Eucharist, the ‘sacrament of the altar,’ was to take place at an altar no longer in the center of the space of worship, but at the end reserved to the clergy” (30).

Wesley, who would claim that Christian perfection is an achievable goal: “Herbert is not John Wesley; he does not hold out even theoretical hope that Man can be perfectly ‘holy, pure, and cleare’ in this world.”<sup>50</sup> But Herbert does recognize and emphasize the transforming power of grace and portrays the transformation, though within limits, of the heart, from stone to flesh. This transformation occurs not because of the action of the Christian individual, but because of God’s grace, most often portrayed in terms of Communion, as we will examine in the next chapter.

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<sup>50</sup> Oakes, *Dressing of Aaron*, 45.



## Chapter 2

### Grace and Fleshy Hearts

If “The Altar” sets up the frame of *The Temple*, the long narrative poem immediately following it, “The Sacrifice,” fills in the canvas of the poetic work. “The Sacrifice,” recounting Christ’s passion from His first-person perspective, allows the reader to experience vicariously the grief and agony that Christ endured as a sacrifice for mankind. As Martz notes, Herbert’s poem is “a *meditation* upon the liturgy, developing the events of Passion Week according to the intricate methods of the seventeenth century: visualization, intellectual analysis, profit drawn from the dual and simultaneous vision of the God made man.”<sup>51</sup> Drawing from medieval Catholic devotional and liturgical traditions, such as the *Improperia* sequences of the Good Friday liturgy, Herbert quotes the *O vos omnes* of Lamentations 1:12 in the opening of “The Sacrifice”: “*Oh all ye, who pass by*” (1).<sup>52</sup> Each stanza, marked by the refrain, “Was ever grief like mine,” centers on a detail of the events starting with Christ’s betrayal to His death on the Cross. The poem mingles grief with hope as Christ endures the “present” pain but also foreknows the future outcome of His sacrifice. Both emotions are devotionally necessary: the reader ought to feel grief that his own sin inflicted so much pain on Christ and therefore feel contrition for his transgressions; the reader also ought to rejoice in God’s immense grace in sacrificing Himself for the redemption of the fallen world. The feeling of grief stems from the reader’s guilt knowing his sin is the reason that Christ endured suffering and death on Calvary (in the historical past). Hope and joy arise from the assurance that Christ’s death and resurrection redeems the sinful believer (in the personal past and present).

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<sup>51</sup> Martz, *Poetry of Meditation*, 92.

<sup>52</sup> See Rosemond Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 24-6.

Herbert illustrates this convergence of time through his use of the metaphor of the stony heart when contemplating grace. The Church of England's articles of faith integrate the Ezekiel 36:26 metaphor in its definition of grace: "The Grace of Christ, or the holie Ghost... dooeth take awaie the stone harte, and geveth an harte of flesh."<sup>53</sup> Grace removes the spiritually dead stone of a heart and replaces it with a living and renewed heart of flesh. Aquinas distinguishes grace into two types: 1) grace as divine help, whereby God moves the will to act; 2) grace as a habitual gift divinely bestowed on man, whereby God strengthens the will to act.<sup>54</sup> Dividing grace into similar categories, prevenient and subsequent, Aquinas further classifies the five effects of grace: 1) to heal the soul, 2) to desire good, 3) to do the good proposed, 4) to persevere in doing good, and 5) to reach glory.<sup>55</sup> Centuries later, the Reformers continue to uphold this Thomist notion of grace.<sup>56</sup> Reformed theologians, like Samuel Maresius (1646–1648), distinguished "justifying grace"—"the gracious divine decision to justify an elect person on account of the merits of Christ"—from "habitual grace"—"the infused supernatural habits of the theological and moral virtues."<sup>57</sup> The removal of the stony heart is similar to the Thomist understanding of prevenient or "justifying" grace, and the gift of the Spirit to walk in righteousness is similar to subsequent or "habitual"

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<sup>53</sup> Article 10 from *42 Articles* (London, 1553), quoted in Werth, "A Heart of Stone," 193.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, V. 2, Q. 111, A. 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, V. 2, Q. 111, A. 3. Aquinas quotes Augustine (*De Natura et Gratia* xxxi) to explain that prevenient grace heals, and subsequent, following healing, strengthens.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen Hampton summarizes the definition of prevenient grace that Samuel Maresius (1646–1648) explains: "Through prevenient grace, God prepares a person's will to embrace God's saving work in them.... So prevenient grace does not work by moral suasion, nor is it simply an invitation on God's part; rather, it efficaciously convinces and powerfully draws the recipient." Following prevenient grace, cooperating grace "completes the work of prevenient grace, by strengthening and confirming the pious motions that prevenient grace has inspired," in "Sin, Grace, and Free Choice in Post-Reformation Reformed Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theology, 1600-1800*, ed. Ulrich L. Lehner, Richard A. Muller, and A. G. Roeber (online edition, Oxford Academic, 2014), 236.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199937943.013.5>, accessed 24 May 2023.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-236.

grace. When Herbert poetically manipulates this metaphor, rather than maintaining the replacement language, he often speaks of grace as transforming the stony heart. At times, as in “The Sacrifice,” the transformation is that of melting, from a state of a solid to a state of a liquid. More frequently, as established later in “The Sacrifice and echoed in “The H. Communion,” the transformation is the transmutation of substance, from stone to flesh. This transformation, often surrounded by medical language, means the removal of sin (the disease) and the healing of the Christian’s soul. Herbert’s adaptation of the biblical metaphor of the stony heart allows both understandings of grace—justifying and habitual—to coexist, and helps the reader to understand that the work of grace is both done and ongoing, both past and continually present. The Lord’s Supper, through which grace operates in the soul, likewise remembers the historical past, Christ’s sacrifice, and celebrates the present, the redemption of mankind.

### **Melting Hearts and Melting Statues**

In certain sections of “The Sacrifice,” Herbert reprises the metaphor of the stony heart to describe the stubbornness of the Jews, representative of the old law, and foreshadows the redemption of mankind that Christ’s sacrifice will accomplish. In one stanza, Christ endures in silence the accusations and insults of the Jews, and Herbert characterizes Christ’s response as patient and gentle. The verses consider whether tender affection can master its opposite:

I answer nothing, but with patience prove

If stonie hearts will melt with gentle love.

But who does hawk at eagles with a dove?

Was ever grief like mine? (89-92)

The Jews' hearts are hardened like stone, and Christ's "gentle love" (90) is hoped to be a heat intense enough to melt stone. However, the rhetorical question challenges the efficacy of gentleness to combat the hardened Jews, comparing its ability to the feebleness of a dove to hunt the much fiercer eagle. The next stanza temporarily proves the opposite of the hoped-for effect: the Jews' cries become louder and angrier. But the question, "But who does hawk at eagles with a dove?" (91), does not have to be despairing, however; it demonstrates the counterintuitiveness of divine love. Even though Christ's "gentle love" did not melt the "stonie hearts"—hardened wills—during His trial, the speaker of "Discipline" upholds the notion that love does have transformative power and requests that God use this method rather than a harsher and more painful one on him: "For with love / Stonie hearts will bleed."<sup>58</sup> The speaker declares that love can turn stony hearts into flesh and thus wound them more effectively than disciplinary wrath can—a counterintuitive claim similar to hawking eagles with doves or to melting rock with gentleness.

As I proposed in the previous chapter, Herbert alludes to the *Metamorphoses* in "Homo, Statua" and adds a classical significance to the biblical metaphor of the stony heart. As stone is a recurring image in Ovid's narrative poem, it is reasonable to suggest that Herbert drew imagery from more than one of its mythological transformations.<sup>59</sup> "Statua" in the title of the poem echoes another Ovidian myth: the statue of Pygmalion. Disgusted by the supposed deficiencies of human women, the mythological sculptor carves his ideal woman from ivory (*ebur*). After eventually falling in love with the inanimate statue, he prays and sacrifices to Venus, the goddess of love, for a woman like her, with an unspoken prayer that the statue itself would become

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<sup>58</sup> "Discipline," 19-20.

<sup>59</sup> Douglas F. Bauer, "The Function of Pygmalion in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 93 (1962): 2.

human. Venus approves of his prayer and piety, and when Pygmalion returns home and kisses the statue, she “melts” under his touch like wax in the sun and becomes flesh:

temptatum mollescit ebur positoque rigore  
 subsidit digitis ceditque, ut Hymettia sole  
 cera remollescit tractataque police multas  
 flectitur in facies ipsoque fit utilis usu.

*The ivory grew soft to his touch and, its hardness vanishing, gave and yielded beneath his fingers, as Hymettian wax grows soft under the sun and, moulded by the thumb, is easily shaped to many forms and becomes usable through use itself.<sup>60</sup>*

The love of Pygmalion and the power of the goddess of love transform that which was “dead” and hard into that which is living and soft. To medieval Christian ears, the myth of Pygmalion sounded like a pagan prefiguration of Christ’s love for the Church.<sup>61</sup> Line 90 of “The Sacrifice,” “stonie hearts will melt with gentle love,” seems to echo the Ovidian ivory statue melting like wax under the creator’s display of affection. The lines 19-20 of “Discipline” likewise recall a similar transformation. Although the image of love having power, fiery or otherwise, to melt the beloved’s heart is not strictly Ovidian and has become a common English idiom, Ovid’s influence is enduring and pervading, and for a poet who, in reaction to his contemporaries, devotes himself to using the medium of poetry to praise God’s love rather than erotic love, using classical love allusions for religious purposes is fitting to Herbert’s vision. Furthermore, Rickey’s

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<sup>60</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X.283-286.

<sup>61</sup> Written in the thirteenth century, Jean Molinet’s *Roman de la Rose moralisé*, which draws spiritual meaning from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, reads Pygmalion as Christ and his ivory statue as the Church. See Claire M. Croft, “Pygmalion and the Metamorphosis of Meaning in Jean Molinet’s *Roman de la Rose moralisé*,” *French Studies* 59, no. 4 (2005), 456.

suggestion that Herbert borrows imagery from Cupid in his picture of Love in “Discipline” links Herbert’s poetry to Ovid.<sup>62</sup> Love melting hearts is not a biblical image; when hearts melt like wax (see, for example, Joshua 7:5; Isaiah 19:1; Psalm 22:14), it is an idiom of fear and discouragement or one of intense emotional suffering. It is thus more likely that melting hearts is an Ovidian allusion. However, without the expression of melting, scripture presents a picture of salvation not unlike the metamorphosis of dead ivory to living flesh: “But God who is rich in mercie, for his great loue wherewith hee loued vs, Euen when wee were dead in sinnes, hath quickned vs together with Christ, (by grace ye are saued).”<sup>63</sup> If Herbert is indeed referring to the *Metamorphoses* in line 90 of “The Sacrifice,” he fuses together phase transition (the change of a solid, for example, into a different state of matter, like a liquid) and resurrection in order to depict the power of the love of God on the interior of man. The human heart is such that it needs a change of spiritual state and change of spiritual matter.

“The Sacrifice” later looks forward to when love, or in this case sorrow toward Christ’s agony, will melt hearts, and reveals how grace operates in the spiritual heart of man:

Such sorrow as, if sinfull man could feel,  
Or feel his part, he would not cease to kneel,  
Till all were melted, though he were all steel:

Was ever grief like mine? (209-212)

Here, rather than rock, the sinful man’s feelings are hardened and unresponsive like steel, but if he were sensitive to Christ’s suffering, he would fall to his knees, overwhelmed—or “melted” as metal in a furnace—with sorrow, shame, and contrition. Herbert presents a kind of paradox: the

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<sup>62</sup> For more on Herbert’s classical allusions, see Rickey’s chapter, “The Classical Materials,” in *Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert*.

<sup>63</sup> Ephesians 2:4-5.

sinful man's unfeeling, stony nature prevents him from experiencing grief at Christ's suffering, but Christ's sorrow is so intense that feeling even just a part of it would devastate a hardened, steely heart, changing its solid state to a liquid one. In other words, he needs a transformation of his hard nature to feel sorrow, and sorrow will change his hard nature. The paradox of lines 209-211 resembles Aquinas's definition of twofold grace. Prevenient (justifying) grace prepares and enables the hardened heart to feel sorrow, and subsequent (habitual) grace helps the person to respond with contrition (kneeling) and allows the sorrow to melt away the hardness.

In "Nature," Herbert suggests the removal of the stony heart and the replacement of a new heart, which sounds more akin to prevenient grace, but in other uses of the metaphor he visualizes the work of grace as transforming or softening the heart of stone. In "Grace," for example, even though the sinful heart is not explicitly a stone but nevertheless hard, grace undoes the "art" of sin (19):

Sinne is still hammering my heart

Unto a hardnesse, void of love:

Let suppling grace, to crosse his art

Drop from above. (17-20)

The hard heart is "void of love," or void of theological virtues, but grace counters sin's effects and makes the heart soft and supple to God's love and will. Herbert represents the work of grace as the softening of a stony heart, visualizing a process by which the praying person becomes sanctified and virtuous. The "supplying grace" in the poem resembles the concept of subsequent grace, by which God instills virtue in the believer. It is, of course, God's work, but "Grace" maintains that the process does involve the cooperation of the Christian in prayer ("Let suppling grace, to crosse his art / Drop from above" [19-20]). Following Lewalski in noticing the biblical

metaphor of God as gardener and man as a plant, R. V. Young compares the repeated request for grace in the poem to Santa Teresa de Jesús's concept of the life of prayer as cultivating a garden: "Herbert's poem handles the same paradox as Santa Teresa's discussion of prayer: that we must long and strive for the grace that can only be a gift, an accession of God's favor that wholly transcends human activity and desire. The result is that this life is inevitably a state of tension, an alternation of spiritual fulfillments and disappointments."<sup>64</sup> Even though Young speculates that Herbert would have been skeptical of "the Carmelite nun's bold forays into mystical union," both writers similarly understand and depict the process by which grace cultivates love in the Christian individual and the attitude the believer ought to have in relationship with Christ.<sup>65</sup> God as the gardener produces the fruit—without grace the stony heart cannot will goodness—but the believer must still desire the gift of grace in prayer, as the refrain of "Grace" suggests.

### Communion as Cordial

"The Sacrifice" establishes that one of the main conduits of grace is the sacraments. Blood and water stream from Christ's spear wound, representing the two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper:

Nay, after death their spite shall further go;  
 For they will pierce my side, I full well know;  
 That as sinne came, so Sacraments might flow:

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<sup>64</sup> R. V. Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 37. In her autobiography *Libro de la Vida* (1588), Santa Teresa de Jesús, a Carmelite mystic, describes four stages of prayer life, each corresponding to the process of watering a garden.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. By drawing similarities between Herbert and Catholics, Young disputes an exclusively Protestant reading of *The Temple* and demonstrates that Herbert does not reject a Thomist definition of grace.



Was ever grief like mine? (245-248)

Analogizing “sinne” as the spear that impales Christ’s side, the poet affirms that the sacraments, Baptism and Communion, originate from Christ Himself and are the means by which the wounds of sin are remedied.<sup>66</sup> Although both sacraments are equally important, the prevalence of Eucharistic imagery throughout *The Temple* suggests the poet’s particular interest in the Lord’s Supper: “through a hundred different guises, the Communion imagery permeates *The Temple*, not only in poems explicitly devoted to praise of this sacrament, but also in dozens of brief references to the ‘feast,’ the ‘board,’ the ‘meat,’ the ‘banquet,’ the ‘blood,’ the Cross, the wounds, often woven into another context with a witty surprise.”<sup>67</sup> Herbert’s interest may stem from the fact that a Christian celebrates Communion on a frequent basis whereas an individual is baptized once. Such frequency merits additional devotion and contemplation. When Herbert contemplates the sacrament, he often refers to the blood of Christ in medical terms. In “The Sacrifice,” for example, the red color of the robe, intended to mock Christ’s kingship, instead foreshadows His blood which redeems and remedies mankind:

Then with a scarlet robe they me aray;  
Which shews my bloud to be the onely way  
And cordiall left to repair mans decay:

Was ever grief like mine?<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The Church of England retained only these two sacraments from the seven of the Catholic Church. See 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*, accessed July 27, 2023, [http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1559/BCP\\_1559.htm](http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1559/BCP_1559.htm).

<sup>67</sup> Martz, *Poetry of Meditation*, 302. Strier argues against a specifically Eucharistic reading of “The Agonie” and extrapolates that “Herbert frequently uses Eucharistic-sounding language—language of blood, wine, and tasting—metaphorically” (*Love Known*, 46 n. 41). However, a reading the Eucharistic language as merely metaphorical undermines Herbert’s obvious reverence of the sacrament and presumes that the sacramental power Herbert portrays is merely symbolic.

<sup>68</sup> “The Sacrifice,” 157-160.

Christ's blood, portrayed as a medicinal potion ("cordiall") that invigorates the heart, alone can restore man's corrupted nature ("decay") to its original healthful state. Herbert's choice of "cordiall" makes the metaphor clearer: the etymology of cordial<sup>69</sup> places emphasis on the heart—the stony heart—as the center of disease. Communion, the celebratory drinking of the "cordiall," therefore remedies the heart of man, whose desires are misplaced and whose will is corrupted.

"Christus in cruce" (13) from *Passio Discerpta*, a collection of poems often seen by critics as the Latin counterpart of "The Sacrifice," further develops the representation of Christ's blood as a medicine for the disease of sin. As the speaker kneels down in reverence and joy at the Cross dripping with blood, he contemplates the healing work of Christ's blood:

Hic, vbi sanati stillant opobalsama mundi,  
 Aduoluo madidae laetus hiánsque Cruci:  
 Pro lapsu stillarum abeunt peccata; nec acres  
 Sanguinis insultus exanimata ferunt.  
 Christe, fluas semper; ne, si tua flumina cessent,  
 Culpa redux iugem te neget esse Deum.

*Here, where the balsams drip for the healed world,*

*I, joyous and with an open mouth, fall down at the dripping Cross:*

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<sup>69</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "cordial, n., sense 1.a," July 27, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9146373010>: "A food or (esp. alcoholic) drink with medicinal or health-giving properties, esp. one that is thought to invigorate the heart, stimulate the circulation, or provide comfort (now *historical*)." The English word is derived from the post-classical Latin word *cordialis* (adjective): "(of medicine) stimulating (12th cent.; from 13th cent. in British sources), of or relating to the heart (from 14th cent. in British sources), heartfelt, sincere (from 14th cent. in British (frequently) and continental sources), also *cordiale* (neuter noun) medicinal drink (from 14th cent. in British sources; also in continental sources)." The prefix is derived from the classical Latin *cor*, *cordis*, meaning "heart."

*Before the descent of the drops, sins depart; nor do they*

*Lifeless withstand the penetrating<sup>70</sup> insults of the blood.*

*Christ, may you flow always; lest, should your streams cease,*

*My fault returning deny that you are God ever flowing.<sup>71</sup>*

Herbert's choice of the word *hiáns* (meaning "with an open mouth" or "gaping") suggests, in addition to expressing amazement or reverence, that the kneeling speaker opens his mouth to receive the drops of blood, almost acting as a paten to catch the crumbs of the sacramental bread. The healing blood (*opobalsama*) enters through the digestive tract of the speaker, and sin, conquered by the force of the blood, flees from the fortress of the soul—a skillfully compact image that combines medical and martial language. Whereas "The Sacrifice" likens the blood of Christ to a "cordiall," a metaphor in which physical internality (the physical heart) represents the spiritual heart, in "Christus in cruce," the poet selects a different type of medicine, a balsam, which is applied to external wounds. Herbert poetically extends the external balm to heal an internal disease, or rather the spiritual one, whether through external application (the drips fall on the speaker) or perhaps through ingestion. Responding to Achsah Guibbory's claim that spiritualizing the church festivals and ceremonies deemphasizes the material, ceremonial, and outward aspects of worship, Robert Whalen argues instead that Herbert's physical language bids us "to see sacrament and ceremony as penetrating the inner devotional realm and claiming its

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<sup>70</sup> Also "keen" or "sharp." I have selected the synonym "penetrating" to evoke osmosis as well as the visual of a sword piercing its target in an effort to reinforce Herbert's poetic image.

<sup>71</sup> I have translated *iugem* (*iugis, -e*), meaning "continual, perpetual," here as "ever flowing." *Iugis*, when modifying running water, means "always flowing, perennial." Since the poem plays on the constant motion of divine blood, I deemed "ever flowing" the most fitting translation. See Logeion, "iugis<sup>2</sup>," accessed July 27, 2023, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/iugis>.

otherwise insular space as contiguous with the trappings that are its institutional surface.”<sup>72</sup>

Later, he writes,

[Herbert] knows that sin is primarily a spiritual ailment and requires a penetrating, spiritual cure. But his is an undeniably material and somatic characterization of sin: ‘hardness’ in need of ‘supp[ling],’ or, in ‘The Agonie,’ a ‘presse and vice, which forceth pain / To hunt his cruell food through ev’ry vein’ (lines 11-12), both suggesting an overwhelmingly physiological need. Whereas for Calvin the material means are but God’s concession to the fleshly limitations of his creatures, Herbert is much more reluctant to divest spiritual experience of its sublunary component.<sup>73</sup>

The medicinal solutions of “The Sacrifice” and “Christus in cruce” elucidate that Communion, a physical rite, performs a spiritual work in the communicant; the physicality of Communion is inseparable from its spiritual efficacy. In “The Sacrifice,” the divine “cordiall” invigorates the spiritual decayed heart, that is, restores the virtues and life that sinful nature lacks—the same work habitual grace completes. But what is the healing effect of *opobalsama* of “Christus in cruce”? If the streams of blood were to cease, the poet says, the speaker’s fault would return and deny God eternal. The “if” of the last line is less doubt in God’s character as eternal than affirmation of the theological necessity of Christ’s divinity and thus eternity. In other words, grace through Christ’s blood both removes sin (remedies the disease) and perpetually enables the individual to have faith (the long-lasting effect of the remedy).

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<sup>72</sup> Robert Whalen, “George Herbert’s Sacramental Puritanism,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2001): 1276. He cites Achsah Guibbory, *Ceremony and Community From Herbert to Milton: Literature, Religion and Cultural Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 55.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 1301.

Herbert portrays the eternality and active power of Christ's sacrifice in the constant motion of "Christus in cruce"—*stillant, madidae, lapsu stillarum, fluas semper, flumina, iugem*. This motion is present, indicated by the use of the present tense. The speaker of the poem is or at least imagines himself physically present at the historical scene of Christ's crucifixion, where the Cross still drips with His blood. The emphasis on perpetuity in *semper* and *iugem* further links the two different historical moments together, allowing the historical past and the present to exist at the same time. Christ's blood, ever flowing, transcends time and space. If the blood of Christ were not eternally existing, "ever flowing," it would not be sufficient to heal and redeem the world. Herbert draws from the book of Hebrews, in which the author assures his Jewish audience that they cannot return to the old way of sacrifice and that Christ's sacrifice takes away sins forever because the former must be annually repeated whereas the latter is perpetually effective.<sup>74</sup> By uniting the historically past crucifixion and the historically present speaker, Herbert invites the reader to identify himself with the speaker of the poem and thus to commune personally with God, both visualizing the bloody person of Christ and praying for perpetual confirmation of redemption. It is also a reminder to celebrate the perpetuity of Christ's sacrifice in the participation of the Lord's Supper.

### Conquest and Nourishment

"The H. Communion," as the title evinces, is one of Herbert's fullest and most direct contemplations of the sacrament. One would expect that Herbert would clarify his position

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<sup>74</sup> See Hebrews 10:11-14: "And euery Priest standeth dayly ministring and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices which can neuer take away sinnes. But this man after he had offered one sacrifice for sinnes for euer, sate downe on the right hand of God, from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstoole. For by one offering hee hath perfected for euer them that are sanctified."

regarding the sacramental theological debate arising out of a rejection of transubstantiation—Lutheran consubstantiation versus Calvinistic denial of real presence—but the careful ambiguity of the poem frees Herbert from committing to a clear-cut stance. Scholars, hoping to pin down the poet’s beliefs, have categorized Herbert in both parties, whereas others acknowledge the ambiguity of Herbert’s stance.<sup>75</sup> However, before we examine the published poem, “The H. Communion,” we should first read the remarkably different Williams MS version of the same title, which will help inform us of Herbert’s theological position. In this poem, Herbert intentionally avoids picking a side of the sacramental debate, although he does criticize certain beliefs. In the beginning, the speaker dismisses the self-posed question whether Christ’s presence is ubiquitous or lodges specifically in the Host:

Ffirst I am sure, whether bread stay  
 Or whether Bread doe fly away  
 Concerneth bread, not mee.

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<sup>75</sup> For an exclusively Protestant reading of Herbert’s Eucharistic theology, see Strier, *Love Known*, xiii-xiv, 46 n. 41. Young strives to dismantle Strier’s supposition that Herbert altogether rejects the teaching of real presence in the Eucharist by demonstrating Herbert’s reverence for the Eucharist in “Divinitie” and by pointing out that the language in “The Agonie” is “highly reminiscent of Catholic meditations on the Sacrament of the Altar,” 118. Sophie Read proposes that Herbert intentionally places himself in an ambiguous category (*Eucharist and the Poetic Imagination*, 126). As Young notes, seventeenth-century Anglicans “desired to reverence the real presence in the Eucharist without acceding to the validity of the doctrine of transubstantiation” (*Doctrine and Devotion*, 121). For the sixteenth-century debate regarding the sacrament of the altar, see George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 42-43: “Both Reformers [Luther and Caristadt] had been brought to the point where, in their emphasis upon grace and faith and in the consequent introduction of subjectivity into the matter of Eucharistic reception, they had come close to depriving the sacrament of both its objectivity and, more seriously, its uniqueness in the redemptive experience of the Christian.... Yet both Reformers up until their split in 1523 maintained somewhat inconsistently a doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the altar”; and Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation*, 2-3: “How the Incarnation set the relationship between the world of matter and God divided Christians in the sixteenth century.... Sixteenth-century Christians could not even agree on the name for the act [of the sacrament].”

But that both thou and all thy traine

Bee there, to thy truth, & my gaine,

Concerneth mee & Thee. (7-12)

The speaker seems to represent the Christian everyman (“Concerneth mee & Thee”—the communicant and God) and vocalizes the poet’s presumed position: the question of whether the substance of the bread changes is less important than the belief that Christ is truly there. It is not clear whether “all thy traine” means His substance and spirit, but it does indicate that in the elements Christ is indeed present and operates for the communicant’s benefit. The sacramental work that all, or most, Christians can agree upon, is what concerns him, rather than how Christ is present in the elements. Now Herbert does mention and criticize certain sacramental theologies; he entertains the concept of Impanation, only for the purpose of refuting it (25-30). He also objects to the idea that the exalted Host could cross the barrier into the communicant’s soul—“Fflesh (though exalted)... cannot turn to soule”—because Herbert maintains that “Bodies & Minds are different Spheres” and therefore cannot change their nature (38, 39, 40). If bodily flesh cannot assume a spiritual nature, it cannot mingle with the human soul. It would seem to contradict Herbert’s earlier visualization of the blood entering the communicant and performing a spiritual work in “Christus in cruce.” Although the line, “Fflesh (though exalted)... cannot turn to soule,” seems only to support the belief in the spiritual presence of Christ, it does not necessarily eliminate the corporal altogether. “The H. Communion” sustains the notion that the sacramental function of Communion is the removal of sin in the human soul (“Sinn onely, which did all deface, / Thou drivest from his seat,” 23-24)—a spiritual work. Herbert’s discussion of the “different Spheres” and the emphasis on some kind of presence of Christ in the Eucharist suggests that there must be a real spiritual presence of Christ so as to possess the ability to cross

the “Sphere” of the Mind, but this does not necessitate that there cannot also be Christ’s corporal presence. Contrary to the hope that the poem will at last resolve the theological issue, the final stanza does not land on a firm and clearly-articulated side of the debate.

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 mee that, so I have more;  
 My God, give mee all Thee. (43-48)

The speaker reasserts that what is important is not so much whether the Incarnate Christ is substantially present (“that I had before,” 46) or only spiritually until the Second Coming, but that the gift of the Lord’s Supper is the best gift. “Give me not that I had before, / Or give mee that, so I have more” (46-47): the speaker first asks not to be given “Thy flesh,” but immediately after realizes that he would have “more” of God, not less (44). He can desire both the spirit and the body of Christ because the right devotional attitude is that the communicant longs for all of God: “My God, give mee all Thee” (48). Recognizing Herbert’s “double-thinking agility in the rhetorical device,” Sophie Read concludes that “the poet retreats in humility from the need to formulate a consistent viewpoint, preferring rather to have faith in, than a precise understanding of, the mysteries of the sacrament.”<sup>76</sup> Although Read understands Herbert’s desire to preserve the mysteries of the Lord’s Supper, she does not attend to the claim that the poet does make: the work of the sacrament removes sin from the communicant and helps him to desire God more. As long as the communicant’s behavior toward the Eucharist is respectful and reverent—as Herbert

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<sup>76</sup> Sophie Read, *Eucharist and the Poetic Imagination in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 124, 126.



makes sure to notify his readers in *The Country Parson*<sup>77</sup>—as long as he maintains faith in the sacramental work of grace and desires God, he does not need to debate too extensively the exact details of the theology of Christ’s real presence. Herbert’s goal as a devotional poet is not to resolve a theological controversy but to stir the reader to desire the presence of God more and to desire the presence of sin less.

The Williams manuscript version of “The H. Communion” considers the theology of the Reformers with witty rhetoric and controlled verse without affirming fully either Luther or Calvin, and maintains that the belief that God removes sin from the communicant and the desire for God are more relevant to Christian life than any end to the controversy over the real presence. The more mature published version essentially agrees with the earlier version, but supplies the visual imagery and metaphor that it lacks. The revision allows the reader to “see” the work of the sacrament. In the second stanza of the published version, the speaker does address how Christ “conveys” Himself to the communicant, addressing the theology of real presence: “But by the way of nourishment and strength / Thou creep’st into my breast” (“The H. Communion,” 7-8). By the way of the bread and wine, Christ comes into the communicant’s “breast,” or rather, heart. Herbert vividly portrays Christ’s gradual approach by the choice of “creep’st”: Christ comes seemingly unbeknownst to the communicant, in the sense that He is undetected by “The noblest sence of five,” that is, by sight.<sup>78</sup> By separating “nourishment and strength” from the “Thou” addressing God, Herbert distinguishes Christ from the visible elements of bread and wine. Line 19, “Onely thy grace, which with these elements comes,” further differentiates God’s presence and grace from the physical elements of bread and wine. This distinction prevents the image from appearing to adhere to the Catholic notion of transubstantiation, that the elements

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<sup>77</sup> See Chapter XXII, “*The Parson in the Sacraments*,” in *The Country Parson*, 257-259.

<sup>78</sup> Williams MS, “The H. Communion,” 33.

become the actual body and blood of Christ. But Christ's presence is real—"Thou creep'st" into the communicant's heart—and accomplishes real effects, that is, the removal of sin from his heart. The external balm of "Christus in cruce" reminds us that Christ penetrates and dispels sin by simply being present in the interior space of the communicant; it discourages a merely metaphorical reading of Herbert's physical, active language describing Christ's presence and the sacramental operations in "The H. Communion." The medicinal terms Herbert employs to illuminate the truth that Christ, through the Eucharistic elements, eliminates sin from the communicant's soul, do not make the outward sacramental ceremony a *sign* of the spiritual but rather unites the externality of the sacrament to the spirituality of the sacramental work.<sup>79</sup>

In the published version, Herbert expounds upon the theological truth he is assured of in the earlier poem: "Sinn onely, which did all deface, / Thou drivest from his seat" (Williams manuscript, "The H. Communion," 23-24). Christ endured the pain of His passion in order to "abolish Sinn" from the human soul (21), and it is by grace through the sacrament that He removes sin. The speaker continues, describing the sacramental removal of sin established in the earlier version of "The H. Communion,"

Making thy way my rest,  
 And thy small quantities my length;  
 Which spread their forces into every part,  
 Meeting sinnes force and art. (9-12)

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<sup>79</sup> See Whalen, "George Herbert's Sacramental Puritanism," 1304: "The sober yet energetic creativity discernible in Herbert's verse is a result of his efforts to find in sacrament the mediation of a grace whose reality the most sincere and constant of devotional psyches is unable otherwise to sustain. It is only through continual return to its institutional and carnal status as sacrament that Herbert can think the Word become flesh and the supreme gift it declares."

Christ's entrance into the communicant's heart forces sin and its crippling power out; His "small quantities" are thus portrayed as an invading army. The elements, like armed soldiers, surround and invade the inner structure of the stony heart in order to "controll" his "rebel-flesh" (16, 17). No room in the soul's fortress is too "subtile," or too hidden, that grace, in the company of the elements, cannot find and "affright both sinne and shame" (22, 18). Grace reclaims the rebel territory (the stony heart) for the presiding Lord. This military metaphor echoes the first stanza in "Nature," in which the speaker asks that God tame his rebellious heart. Read has noticed Herbert's use of military-sounding language and imagery in these verses, which emphasize the active spiritual force of Communion.<sup>80</sup> But what she has not considered is that there is a second metaphor at play in this stanza: a humoral metaphor. This humoral metaphor informs the way we approach the military metaphor and complements it.

The poet imagines how Christ's presence would enter into him through the elements of Communion: "by the way of nourishment and strength" (7). The word "nourishment" points simultaneously to the physical nature of the elements (bread and wine) that by being in the form of food nourish the body and to the spiritual regeneration of the sinful soul. In one of the Elizabethan Homilies, the author similarly considers the way by which the soul is spiritually nourished through the comparison to bodily nourishment: "And truely as the bodily meat cannot feede the outward man, vnlesse it be let into a stomacke to bee digested, which is healthsome and sound: No more can the inward man be fed, except his meate bee receiued into his soule and heart, sound and whole in Faith."<sup>81</sup> As a poet, Herbert plays with this ancient theological concept

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<sup>80</sup> Read, *Eucharist and Poetic Imagination*, 123.

<sup>81</sup> Anglican Library, "An homilie of the worthy receiuing and reuerend esteeming of the Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ," Book 2, Homily 15, accessed July 27, 2023, <http://www.anglicanlibrary.org/homilies/bk2hom15.htm>. The understanding that Eucharist is nourishing is not a new concept, but one that has persisted for centuries. The Reformers did not disregard the ancient tradition in their formulations of sacramental theology. Calvin, for example,

of the Eucharistic Host as spiritual food. “Nourishment” combined with “strength” seems to me to suggest a humoral metaphor, in which the elements are food designed to rebalance the excess of a humor according to the Galenic method still practiced in the seventeenth century. Michael Carl Schoenfeldt explains the aim of this approach: “The goal of medical intervention was thus to restore each individual’s proper balance, either through ingestion of substance possessing opposite traits, or purgation of excess, or both.”<sup>82</sup> Foods were categorized according to the properties of the four humors: hot/dry (yellow bile/choleric), hot/wet (blood/sanguine), cold/wet (phlegm/phlegmatic), cold/dry (black bile/melancholic). A person who had an excess of yellow bile, for example, would be encouraged to avoid hot/dry foods and to consume cold/wet foods. As a man frequently ill himself, Herbert treated his “ague” by these same means of restricting his diet.<sup>83</sup> In “The H. Communion,” the disease with which the speaker is afflicted is sin, which “turn’d flesh to stone” (29). Traditionally, stones, being by nature cold and dry, are associated with melancholy (black bile); thus, its opposite would be hot and wet, the humor of blood. The stony heart, then, would require a food that would counteract the excess of the melancholic humor with an addition of blood. Christ’s blood in Communion thus counteracts the stoniness of

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talks about the Lord’s Supper as nourishment: “We confess that the spiritual life, which Christ bestows on us, does not consist simply in the fact that he quickens us by his Spirit, but also that through the power of his Spirit he makes us participate in his life-giving flesh, and by this participation we are nourished for life eternal. . . . For when Scripture openly declares that Christ’s flesh is indeed food for us, and his blood drink indeed, it is clear that we must be nourished by these things if we seek for life in Christ,” quoted in G. S. M. Walker, “The Lord’s Supper in the Theology and Practice of Calvin,” in *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), 133.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Carl Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>83</sup> Walton, *Lives*, 284: “In [Sir Henry Herbert’s] House he remain’d about Twelve Months, and there became his own Physitian, and cur’d himself of his Ague, by forbearing Drink, and not eating any Meat, no not Mutton, nor a Hen, or Pidgeon, unless they were salted; and by such a constant Dyet, he remov’d his Ague, but with inconveniences that were worse; for he brought upon himself a disposition to Rheums, and other weaknesses, and a supposed Consumption.”

sin. Furthermore, blood represents life and stone represents death; Christ's blood is not only transformative, changing one nature into another, but also life-giving, changing one's state of death into a state of life. In *Bodies and Selves*, which delves into the "fleshiness" of Herbert's poetry, Schoenfeldt refers to the image of the stony heart in "The Altar" and "Love unknown" but does not extend the humoral metaphor in the way I have here to the opposing natures of stone and Eucharistic blood. It is significant to notice this underlining humoral metaphor, in the way that Herbert uses bodily physicality to visualize the spiritual transformation. Even if "Body" and "Mind" occupy in different spheres, humoral theory supposes that the balance of bodily humors affects the temperament of the Mind, the process of which indicates that the spheres, though perhaps "separate," are nevertheless somehow interconnected. The mysterious work of the sacrament, as the poet portrays it, hinges on the interconnection of the spheres: the elements are visible to the eye; Christ's presence, invisible but real, "creep'st" into the carnal "rebel-flesh" of the communicant and counteracts the stoniness of sin; the result is the purgation and spiritual renewal of the communicant.

In "The Elixer," Herbert applies an alchemical metaphor in a similar fashion, where Christ's blood is the "elixer," the philosopher's stone, that transmutes the lead nature of man into the most valuable element, gold: "This is the famous stone / That turneth all to gold" (21-22). According to alchemical tradition, lead is the metal associated with Saturn, black bile (the cold/dry humor), and earth (stone), and symbolizes sin and death. Gold, associated with fire and choler (the hot/dry humor), represents the vigor of adolescence. Here again, Christ's blood is both transformative and life-giving. The humoral metaphor complements the military one; both visualize the opposite forces of blood and the conquering army on the stony heart and the rebel fortress respectively, but with different connotations. Whereas the military language of the poem

underlines the imposing authority of God to subdue the sinful nature of the communicant, the humoral metaphor balances out the harshness of dominance over the rebellious will by adding the sweetness of nourishment and healing; life-giving blood transforms the heart from a dead stone to a fleshy one—cured, rebalanced, and beating. God’s conquest of sin and the corrupted will does not extinguish or empty the human soul, but rather gives it new life.

Later in “The H. Communion,” Herbert further develops our understanding of the nourishing conquest and the kind of life it gives. The poet contrasts the “rebel-flesh” with prelapsarian Adam before sin turned his flesh to stone and shows to what original state of life grace restores the believer. Had Adam remained unfallen, the poet suggests that he would have easily and simply ascended into heaven as one goes through one room to the next: “A fervent sigh might well have blown / Our innocent earth to heaven” (30-31). If the unfallen Adam had a longing to see God, he could simply cross the barrier between earth and heaven that now separates us from God’s dwelling. The poet concludes the poem with the work that grace accomplishes in the communicant, which is to endow him with the perfect nature original to Adam: “Thou hast restored us to this ease / By this thy heav’nly bloud” (37-38). Because of his participation in Communion and because of the restorative work of grace, the speaker is no longer separated from God because of sin and will enjoy easy passage into the presence of God. As Young observes, “Herbert treats the reception of the Eucharist as itself a means of transforming grace that restores the close communion between man and God that Adam enjoyed in Paradise.”<sup>84</sup> Here Young points to the restoration of man’s relationship with God, and Calvin likewise “insists that grace is not a quality or substance ‘but the personal presence of Christ offering men a personal relationship even in uniting them to himself.’”<sup>85</sup> In “The H.

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<sup>84</sup> Young, *Doctrine and Devotion*, 138.

<sup>85</sup> Walker, “The Lord’s Supper in Calvin,” 136.

Communion,” Herbert adds that the way by which Christ unites man to Himself is through the restoration of man’s nature, petrified by sin, to its original fleshiness.

### **An Offering of a Heart**

Herbert creates continuity between poems that meditate on the Lord’s Supper by uniting many of them with the metaphor of Christ’s blood as medicine. “An Offering,” referring to Christ’s blood as man’s “cure,” presents another human response to grace. Whereas “The H. Communion” rejoices in the transformative work of grace through the Lord’s Supper, “An Offering” confronts the anxious question: what can an impure individual give, if anything, to a holy God, who has already bestowed upon him unmerited favor? After receiving such a gracious gift, the individual surely cannot remain passive and must demonstrate his gratitude. Addressing an unspecified listener, perhaps indicating the reader himself, the speaker instructs him to bring an offering to God. The speaker questions his correspondent, “What hast thou there?” and, in response to an unrecorded reply, as if the reader had spoken to the speaker, asks, “a heart? but is it pure?” (3). His addressee, recognizing his sin, is expected to say “no.” Even a pure and whole heart is not a worthy gift to God, the speaker admits, because it is not naturally pure but is made so by Christ’s sacrifice: “Yet one pure heart is nothing to bestow: / In Christ two natures met to be thy cure” (4, 5-6). Introducing a medical metaphor in the word “cure,” the speaker, rather than representing the blood of Christ as the cure for man’s sinful nature, assigns to the dual nature of the incarnate Christ—His godhead and His manhood—the healing power. The diseased heart is cured. Even if the heart is no longer stony and is pure and good, what real gift can one give back to the Giver? What good is it to give God such a poor gift? But the speaker does not resign in defeat; he still maintains the confidence that the individual can and should give God an offering.

Although the gift of one's heart is inadequate, the speaker asserts that this inadequacy does not necessitate that the gift should not be given. The offering does not—and cannot—compare to the grandiosity of the divine gift of grace, and Herbert makes special effort to engrain this humble recognition into the reader. But the remainder of the poem reminds the reader that his response to grace is not inactive; the Christian can and must respond. After returning to the portrayal of divine blood as medicine, the speaker affirms that the reader should still offer his heart to God but adds a second gift, a hymn:

There is a balsome, or indeed a bloud,  
 Dropping from heav'n, which doth both cleanse and close  
 All sorts of wounds; of such strange force it is.  
 Seek out this All-heal, and seek no repose,  
 Untill thou finde and use it to thy good:  
 Then bring thy gift, and let thy hymne be this; (19-24)

The blood of Christ, described as a fragrant and medicinal ointment, rains down from heaven, echoing the refrain in "Grace." It is an "All-heal" as mysterious and desirable as the alchemical "elixir." It has both cleansing and healing properties for all kinds of (spiritual) wounds. Like an alchemist who devotes his life to discovering the philosopher's stone, the reader ought to seek without rest the blood of Christ, which restores his wounded, stony nature to its original healthy fleshy state. This search points to both a regular participation in the Lord's Supper and a daily devotional longing for God. Despite the earlier qualms with the unworthiness of the heart as a gift, the speaker affirms that the healed heart is the Christian's proper gift to God and includes that a hymn of praise is also a required offering. The content of the hymn informs us of the proper attitude the recipient of grace ought to have:



Since my sadnesse  
                  Into gladnesse  
Lord thou dost convert,  
                  O accept  
                  What thou hast kept,  
As thy due desert.

                  Had I many,  
                  Had I any,  
(For this heart is none)  
                  All were thine  
                  And none of mine:  
Surely thine alone.

                  Yet thy favour  
                  May give savour  
To this poore oblation;  
                  And it raise  
                  To be thy praise,  
And be my salvation. (25-42)

The hymn repeats the sentiment of the speaker in the previous verses: God has done the work to reverse the corrupted nature of the individual, and the heart, purified by means external to the owner, is no adequate gift. But the speaker of the hymn is willing to give all he has to God and

reserve none for himself. He hopes that God will still accept and be pleased by his complete surrender of possessions, will, and praise (39). It is a humble and self-denying attitude. This devotion, this continual thanksgiving, will be his “salvation,” his rescue from a fruitless life (42).

“The H. Communion” looks forward to the completed work of grace and, through the humoral and military metaphor, highlights God’s role in the work of grace in the believer. “An Offering” directs the focus of the regenerate Christian toward God and encourages him to offer his heart and all he has to the Lord, despite the unworthiness of the gift in comparison to God’s. Now “The Banquet” discusses the involvement of the Christian in the participation in Communion and picks up the necessity of praise affirmed in “An Offering.” “The Banquet” inverts the guest-host relationship in “Love (III)” and makes the believer the host and the Host the guest. The human speaker joyfully invites Christ’s presence into his heart as he participates in the celebration of the sacrament:

Welcome sweet and sacred cheer

Welcome deare;

With me, in me, live and dwell:

For thy neatnesse passeth sight,

Thy delight

Passeth tongue to taste or tell. (1-6)

Proper Christian devotion is thus not merely passive, inactive; the communicant in a friendly tone welcomes Christ’s presence (“deare”) into his heart and delights in the “taste” of the Eucharistic elements (“sweet and sacred cheer”).<sup>86</sup> Herbert does not undermine God’s provision

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<sup>86</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “cheer, n.<sup>1</sup>, sense I.6,” July 27, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6958698511>: “Food and drink provided for a guest or (now chiefly) enjoyed on a festive occasion. In early use also more generally: food and drink, provisions (*obsolete*).”

and victory; as he reprises the medical/military metaphor, the “sweetnesse in the bread... subdue[s] the smell of sinne” (13, 15). However, he does not stress God’s role so much as to neglect the believer’s cooperation. In the last stanza, the poet stresses the believer’s contemplation of God’s sacrifice and grace for him. This can materialize in musical celebration (“Let the wonder of this pitie / Be my dittie” [49-50]), or for the poet specifically in his verse (“my lines” [51]) and for each individual in his “life” (51). The poet summarizes the Christian life as a constant striving to be a “liuing sacrifice, holy, acceptable vnto God:”<sup>87</sup>

Hearken under pain of death,

Hands and breath;

Strive in this, and love the strife. (52-54)

Contemplating God’s sacrificial gift with praise, living devoted to the Master’s will, dying to the old man as St. Paul writes, all takes daily effort: strive and love the strife. Noticing the poet’s “surprising amount of attention to the abundant concerns of this flesh,” Schoenfeldt argues that Herbert’s recurring food metaphor analogizes the process of Christian devotion: “His devotional effort engages with the food that nourishes and tempts his flesh as well as with the theology that engages his mind. In the process, he reveals a series of profound if unexpected linkages between the digestive operations that sustain somatic existence and the salvation theology that promises eternal life.”<sup>88</sup> Despite his metaphysical tendencies, Herbert is not so Platonic as to devalue the physical aspect of the Eucharist and links the corporality of eating to the spirituality of contemplation. In the celebration of Communion, the Christian participates both physically and spiritually, and both the inward and the outward must be in alignment. For Herbert, true devotion is heart-felt, and without the participation of the heart the religious ritual and praise means little.

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<sup>87</sup> Romans 12:1.

<sup>88</sup> Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves*, 96.

As we will see in the next chapter, Herbert presents a way through which God refines the heart that has grown inactive: the way of suffering.

### Chapter 3

#### Purgation through Pain

As discussed in the first chapter, Herbert teaches us how to respond to sin: we ought to reflect on Christ's agony with weeping and contrition and ought to pray for the transformation of our hearts. In the second chapter, we saw how God's grace transforms hearts of stone into hearts of flesh through Christ's sacrifice and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Our part is to welcome God's work to sanctify our hearts and to fight against the old man. However, Herbert understands that this process is no simple task, but a constant struggle. Between the two mysteries of Sin and Love lie the "spiritual Conflicts": the conflict between the old man and the new man. The middle poems of *The Temple*, comprising the "body," essentially "live out" the conflict between stone and flesh introduced in "The Altar." In the variety of tone and topic, Herbert expresses the range of emotion and level of conflict that a Christian experiences throughout his lifetime, that Herbert must have experienced deeply himself. Each poem sits with the emotion and attitude of each season before offering the hope or resolution that faith can at that time offer. Through the first-person perspective of many of the *Temple* poems, Herbert permits the reader to identify with the speaker: the reader weeps as the speaker weeps, rejoices as he rejoices, rages as he rages, contemplates as he contemplates, learns as he learns, struggles as he struggles. When the reader assumes the perspective of the speaker, at the end he can join the speaker in a prayer for transformation after contemplating a certain truth, or he can share the speaker's revelation, which unveils a truth unknown or even a reminder of a truth he already knows but is presented in a fresh light. Through this process of prayer or enlightenment, the reader begins to reflect upon the state of his own heart, whether stony or fleshy, more clearly. Several of the poems we examined in previous chapters, both in English and in Latin, are or

include prayers, through which the poet guides the reader to long for God and for the removal of sin in his heart. What we have not yet studied in depth are Herbert's revelatory poems, in which a truth becomes known to the speaker by the end. Examples of this type include "Love-joy," "IESU," and "Love unknown." The latter poem, neglected by some Herbert scholars,<sup>89</sup> is the one that concerns us in this chapter: "Love unknown" encapsulates the Christian struggle between sin and grace and reveals the ways of Love to melt and mend the sinner's heart. Written as a colloquy between a troubled narrator and his trusted Friend, "Love unknown" is a wonderfully intricate, semi-allegorical story of the transformation of the heart of the Christian sinner through seasons of affliction. The poet accomplishes two tasks: to reveal the unknown to the reader and to encourage praise. As the title suggests, Love is the thing unknown. Furthermore, once revealed, it is the thing for which the Christian praises God. "Love unknown" offers an answer to the problem of pain, lamented in poems like "Complaining" and the "Affliction" poems: God's love is capable of using affliction, a supposed evil, to bring about the transformation of the heart.

### **From Monologue to Colloquy**

Several of Herbert's poems, written like ejaculatory prayers, wrestle with the experience of suffering and the good nature of God. The speakers cry out to God during times of agony, often questioning God's plan, wondering why and for how long they must endure, and asking for relief; but often there is no answer. The speaker of "Affliction (IV)," for example, describes his broken state in despairing terms:

Broken in pieces all asunder,

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<sup>89</sup> Critics like Rosemond Tuve, Helen C. White, and R. V. Young, for example, make mention of "Love unknown" only in passing. Barbara K. Lewalski compares the poem to several texts, including van Haefren's plates presenting Anima and Divine Love, but offers very little analysis of the poem itself.

Lord, hunt me not,  
 A thing forgot,  
 Once a poore creature, now a wonder,  
 A wonder tortur'd in the space  
 Betwixt this world and that of grace. (1-6)

Broken by affliction, he feels that he has descended to a lower degree of being, a “thing” and a “wonder” no longer human or even creaturely, a shattered rock. He is tormented in the space between the world of sin and suffering and that of grace and heavenly paradise. The speaker of “Complaining” likewise feels that his humanity is reduced to the faculty of expressing grief and describes himself through demeaning metonymies: “Thy clay that weeps, thy dust that calls” (5) and “Am I all throat or eye, / To weep or crie?” (13-14). At the end, he prays for relief in this life or the next. Even though some of these poems do not resolve in peace or revelation, Herbert does not ultimately leave these anguished questions unanswered. Placed in the latter half of “The Church” after the “Affliction” poems but before “Complaining,” “Love unknown” adds a second voice, one wiser and loving, to the tortured monologues of the other poems. Although it does not necessarily provide a complete and singular answer to the vast question of human suffering,<sup>90</sup> the revelation of the poem does offer hope to those stuck in the space between sin and grace:

suffering is not pointless, is not inflicted by a distant or wrathful God, and is not destructive but restorative. Whereas in “The Church-floore” tears wash away the dust of sin and grief from the

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<sup>90</sup> The placement of “Complaining” after the wisdom of “Love unknown” suggests that the question of suffering may be continually—and appropriately—revisited. When placed in context of “Love unknown,” the response of the speaker of “Complaining” to his suffering becomes more strained and poignant: if he indeed understands that his suffering is purgative, how much more pained is his cry to find relief in healing or death? Even though he will be sanctified through the process inflicted by God’s “wrathfull power,” he cannot endure the affliction much longer (16).

marble of the heart, “Love unknown” takes purification a step further to transformation: the fowl heart is renewed; the hard, softened; the dull, quickened.

Discouraged and broken like the speakers of “Complaining” and “Affliction (IV),” the narrator cannot imagine why his Master whom he dutifully serves would allow or inflict such pain and cannot see past his immediate experiences. Viewing his tale as tragic, he presumes that his friend will be unable to help him but will pity him, and expects no answer to his complaints. But the narrator proves to be naïve, as his Friend exceeds his expectations. Strier is only partially right in his understanding of the naivety of the complainer: “The narrator of ‘Love unknown’ represents not the sinful but what might be called the childish aspect of the regenerate Christian, the point of view which evaluates experience only in terms of immediate pleasure and pain.”<sup>91</sup> The immaturity of his perspective is not so much in his evaluation of his experience in terms of pleasure and pain, although his thinking is indeed surface-level and closely related to his sensory experiences, but rather in his overly-simplified, reward-based view of morality, which causes him to deem the actions of his Master as harsh and unfair and his lot as tragic. For the narrator, the gifts and the offering of sacrifices merit the Master’s favor and result in pleasant rewards; conversely, acts of sin are punished, if they are not pardoned. In short, justice for him is to return good for good and evil for evil, and pleasure is good and pain evil. Therefore, when the Master does not return the narrator’s gifts with a pleasant reward but rather inflicts pain on his heart, the narrator cannot but view his affliction as undue punishment.

The Friend, on the other hand, can see beyond the narrator’s limited perspective and immediate experience. The narrator divides his supposed journey to ruin into three encounters: the Font, the Caldron, and the Thorns. After the narration of each encounter, the Friend looks

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<sup>91</sup> Strier, *Love Known*, 161.



beyond the narrator's immediate pain and offers a new perspective focused on the corrupted state of the narrator's heart: his heart is foul, hard, and dull. In the last verses, the wise listener tenderly reveals that the narrator's "long and sad" tale is not truly tragic but comedic (1).<sup>92</sup> His end, on which the Friend insists the narrator ought to focus, is not one of death but of regeneration. Therefore, the suffering the narrator experiences is purgative. In other words, the pain inflicted by the Master is not the problem of the story, as the narrator naively supposes, but rather the solution to the problem, which is actually the state of the narrator's heart. The Font represents the purification of the sinful heart through Christ's sacrifice and through the sacraments, much like the transformation examined in the first two chapters. The Caldron, a symbol of hardship and affliction, serves to soften the stony heart. When the fleshy heart has grown dull and unfeeling, Thorns of mental agony awaken the heart through sleepless nights, prompting the individual to pray sincerely again.

### The Font

In the first story, the narrator undergoes a painful process of purification. He tells of the first day that his Lord caused him pain:

To him I brought a dish of fruit one day,

And in the middle plac'd my heart...

...The servant instantly

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<sup>92</sup> In my terms "tragic" and "comedic," I am drawing on Louise Cowan's definitions of "tragedy" and "comedy," whose origins lie in Aristotle's *Poetics*, in her introduction to *The Terrain of Comedy* (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1984), 9. According to her graph of the poetic genres, tragedy is "the realm of suffering—loss, fragmentation, pain," whose cycle begins with a fall, involves suffering, and concludes with some kind of reconciliation (usually death). Comedy, by contrast, is "the realm of faith, hope and love in a fallen world: endurance, regeneration." Because the tale of "Love unknown" ends in the complainer's purgation and regeneration, the story of suffering falls under the category of comedy rather than of tragedy.

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 dy'd,  
 And washt, and wrung: the very wringing yet  
 Enforceth tears. (6-7, 11-18)

The supposedly cruel action of the Lord shocks the narrator, who expects his favor in return for the gift of fruit. Herbert's choice of "fruit" seems to suggest that the narrator is a well-intentioned Cain, whose offering of the "fruite of the ground" God rejected.<sup>93</sup> Like Cain's offering, the narrator's "dish of fruit" is rejected, and he cannot understand why the Master returned his "good" gift with "evil" pain. Unlike Cain, however, the narrator offers his heart, dedicating himself to his Master, and responds to God's action not with anger but with dejection. The verse, "A stream of bloud, which issu'd from the side / Of a great rock," is undoubtedly the blood of Christ, albeit unbeknownst to the narrator himself (14-15). The image is a typological fulfillment of the water pouring from the rock struck by Moses in the blood flowing from the side of the crucified Christ.<sup>94</sup> Herbert's narrator describes his suffering, burned into his memory, in terms related to the process of washing and dying cloth: "there it was dipt and dy'd, / And washt, and wrung: the very wringing yet / Enforceth tears" (16-18). Although the narrator draws on this kind of language to portray more vividly his agony, the Friend's tender reply, "*Your heart was foul, I*

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<sup>93</sup> Genesis 4:3. "Fruit" could also refer to tithe, an offering of the first fruits of the harvest. But because in the next part of the tale the narrator offers a sacrifice of sheep, I am inclined to see a parallel between the narrator and the sons of Adam.

<sup>94</sup> Another Herbertian image unites this imagery of the rock with Christ's crucifixion: "They strike my head, the rock from whence all store / Of heav'nly blessings issue evermore" ("The Sacrifice," 169-172).

*fear*,” encourages his interlocutor (and the reader) to reinterpret the “wringing” as the cleansing and purifying of the heart as with a soiled garment (18). The union of water (the “font” and washing) and blood issuing from the side of a rock in the Herbertian image echoes the one the poet presents in “The Sacrifice” to indicate the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: “For they will pierce my side, I full well know; / That as sinne came, so Sacraments might flow” (246-247). The image of “Love unknown” concisely depicts the sacramental purification of the Christian. However, at this point, the complainer does not quite understand the implications of the Friend’s observation: the cleansing process naturally involves suffering. The “wringing” is not done out of cruelty but out of necessity. The word “dy’d” is likely a pun, hinting at both purification<sup>95</sup> and the death of the old man, an essential step of salvation.<sup>96</sup> Still viewing pain as punishment, he admits his faults, believing that they are enough to end his “lease,” but insists that he has been pardoned (20). To the narrator, pardon indicates an escape from punishment and pain in general. So if he has been pardoned, he cannot comprehend why he must undergo such affliction now when he offers a suitable gift. He could understand if he had sinned against his Master, but not when he demonstrates his loyalty. Even though he steps away from the fountain of blood with a “well, / And clean and fair” heart, the narrator cannot yet see that his suffering and tears are redemptive and not punishment for wrongdoing (22-23).

### **The Caldron**

In the next story, the narrator’s hard heart is softened through affliction. The narrator demonstrates that he still strives to please his Master and do right—he often participates in Communion, for example—but he still offers external gifts, notably not his heart, to win his

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<sup>95</sup> Isaiah 1:18.

<sup>96</sup> Romans 6:6.

Master's love. After encountering "a large / And spacious fornace flaming" (25-26) and "A boyling Caldron, round about whose verge / Was in great letters set AFFLICTION" (27-28), he decides to offer a "sacrifice out of [his] fold" (30), presumably of sheep, in order to warm his Master's love (32). In Genesis, God accepts Abel's sacrifice of a lamb, and the narrator deduces that his Master will favor the better gift. But his intended sacrifice is disrupted: in what the narrator deems a mistake, the man at the furnace grabs the servant's heart instead of the sacrifice and throws it "into the scalding pan" (35). Whereas the narrator tries to use the fire for a burnt sacrifice, the Friend understands that the furnace is the means by which a smith who melts hard materials—in this case, the narrator's heart—in order to reshape them: "*Your heart was hard, I fear*" (37). The heart is hard and callous, though not explicitly stony, and must be melted by flame. This scene reminds us of line 90 of "The Sacrifice": "stonie hearts will melt with gentle love." Even though the cauldron is labelled "AFFLICTION," the connection with "The Sacrifice" encourages us to interpret the fire of the furnace as the "Immortall Heat" of Love—the Love unknown to the narrator.<sup>97</sup> If this is the case, the Master proves that his love has not, indeed, grown "cold."

The narrator's reply informs us in what way his heart is indeed hard, as his Friend claims. Aware of a "callous matter" growing abnormally on the flesh of his heart, he seeks a remedy in Communion but apparently to little avail (38). The narrator's unsuccessful efforts to soften the callus from his heart would seem to prove the ineffectiveness of sacramental devotion; however, when read in light of the previous event, this passage does not discount sacramental efficacy but demonstrates the need for the Christian to align his outward action with inward devotion, and furthermore shows another means by which God softens the hard heart.

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<sup>97</sup> "Love (II)," 1.

Indeed it's true. I found a callous matter  
 Began to spread and to expatiate there:  
 But with a richer drug than scalding water  
 I bath'd it often, ev'n with holy bloud,  
 Which at a board, while many drunk bare wine,  
 A friend did steal into my cup for good,  
 Ev'n taken inwardly, and most divine  
 To supple hardnesses. (38-45)

Strier reads these lines as indicative of the “pointlessness” of cooperative effort and concludes that because “Herbert’s insistence on the action of a friend in stealing the ‘holy bloud’ into the speaker’s cup eliminates all suggestion of cooperation,” the experience is a gift for the “chosen.”<sup>98</sup> In other poems on Communion, as we have seen, Herbert does emphasize God’s role in removing sin from the heart, but “An Offering” validates the devotional pursuit of the “All-heal” and establishes the necessity of maintaining an attitude of praise and humility. Although the narrator of “Love unknown” is correctly understood as naïve, his frequent effort to bathe his heart in “holy bloud” is not misaligned, and his knowledge of the suppling power of the Eucharist is in accord with Herbert’s theology presented in other poems. It seems that the narrator learns of the cleansing power of holy blood from his previous encounter with the fountain and puts his new-found knowledge to practice. Where the narrator is mistaken, however, is his failure to unite his external action with internal devotion and his misguided fear of inconsistency in his Master’s love. Acting out of anxiety rather than out of adoration or contrition, he offers a sacrifice lacking his heart, unlike the dish of fruit. The hardness of his

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<sup>98</sup> Strier, *Love unknown*, 164.

heart is rooted in his lack of internal participation in sacramental ceremony and his misconception of God's love—both in his supposition of the inconsistency of love and in his conception of earning love through gifts as a kind of transaction. If he performs an external act of sacrifice without the necessary internal engagement, it is possible that he lacks the same internal engagement when he partakes of the Eucharistic elements. The narrator has yet to learn the Psalmist David's attitude in Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." Only when the heart is broken and contrite will God receive sacrifices. Earlier, the speaker of "Love unknown" admits his faults and seems to feel some measure of contrition, but he must be "broken," and the way for him to become broken is through affliction. As "Love unknown" reveals, God's love is eternally warm and heats the Caldron of Affliction for the purpose of softening the hard heart of the Christian sinner.

### **The Thorns**

In the third part of the story, the narrator is still restricted by his narrow view of forgiveness and Christian devotion. The fault which affliction purges from the narrator in the third event is similar to his previous neglect of his inward devotion: his soulless and lazy practice of prayer. When the speaker returns home, intending to "sleep out all these faults" (49), he finds that his bed is full of thoughts piercing as "thorns" (52). Whereas it is ambiguous whether the affliction of the cauldron is inflicted internally or externally, Herbert is clear that the final affliction—be it convicting thoughts, worries, painful memories—targets the narrator's weakened mind and causes insomnia. The narrator laments to his Friend that his Master has stolen every pleasure, even sleep, from him: "Deare, could my heart not break, / When with my pleasures ev'n my rest was gone?" (52-53). When his Friend observes, "*Your heart was dull, I*

*fear*" (56), the narrator is quick to admit his faults but, knowing them to be forgiven, still cannot understand why he is being "punished":

Indeed a slack and sleepe state of minde  
 Did oft possesse me, so that when I pray'd,  
 Though my lips went, my heart did stay behinde.  
 But all my scores were by another paid,  
 Who took the debt upon him. (57-61)

He understands that his inattentiveness is a fault, but he assumes that after he is forgiven, nothing more is required of him. But such is not the case: Romans 6 and Herbert proclaim otherwise. For Herbert especially, the Christian ought to direct his efforts to devote his heart, though it be flesh or stone, to God: "Oh, let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine, / And sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine" (15-16). In "Love unknown," proper devotion includes alertness and sincerity in prayer. If "dull," that is, inattentive, lazy, and unfeeling, the heart must be quickened by pain: the piercing thoughts and removal of all comfort restore his sense of feeling in a way that "gentle" love cannot.

### **The Art of Suffering**

Herbert uses the element of surprise, either experienced by the speaker or by the observing reader, to enlighten the reader and to encourage him to reinterpret the story of a poem. Even though Helen Vendler recognizes the Christian meaning of the transformation through grace and the revelation the Friend supplies, she ignores the theological importance of the revelation for both the narrator and the reader and thus misses Herbert's poetic method of surprise. She, instead, focuses on the *compassion* of the Friend rather than the *meaning* of what

he tenderly reveals to the narrator and is satisfied with an overly modern interpretation of the Friend as a model therapist, whose goal is more about soothing a troubled friend than about helping him to reexamine his tale and to renew devotion through enlightenment.<sup>99</sup> To the contrary, however, the poem is less about teaching the reader how to listen patiently and kindly than about resolving the confusion about the seemingly cruel actions of a loving God. Herbert wrote theologically-rich poetry that engages the reader and performs some inward effect. “Love unknown,” for example, permits the reader to sympathize with the troubled narrator and to reflect in turn on his own situation in light of the revelation that Christian suffering is not punishment but a means employed by Love for renewal. We saw this already with the Friend’s replies to the narrator’s tale in “Love unknown”: the Friend observes that the narrator’s heart is “foul,” and this revelation allows the reader to reinterpret the “wringing” that enforces tears as the rinsing of what is soiled. In the final tale, the thoughts which the narrator calls thorns operate the same way. When we know that the heart of the narrator is dull and must be awakened, we better understand the purpose of his suffering. The “thorns,” notably reminiscent of the ones that penetrated the head of Christ, allow the narrator to share, to a certain extent, in the suffering of Jesus. Furthermore, the Friend’s last words summarize the revelations he was hinting at earlier: the Master acts not out of cruelty but out of love. By directing the narrator away from his pain to the end, the transformation of his heart, the Friend clarifies that none of the afflictions were

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<sup>99</sup> Helen Vendler, *Invisible Listener: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 20, 21: “The Friend speaks as if renewing and suppling and quickening are all recurrent natural processes, cycles in which marring is mended, foulness is renewed, hardness is suppld, and dullness is quickened. He names and justifies the processes; he does not reproach. He urges cheerfulness and praise, not penance or remorse. The compassionate Friend confirms his newly burnished narrator-friend that he is now in the desirable and enjoyable state of being ‘*new, tender, quick*.’... And the modern reader may, in being shown Herbert’s forbearing Jesus, reflect that Herbert has anticipated the modern notion of the ideal therapist—suggesting what a credible human presence Herbert can create on the page.”



destructive, but that it is through his brokenness that his heart, which he “had marr’d,” is “mended”:

*Truly, Friend,*  
*For ought I heare, our Master shows to you*  
*More favour then you wot of. Mark the end.*  
*The Font did onely, what was old, renew:*  
*The Caldron suppld, what was grown too hard:*  
*The Thorns did quicken, what was grown too dull:*  
*All did but strive to mend, what you had marr’d.*  
*Wherefore be cheer’d, and praise him to the full*  
*Each day, each houre, each moment of the week,*  
*Who fain would have you be new, tender, quick. (61-70)*

It is revealed to both the narrator and the reader that each of the afflictions serves a transformative purpose. The work of grace is less about correcting behavior than about changing the root of the behavior, the nature of the individual. God mends what was marred and makes his servants “new, tender, quick” through the sacraments, affliction, and mental anguish (70). As the title affirms, “Love unknown,” by the end, becomes known to the narrator and to the reader in unexpected ways. Seeing this truth presented in an allegorical story helps the reader to reflect on his own experiences and to apply the same principles to his situation, trusting that his suffering, too, is meaningful and transformative. If the reader embraces this truth, he ought to adopt and maintain an attitude of praise amidst his suffering, to “Strive in this, and love the strife.”<sup>100</sup> It is an art, Herbert says, to see beauty in ashes, love in affliction, flesh in stone, praise in pain:

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<sup>100</sup> “The Banquet,” 54.

Yet ev'n the greatest griefs  
    May be reliefs,  
Could he but take them right, and in their wayes.  
  
Happie is he, whose heart  
    Hath found the art  
To turn his double pains to double praise.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> "Mans medley," 31-36.

## Conclusion

The heart is central to *The Temple*, and indeed to all of George Herbert's poetry, for it is the center of conflict between the two vast things, Sin and Love. The first chapter examined how Herbert uses the metaphor of the stony heart in Ezekiel 36:26 to describe the nature of sin, characterized by an inactive or rebellious will and a heart resistant to the feeling of contrition or remorse. However, Herbert "redeems" the Christian's heart of stone in the image of an altar dedicated to God, as seen in the first poem of "The Church," and again in the recurring Ovidian imagery of weeping marble. Nevertheless, the stony heart must be revitalized, and a prominent act of grace in which God transforms the heart of stone into a heart of flesh is through the Lord's Supper. In "The H. Communion," Herbert imagines the way that Christ's blood, mysteriously present in the Eucharistic elements, conquers sin in the heart of the communicant in terms of the sanguine humor counteracting the melancholic humor and of a lord's militia reclaiming a rogue army. Even though it is God who transforms the heart, the role of the devout Christian in the process of transformation is not passive; Herbert expects and directs the Christian to seek out Christ, to welcome Him, to join Him in the battle against one's own sin, and to respond with praise to God, as seen in "The Banquet" and "The Offering." Furthermore, Herbert understands that the transformation of the heart, the sanctification of the Christian, is an ongoing process. Not only does it take time for Love to melt the stony heart, but also throughout the life of the Christian the heart goes through stages of foulness, hardness, and dullness, as seen in "Love unknown." God, in addition to the sacraments of Communion and Baptism, uses suffering to purify the foul, hard, and dull heart of the Christian and to urge the passive heart to participate actively with outward acts of devotion. Without the involvement of the heart, religious ceremony means nothing to God and nothing for the Christian. For this reason, Herbert encourages this

heart-felt participation by permitting the reader to live vicariously through the first-person speaker of his poems. The reader, so identifying with the speaker of a poem, wrestles with the same conflicts, prays the same prayers, and comes to the same revelations through the poetic use of an unexpected twist.

For Herbert, true devotion is heart-felt, conscious, and intentional. By displaying all manner of “spiritual Conflicts”—between man and sin, man and God, man and suffering—Herbert’s poetry enlightens the reader, helps him to self-reflect, urges him to wrestle with his own spiritual conflicts, and spurs the reader’s heart toward true devotion to the Savior of mankind. For Herbert knows that when one subjects his will to that of Jesus his Master, he will find “perfect freedom.” But the process of subjection is not one without conflict, suffering, and strife, just as the gift of salvation came at the cost of Christ’s spilled blood and death. As Herbert’s poetry reveals, that knowledge ought not to be shunned but embraced: “Strive in this, and love the strife.”<sup>102</sup> Herbert gives us the hope that one day we, though “Guiltie of dust and sinne,” may sit and eat at the banquet table of God in peace and joyful gratitude, knowing Love has transformed our stony hearts into flesh and has made us worthy to be there.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> “The Banquet,” 54.

<sup>103</sup> “Love (III),” 2.

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