"Prayer the Churches Banquet": The Parallel Temporalities of Objects in George Herbert's *Temple*

ANNALISE WOLF

Fordham University

George Herbert's 1633 volume of poems, *The Temple*, wrestles with efficacious performances of devotion in the face of human frailty. It plays with shape-poems and poems-as-objects in an exploration of both solitary participation in a community of worshippers and an extension of shared temporality in verse to believers in various times and places. Through such linkages and cycled problematics, Herbert expresses overt concern with the fragility and instability of language.

This article focuses on readings of "The Altar," "The Church-Porch," "Easter-Wings, "The Windows," "Easter," "The Holdfast," and "Sin (I)" in order to explore the status of language, how Herbert navigates the ideal of the command to "pray continually" as admonished in 1 Thessalonians, the parallel temporalities he fashions and makes available to others in his devotional poems, tensions within and need for a devotional community, and how poems titled after or shaped like objects or events are significant to his project.[1] This essay focuses on a selection of Herbert's poems that are interested in or present themselves as liturgical objects. Indeed, since this essay is centered on a paradox, that Herbert the divine crafted poems that express his conviction that language is insufficient to preach or convey truth, it is useful to contextualize his corpus within Rosalie Colie's premise that "there was such a thing as a paradoxical tradition, and with it a paradoxical mode of

perception which deliberately intermixed material from very different categories."[2] The heterogeneity of Herbert's mixture mimes the heterogeneity of the community and the approaches to prayer that he attempts, through his devotional poems, to unify.

HERBERT'S PROBLEMATIC: FRAMING THE PROJECT OF *THE TEMPLE*

The entrance to *The Temple*—the table of contents, with its numerous thing-titles—provides cues that ask the reader to mind materiality, which looms large over the volume. As the reader progresses deeper into the structure of *The Temple*, the various speakers interlace the already highlighted status of things with further questions about the connectedness of communit(ies) throughout time, the persistence and persistent efficaciousness of objects throughout time, and the inevitable failures of language.

The first poem, "Perirrhanterium," a comparatively long poem named after a vessel of the same name that holds holy water, offers itself as a chain of connected proverbial six-line stanzas for living a holy life, inveighing against drunkenness, sloth, swearing, and other sins. The fairly simplistic, often interpreted as moralistic, numbered bits of advice aphoristically ground expectations for devotional practice out of which the more nuanced and complex advice of the other poems grows. As examples, here are two of his stanzas:

> Laugh not too much: the witty man laughs least:
> For wit is news only to ignorance.
> Less at thine own things laugh; lest in the jest
> Thy person share, and the conceit advance.
>   Make not thy sport, abuses: for the fly
>   That feeds on dung, is coloured thereby.
> . . . .
> In thy discourse, if thou desire to please:
> All such is courteous, useful, new, or witty.
> Usefulness comes by labour, wit by ease;
> Courtesy grows in court; news in the city.
>   Get a good stock of these, then draw the card
>   That suits him best, of whom thy speech is heard.[3]

Proverbs and moral sayings have advantages of being portable, memorable, concise, and (usually) applicable. They are often warnings and practical perspectives to aid in solving common problems, as the two stanzas above

2. Rosalie L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton University Press, 1966), xii–xiii.

3. George Herbert, "Perirrhanterium," lines 229–34, 289–94 (stanzas 39 and 49), in *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin (London: Penguin Books, 2004). All quotations of Herbert's poetry are from this edition, with line numbers hereafter given parenthetically.

caution against acting a fool and admonish care in speech. Incidentally, "a good stock of these" may refer to the proverbial stanzas of the poem itself, thus offering itself to be dismembered and reassembled as it serves the reader.

By beginning his volume of poetry with a string of pragmatic suggestions, Herbert underscores the significance of use in this collection of poems. From the beginning of his collection, Herbert draws attention to the object status of his poems beyond their existence as verse. "The Altar" is explicitly a liturgical object, and many other referenced objects obliquely invoke meditation pertaining to congregational and private devotion. The table of contents reveals a preponderance of object-titles, illustrated by "Church-Lock and Key," "The Church Floor," or "The Windows"; another category topically relates, as in "Affliction" and "Jordan," while some are not clearly related at all, at least by title: "Employment," "Denial," and "Ungratefulness." What difference does it make when the poem invokes an existing, material object, the verse standing in some shadow relation or serving as a type of alternate of that object? A fourth category invokes particular times significant to the Christian calendar: "Good Friday," "Easter," "Holy Baptism," "Evensong," and "Lent," underscoring repetition and the passage of time in *The Temple*. All these events repeat regularly. Some poems participate in multiple categories at once, such as "Jesu" and "Prayer." The first may hail both a historical figure and the concept of the incarnate Christian God, while the second, positioned as it is among object-titles, asks if prayer is a type of object, transferable and somewhat stable, or an ephemeral expression. As a written poem, it is both.

Since several poems are under discussion here, a note on the speakers is in order. Although Herbert's speakers evince commonalities, I hesitate to merge them and potentially erase or overlook significant differences between speakers of various poems. The commonalities between them, however, are often strong and suggest some unity. For instance, several poems, such as the inaugural "Perirrhanterium," which forms the first part of the opening section "The Church-Porch," reference Herbert's actual role as a member of the clergy and explicitly imagine a lay audience.

By pointing out the material alternate self of the poem, I am not arguing that Herbert is crypto-Catholic, or intentionally resisting Anglican liturgical practice or arrangement of the church. Elizabeth Clarke has perceptively noted that "contemporary readers, of all theological persuasions thought he had succeeded [in baptizing his poetic skill in Jordan]," and I hope to mind Stanley Fish's admonishment that taking one side or the other of the religious or formal debates on Herbert is less productive than examining what in his works prompts these apparently unsolvable debates.[4]

4. Elizabeth Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: "Divinitie, and Poesie, Met"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 9. See Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

Despite the paradox that proponents of justification by faith (alone) also tended to lean heavily on correct doctrine, Richard Strier argues for a significant unity between Luther's and Herbert's theology evident in the latter's poems, "the centrality of a single doctrine to George Herbert's poetry and theology: the doctrine of justification by faith," which "Luther himself insisted that the doctrine 'cannot be beaten into our ears enough or too much.'" Strier continues, "My major claim is that Herbert also felt this way and that he understood and experienced the doctrine of justification by faith in much the way Luther did."[5] Contra Strier, I see Herbert as very uncomfortable with a typically Protestant reliance on language as a carrier for correct doctrine.[6] Words must always be augmented, Herbert writes, for "Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one / when they combine and mingle, bring / A strong regard and awe" ("The Windows" [11–13]). In a sense, his suspicion of the efficacy of language puts him at odds with Protestant reliance on personal prayer and scriptural interpretations as well as correct doctrinal confessions. If language itself cannot be trusted, and the barriers of tradition have been knocked away, where shall the faithful seek divine truth? The "mingl[ing]" he claims is necessary for "man [to] preach thy eternal word" ("The Windows" [1]) is embodied in "The Altar," which stands as a candle, a prayer, an altar—a symbol of devotion linked to and independent from the ever-failing, ever-interrupted pattern of human worship.

Herbert's most acute concerns around lost meaning (in "The Holdfast" and "The Windows") involve a single speaker. Each successive reader, then, who joins voices with the poems' speakers also joins a congregation of those who have prayed these same prayers. Shared language, too, becomes another guard against the dissolution of language. These multiplicities and repetitions may solidify the poem in the same way that augmenting a prayer with an object allows the physical thing to lend stability to the prayer.[7] The poem becomes its own material object when committed to paper. "Easter" welcomes both a sacred and a secular audience into the fold of collective speakers. The poem begins in the singular: "Rise, heart, thy lord is risen" (1). The second stanza, however, references Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder's renowned "My lute, awake!" (1557). Herbert reverses the phrase and begins "Awake, my lute" (7). Wyatt's secular love poem, filled with innuendo, commands the lute to "Perform" the polite drama of courtly love.[8] Although the phrases

5. Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), xiii.

6. Ibid., xi.

7. Christianity has often deemphasized materiality, although Christ's incarnation places the material world at the center of the human redemption story.

8. Thomas Wyatt, "My Lute Awake," line 1, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed., gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 2006).

are inverted, "Easter" makes an unmistakable reference to Wyatt's song, perhaps comparing his own "labour"[9] of love with the secular one, perhaps inviting that courtly community into his own, more capacious song of praise that, rather than being premised on jealousy and exclusion, invites "all wood" to "resound his name" (9) who "perfume[s]" all "th'East" (24). In reaching beyond the bounds of his own congregation and confessional community, Herbert merges multiple communities and invites them to share a single song, which gathers strength and meaning in the "life" offered it by living voices.

We must keep in mind that Herbert uses poetry to reach beyond confessional bounds in gathering communities together. Gaston Bachelard reminds us of the particular power of images and spatial logics in connecting people, irrespective of shared history or shared meaning invested in the invoked images: "The poet does not confer the past of his image upon me, and yet his image immediately takes root in me. The communicability of an unusual image is a fact of great ontological significance."[10] Herbert explores the unity a shared "unusual image" might offer believers who are, in many other ways, at an impasse in matters of theology and practice.

I also wish to recognize Derrida and Bachelard as companions with which to consider Herbert, and note that they are theorists approaching language from rather different directions. Bachelard begins with the "general thesis" that "everything specifically human in man is *logos*"; that "one would not be able to meditate in a zone that preceded language. But even if this thesis appears to reject an ontological depth, it should be granted, at least as a working hypothesis appropriate to the subject of the poetic imagination."[11] Derrida would not grant such a hypothesis: he raises a similar view of language as a problem in the first paragraph of *Of Grammatology* (1967): "The devaluation of the word 'language' itself, and how, in the very hold it has upon us, it betrays a loose vocabulary, the temptation of a cheap seduction, the passive yielding to fashion, the consciousness of the avant-garde, in other words-ignorance-are evidences of this effect. This inflation of the sign 'language' is the inflation of the sign itself, absolute inflation, inflation itself."[12] Yet in the interest of exploring irreconcilable tensions in Herbert's poetry, I won't attempt to reconcile the theorists I find most helpful.

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9. Ibid., line 2.

10. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (1958; Boston: Beacon, 1994), xvii.

11. Ibid., xxiii.

12. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1967; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 6.

SHOULD BE MADE OF STERNER STUFF:
SHARED TIME, OBJECTS, PRAYERS

I follow Herbert's reservations about language—as constantly fracturing, reflecting, bonding, interrupting meaning—and so look not for a central unification in his project, but rather at the function of several poems within his larger volume. Unlike Strier, I cannot hope to "reveal the immanent (and actual) intensions of Herbert's lyrics,"[13] since his reservations about linguistic stability caution me against searching for a particular, crystallized, single meaning in a poem or poetic project.

There are at least three and sometimes four distinct types of object/subject at play in Herbert's devotional poems and the settings they imply: the speaker, the poem, the object the poem becomes or represents, and the congregation. The congregation follows the minister in prayer, and in their mutual interreliance, there is potentially some instrumentalism, stretched throughout time as the reader joins or at least witnesses the prayer codified in the poem. The congregation "makes use of" the minister to facilitate their prayer, while in composing, he also "makes use of" an audience physically within his church as well as an implied one later in print.[14] As solitary objects, or solitary believers, their significance and effectiveness changes, as compared to the imagined communal context of a church. For the sake of unity, "each Christian was required to suspend his or her individuality within the wider, deeper, greater community of the parish."[15] So communal meditation and devotion remain a persistent and strange supposition of Herbert's often intensely solitary devotional poetry, but an essential part of the Christian properly relating to God. The poem itself, especially as read by others and detached from its author, may be understood to conjure up a particular speaker, and whatever gap exists between the speaker and the reader may prod the reader to reflect on what, precisely, that gap is and what distinctions there are between their theological, political, and social commitments.

Although many critics, responding to its stresses and fractures, argue that *The Temple* covertly signals adherence to various social classes, political ideologies, and theological doctrines, I focus on its concern with the (in)capacities of language and ways various man-made liturgical objects augment and expose failures of the human will. These issues surface urgently in his shape

13. Strier, *Love Known*, xii.

14. Herbert prepared his own volume of poems for publication, and Izaak Walton claims that before his death, Herbert sent them to his friend Nicholas Ferrar to this purpose; see Izaac Walton, *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert and Robert Sanderson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 314.

15. Christopher Marsh, " 'Common Prayer' in England, 1560–1640: The View from the Pew," *Past and Present*, no. 171 (May 2001): 74.

poems, and the prominence he offers, both in poem titles and in the body of his verses, to the physical architecture of the church and the objects found therein. These physical references reaching out from within the poems anchor them to the material world and other readers, stressing the poem's status as an artifact that persists through time independently from its author. The parallel temporalities of these objects in contrast to the time-of-reading or time-of-worship or even lifespans of the reader or author are significant in light of Herbert's anxieties about language and the contexts in which various poems reference one another, interrupting and inflecting interpretations of other poems within *The Temple*.

To be clear, it is important to distinguish between the images that make up the poems, and the poems existing as larger entities with the capacity to function as objects. I keep in mind Bachelard's caution that "the reader of poems is asked to consider an image not as an object and even less as the substitute for an object, but to seize its specific reality."[16] The images connect reader and speaker, reader and author even, through a flash of recognition that binds phenomenologically rather than through common history, and I contend that Herbert considers the capacity of his poems as larger collections of images to serve as objects, more explicitly than most poets do, by pairing poems with liturgical and devotional objects. As Bachelard does not engage with poems as wholes, my use of his concept of the image in service of arguing that Herbert is indeed deploying poems as objects is not actually in contradiction with his project. Bachelard clarifies, "I leave aside the problem of the *composition* of the poem as a grouping of numerous images,"[17] and, indeed, this is where I take up my argument.

Much attention has been paid to Herbert's play with form, most especially in his shape poems, which T. S. Eliot dismissed as "trifling."[18] His poetic project has been unfavorably contrasted to his contemporaries, without attention to their differing aims, leading to judgments like "there is no connoisseurship in Herbert's poems."[19] Taking Caroline Levine's recent injunction to pay close attention to the "affordances" of various forms, I join recent critics such as Frances Cruickshank in urging readers to take the poems of the carefully structured *Temple* seriously, the formal oddities apparently strange but central components of "poetry that doubts and stalls, that registers uncertainty and imperfection."[20] Herbert's poetry apparently "seeks humility,

16. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, xix.

17. Ibid., xxiv.

18. T. S. Eliot, *George Herbert* (London: Longmans, Green, 1962), 31.

19. Richard Strier, "Changing the Object: Herbert and Excess," *George Herbert Journal* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1978): 27.

20. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 1. Frances Cruickshank, "Broken Altars: The Work of Form in George Herbert's *Temple*," *Christianity and Literature* 66, no. 1 (December 2016): 25.

simplicity, and plainness in every sense of that word," and many critics have pointed out the paradox of his relentlessly artful poems advocating plainness.[21] Levine adopts a capacious definition of form (as "an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning or shaping") because "it is the work of form to make order."[22] Herbert's interest in liturgy and liturgical objects demonstrates an interest in the "ordering, patterning, [and] shaping" of a religious community, bound together by common rites. The shared objects of his poems in *The Temple* echo that function and become, in the absence of many previously familiar liturgical objects, a means of ordering and coordinating a common prayer life asynchronously. R. L. Colie observes that without an intimate understanding of liturgical practice, it is impossible to read Herbert's poems: "To understand his slant use of metaphor, we must know the topoi of Christian worship, the regular phrases of Scripture and the Book of Common Prayer, invoked Sunday after Sunday across England to recall to Christians the continuity of their ritual and of the particular transcendent truth that ritual commemorated."[23] In addition to shared objects, the time of the poem becomes shared with other readers/practitioners of the poem/prayer in a manner similar to a church calendar ordering shared liturgies, practiced in different locations and times. Yet Herbert is also always suspicious of language's capacity to unify, order, and shape a community, or even a self.

POEM AS LITURGICAL OBJECT

Herbert's discomfort with language as a foundation for worship, or even theology, surfaces in several poems. "The Altar" condenses many of these possibilities into a single poem and can help us articulate the questions in specific detail:

> A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,
> Made of a heart and cemented with tears;
> Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
> No workman's tool hath touch'd the same.
> A HEART alone
> Is such a stone,
> As nothing but
> Thy pow'r doth cut.
> Wherefore each part

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21. Cruickshank, "Broken Altars," 25. A similar irony may be noted in *The Temple* as a volume of poems expressing skepticism toward even the potential efficacy of language.

22. Levine, *Forms*, 15–16.

23. R. L. Colie, "Logos in the Temple: George Herbert and the Shape of Content," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 26, no. 3/4 (1963): 328.

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.
Oh, let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.

"The Altar" flickers between two significantly different interpretations based on what "these stones" reference. If the reference is delimited to the "broken altar" "made of a heart," that heart that is "such a stone" is potentially continuing to praise even if or when the volitional self is divorced from that heart. The heart as instantiated by the "altar" may be understood as a material artifact endued with agency the (fragmented) self lacks. Can a united self exist in praise, or at all? Why is the self so split? If only God's power can "cut" the stone, which in parts now makes up this altar, there is a suggestion of violence enacted by God on the speaker that enabled the construction of this altar. Alternatively, if the stones are uncut by human hands, as Exodus 20 instructs for the creation of an altar, the pronouncement that only God can cut "these stones" may read as an assurance of protection. If "these stones" is read to reference the object in the title of the poem, and is understood to function as a liturgical object, this interpretation allows for a positive reading of "if I chance to hold my peace," where instead of the will ceasing to praise, the poet is resting, but maintains prayer via the poem.

This written poem allows a parallel temporality to augment the strictly linear temporality of the poet's praise: since the poem continues to exist after having been composed, it can carry the prayer forward whether the poet is actively praying or not. In this sense, the ceaselessness of ideal prayer requires liturgical artisanship: the pray-er crafts prayers that take the form of now-externalized and stable objects, which may also be taken up by another person and used as their prayer. Is the continuity provided by the written poem-prayer simply the possibility for another person to approach and utilize it, or can it still operate as an effective prayer as it sits aside, absent a speaker? In order to conceptualize prayer continued forward in time via an object, however, one must disregard "the great metaphoric gaps which inescapably divide a word from referents as various as a generic tradition, the object of representation, and the matter of sacramental presence" that Herbert recursively meditates on in his poems.[24] The verse-object participates in communal symbolism in a new register: not just the symbols within the lines, but the entire poem as an object.

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24. Kathleen Lynch, "George Herbert's Holy 'Altar,' Name and Thing," *George Herbert Journal* 17, no. 1 (Fall 1993): 42.

Herbert's choice of verse for prayer, as well, may suggest a particular temporality to the prayer, emphasizing prayer in relation to time.[25] Deeply invested in the solitary self, Herbert's poems resound with the "lyric I." "Speaking implies a possibility of breaking off and beginning," and his emphasis on the action and futility of these first-person speakers often center temporality.[26] Poems may always be understood to imply speakers, but Herbert pressures this point by the repetition in his devotional poems of scenarios (perhaps present, perhaps remembered) that find/found/will find resolution. The speaker may be locked in an eternal loop of restlessness followed by calm, or these poems may be understood as various perspectives of a single or few incidents in the past being now recounted from a place of calm. Meter controls and restrains language, disciplining it to a particular end, which Herbert does in an additional layer with his shape poems, and so also regular prayer is discipline and the intentional creation of a lacuna of time, offered to God, acting as a separate enclave in the quotidian passage of the day. The existence of the written poem blends these two flows of time, as the speaker may temporarily join his voice with the poem, and then step away from it while the poem continues to exist as an invocation to God or exhortation to the self.

Some of these poems take on material and temporal functions as extensions of the poet, and are also available as proxy objects or temporalities for the devotion of a reader. Objects, too, may be understood to possess different sorts of agency than human subjects, in Bruno Latour's formulation, to "offer the agents of the world a more interesting world than that of passive object."[27] The blending of human and object agency produces complementary forms of worship. These layers of complications are worth investigating, with Northrop Frye's ever-timely statement of the obvious in mind, that "the conclusion that a work of literary art contains a variety or sequence of meanings seems inescapable."[28]

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25. Of course, Herbert is hardly alone in his choice, and in the early modern era prayer as related to verse was modeled and copied from the form of the psalms, although their meter in the original language was not understood but was presumed. Thus, verse for prayer was not following the pattern of communal worship as laid out in the various Books of Common Prayer, but was aligned with Protestant interest on versified translations of the Psalms (using a looser, Renaissance understanding of translation rather than a more precise, modern understanding).

26. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 88.

27. Bruno Latour, "Do Scientific Objects Have a History? Pasteur and Whitehead in a Bath of Lactic Acid," trans. Lydia Davis, *Common Knowledge* 25, no. 1–3 (2019): 127. Of course, the framing of "offering" a "more interesting role" still presupposes the orchestrating human as the primary agent.

28. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1973), 72.

WHAT IS A TEMPLE?

The congregation and the minister both instrumentalize one another via the nonhuman objects of the poems and the sacred objects they represent, which are physically present in a liturgy. The objects thus enable a collaboration between the human and nonhuman, extending the congregation in time and space, and permitting Herbert the author to create the speaker who also distends beyond the moment of composition or the initial moment of prayer into a presence accessible from later chronological vantages. This larger entity of speaker/congregation/sacred objects/(figured by) poems thus constitutes a different, larger congregation of worshippers than the initial congregation, spiraling outward and changing form with each spiral as more and more participants are invoked.

Herbert's invocation of not only the architecture but also the sacred objects of the church suggests that all the objects present in *The Temple* are accessible to the reader and may be handled by any person who wanders into the church. This radical openness levels hierarchy, making all spaces and objects equally accessible to anyone interested. Since a book of poetry may be a solitary experience, the reader may also experience those objects with an implied community throughout time, but with no other person physically and temporally present. Herbert fashions an oddly solitary confrontation with liturgical objects. The physical counterpart of some of these poetic objects it might be easy to visit alone, like the church porch or windows, but other sacred rituals or objects are inherently communal, such as holy communion, or church music. Presenting these items and experiences as part of a buffet of verses, ready to be selected in any order, experienced in nearly any time or place, runs the risk of fragmenting the unity of services and liturgies into piecemeal tokens, available for tasting on their own instead of incorporated into the ordered framework of the church building and body.

Herbert's play and constant experimentation with poetic structures evokes Angela Leighton's description of form: "Its whole bent is towards materialization, towards being the shape or body of something."[29] Herbert's corpus emphasizes the process of materialization, the interplay between the material object of the printed poem, and the shape of another object the poem may invoke, or the object from the world outside the text it may shadow from within the text. The nonidenticality of a liturgical object (such as a candle or an altar) and a poem that presents itself as such an object creates a space of possibility and contrast between them, wherein the

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29. Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 2. Her entire description fills two pages and thoughtfully probes a wide array of various conflicting and complementary meanings.

reader may ponder essential features of the object and imagine other manifestations of the object.

Since Herbert's poems are so explicitly centered on objects and spaces, it is worth considering how this fixation on the material item interacts with the infamous "lyric I" presumed for the speaker. The "I" is complicated in the religious poems, which frequently call to mind a shared liturgical speaking self, reminiscent of the Hobbesian monarch constructed of many silent men.[30] A gathered congregation mirrors and merges with the "cloude of witnesses" of Hebrews, all participants in the saints gathered from across time, but unlike Hobbes's model of secular might, each participant offers her voice on behalf of herself and the others in unified prayer.[31]

HOW CAN PRAYER BE MADE?

In addition to reading the poems as prayers, I follow Janis Lull in her observation that "the poems are also meditations on the nature of reading and writing, because in writing *The Church*, Herbert was also offering a reading of the Bible,"[32] and wish to extend this observation because Herbert not only offered a reading of the Bible; he offered this reading in contrast to preaching, exploring the differences in kind and faults between the ephemeral breath of spoken word and the unfixable, sliding, but comparatively more fixed language of writing. Herbert offers a meditation on the simultaneous hope and futility of preaching, his vocation, and writing, his hobby, to accurately communicate truth to an other. This lapse, this futility, is one of the central paradoxes of *The Temple*.

A reservation always hovering in the background of Herbert's work and occasionally breaking into the surface of the verse is the question of how efficacious words can be. Can an object made of verse and the same object made of some other substance function similarly? If they are fashioned from different things, their resemblance to each other is materially limited. "It is, and is not, the object it represents," and this flickering, this indecidability offers itself as both and neither, echoing the instability Herbert's speakers often lament: over themselves as faithful/unfaithful, praying/not praying, able/unable to preach.[33] The poem as a formal liturgical object, and also merely a poem, mirrors the speakers' central conundrum

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30. See the frontispiece for Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan; or, The Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London, 1651), available at Early English Books Online, https://proquest.libguides.com/eebopqp.

31. Heb. 12:1 (image 267).

32. Janice Lull, *The Poem in Time: Reading George Herbert's Revisions of "The Church"* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 13.

33. Leighton, *On Form*, 3.

flickering between certainty and mistrusting the possibility of language to faithfully convey truth.

This very instability may also point to Herbert consciously working in the tradition of paradox, a consistent motif throughout his poems.[34] Containing this paradox is "Herbert's fundamental faith in God's linguistic enclosure—the ultimate union of fallen language with divine signification,"[35] and this possibility seems to appear for Herbert through carefully revised and crafted poetry. Perhaps the process of crafting a poem that can be revisited and mulled over allowed him more surety of the "divine signification" imbuing his "fallen language." Meticulously wrought verse, then, becomes the best union, for Herbert, between divine truth and language, ever uncertain. His experimentation with various verse forms is significant beyond the shape poems, although it includes them, and is experimentation with various structures of thought. As Eric Weiskott explains, "Verse form is never incidental to the thinking it performs. . . . At the level of metrical structuration, where language becomes verse, meter and thinking are one and the same."[36] *The Temple*, then, mulls over the same sacred spaces and the same intractable problems from the vantages of various meters and forms. Rather than shifting problematics, he shifts "metrical structuration" and continues pondering continual prayer, the self in a congregation, wavering faith.

As a fixed object, a poem is not subject to the omissions and misrepresentations of memory, and the unifying envelopes of verse (packed with various types of call-and-response in the form of rhymes and patterned sounds) force a layered circularity into the reading, speaking, or hearing experience, present to a far lesser degree in either extemporaneous speech or prose. The practice of composing poetry, then, is also the composition of a "linguistic enclosure" in which to invite the reader to devotional contemplation. Formal enclosure is central to versification; as Frances Ferguson notes, a sonnet "could be said to be formally achieved, in that it would not disappear simply because you were not attending to it. It could regularly be found, pointed out, or returned to, and the sense of its availability would not rest on agreements about its meaning."[37] The permanence of such a formal object, the finished state and continued existence, then, permits the author to rest from the labor of constant prayer. The object has been achieved, and, as compared to breathed speech, has transcended some measure of its ephemerality.[38]

34. The Renaissance tradition of paradox is explored in Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica*.

35. Lull, *Poem in Time*, 16.

36. Eric Weiskott, "Early English Meter as a Way of Thinking," *Studia Metrica et Poetica* 4, no. 1 (2017): 41.

37. Frances Ferguson, "Jane Austen, *Emma*, and the Impact of Form," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (March 2000): 157–80.

38. Of course, like any material object subject to decay, it has not and cannot ever completely transcend ephemerality, and the early modern tradition of excerpts does fragment

One of Herbert's clearest statements that speech is insufficient, "The Windows," opens with the question "Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?" because "He is a brittle crazy glass" (1–2). Preaching is meaningless because "speech alone / Doth vanish like a flaring thing, / And in the ear, not conscience ring" (13–15). Only married to another force can they "bring / A strong regard and awe" (12–13) here joined with "Doctrine and life" (11). Doctrine is laid out in writing, professed with the voice; but how can Herbert figure "life"? He uses the quotidian objects and concepts structuring the life of the church in order to vivify the doctrine he preaches, "wat'rish, bleak, and thin" (10) without imagination. The use of "thin" in this poem calls to mind the speaker grown "thin" (15) in "Easter-Wings," a poetic echo that suggests that it is only when one "shows" "thin" does one cry to God for help.

At the same time that Herbert's poems emphasize the material world, they also withdraw from it in their symbolic, metonymic use of physical items to refer to spiritual, inner illumination and turmoil. Yet Herbert is undeniably referencing the external, material world in his titles and shape-images, so a consideration of these references still obtains. As a poet, Herbert is interested in working in the interstice between interior and exterior, echoing each space against the other. Bachelard offers a "phenomenological inquiry on poetry" that seems particularly suitable here: "This is where the phenomenological doublet of resonances and repercussions must be sensitized. The resonances are dispersed on the different planes of our life in the world, while the repercussions invite us to give greater depth to our own existence. In the resonance we hear the poem, in the reverberations we speak it, it is our own."[39] The poem resonates as an external object that has been crafted for a particular purpose, but when the speaker voices the poem, she has the opportunity to make it her own. While Bachelard's observation is certainly applicable beyond Herbert's poetry (and was not written with reference to his work), Herbert solidifies these disparate planes of poetic existence more concretely than many other poets through his miming of objects with his poems. The effect of this space between the poem's resonances with other "planes of our life" and the reverberations of possessing it with our own audible voice is that "the reverberations bring about a change of being. It is as though the poet's being were our being."[40] This fragile unity premised on difference mirrors the unity of the poem with a liturgical object, based on the fact that it is a linguistic construction ultimately bearing few resemblances to the referenced candle, altar, or other item. Since the Protestant tradition in which Herbert served as a minister (later termed Anglican) had

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and change the object. I think it stands, though, that the crafted poem may be understood to resist temporal and material erasure.

39. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, xxii.
40. Ibid.

stripped many adornments from the liturgy in contradistinction to Catholic practice, his poems may represent one Protestant, specifically Anglican, response to a perceived value in or need for such objects, or simply an appreciation for the role such objects fill in parish life. Further, they invite the reader to serve in the role of speaker of the poems, positioning herself as a faithful worshipper praying the prayers of the poems alongside Herbert and others in a manner similar to the (at least theoretical) universal unity embodied in geographic and temporal union of the saints following the Catholic liturgical calendar.

"THE FALL": REST OR REPETITION?

"Easter-Wings" demonstrates Herbert's interest in the valences of meaning that spatial arrangement can offer the bare text of a poem.[41] As each verse narrows, afflictions mount for the speaker, and at the narrowest point of most suffering, he cries "With thee" (6) before, in parallel actions "let me rise / As larks" (7–8), and "if I imp my wing on thine, / Affliction shall advance the flight in me" (19–20). Having two wings, and so two verses, enacts the fall and God's rescue twice each. This repetition produces an odd roller-coaster effect, difficult to understand as either personal outpouring of thanks or formalized liturgical praise. In either context, a repetition seems superfluous. This repetition draws attention again to Herbert's interest in cycles in tension with the text. Both the first and the second stanzas claim "this day" (9, 18) is the victorious rising, but immediately after that first ascent, the reader is drawn back down to "tender age in sorrow" (11). The second stanza repeats the hourglass of sin followed by a cry to God, blessed by anticipation of divine favor. This pattern sets up an expectation at the end of the second verse that the cycle may continue to repeat. What kind of rescue merely jerks the sufferer between "Decaying" (3) and "sorrow" (11) and short-lived songs of victory? The verb tenses provide one possible key to this curiosity: the past suffering is told in the past, while future joys are but wished for with a humble imperative:[42] "Lord, who createdst man . . . / [who] became / Most poor" (1–5); "My tender age in sorrow did begin: / And still with sicknesses and shame / Thou didst so punish sin, / That I became / Most thin" (11–15); "O let me rise . . ./ And sing" (7–9); "Let me combine, / And feel this day thy victory" (17–18). The speaker, then, seems caught in the present, hopeful for an unattained future. The request that

41. I cannot reproduce the shape of the poem adequately here, but I encourage the reader to consult a text in order to appreciate Herbert's nuanced handling of what struck me initially as a fairly kitschy poem.

42. I am grateful to one of *Modern Philology*'s anonymous reviewers for pointing out the use of the humble imperative here.

God would "let" may alternately be read as the speaker seeking for an experience of song and felt victory that he does not yet feel.

The repetition of the fall, however, continues to disturb a merely hopeful interpretation, since the repetition is unnecessary in both form and content. The past tense could have been restricted to the first verse and the future depicted in the second. Or, since the poem so neatly visualizes a fall and rise, a single wing might have been sufficient since, after all, the narrative is the same in both. If more length were desired, the lines might have been longer and the same amount of text placed into the same shape. Herbert chose two verses, though, repeating the same process: "Form is, for Herbert, not a found thing, but a finding."[43] More emphatically than a narrative of hope, "Easter-Wings" offers a meditation on the circular process of sin and hope: the refusal of a conclusive finale. The wishful mood of "let" cannot be certain of attaining its desire, which perhaps makes the effect of the second fall that much more dramatic and serious. Although not canonically a liturgical object, the imagery of God's wings references Psalm 81, and Herbert uses the occasion of Easter to consider the experience of living as a fallen creature hoping for grace. This shaped poem enacts a looping temporality uncannily similar to that invoked by "these stones" in "The Altar," but this time suggesting infinite struggle rather than the rest of fulfilled prayer. His poem-as-object considers the negative capacity of time split and continued: Can a single person (re)live the consequences of the fall multiple times?

"SOMETHING UNDERSTOOD"

Herbert experiments in shape-poetry and thing-titles in order to overlay his poems with the stability afforded by some other object. In Derridean terms, the physical object evoked through language offers a supplement to his flickering verses, shielding them from being snuffed out by a misunderstanding. Presenting his poems as simultaneously auditory and physical objects wraps them in the endless cycle of trace and origin Derrida explores in *Of Grammatology*. His translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains, "Derrida suggests that what opens the possibility of thought is not merely the question of being, but also the never-annulled difference from 'the completely other.' Such is the strange 'being' of the sign: half of it always 'not there' and the other half always 'not that.'" The poems make explicit their status as object and event, as ephemeral speech and material substance. Again, "both Heidegger and Derrida teach us to use language in terms of a trace-structure, effacing it even as it presents its legibility."[44] Perhaps the

43. Cruickshank, "Broken Altars," 37.
44. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, introduction to Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, xxxv–vi.

tension between the verse and the other item will hold interest long enough that the meaning of the poem will become clear(er) to the reader than words alone would have expressed. Each conceptual item relies upon and is erased by the other.

Or, rather than imagining language as ephemeral and material objects as stable, we can imagine the interplay of two types of dissolutions, two types of coherences. We might take up Spivak's gloss on Nietzsche: "If one is always bound by one's perspective, one can at least deliberately reverse perspectives as often as possible, in the process undoing opposed perspectives, showing that the two terms of an opposition are merely accomplices of each other."[45] Neither a linguistic nor a material approach to prayer, to community, to the church can solve Herbert's dilemmas, but the two concepts provide, not a combination, but space for alternation in the mind, each lighting the insufficiencies of the other.

In Herbert's *Temple*, Christ inhabits both Derrida's "not-that" inasmuch as the traditions of the church can never fully contain divinity, and "not-there" in the always insufficient physical church, on which Herbert puns by creating his own also-inadequate temple. Both temples and traditions may be understood to contain some part of the "that" and the "there" but also to constitute the "care" of "Sin (I)": "Lord, with what care hast thou begirt us round" (1). In the performance of devotion, even earnest devotion, care "begirts" "us," the speaker included along with the other pray-ers, even as the poem is "begirt" by *The Temple* as a volume. The material and temporal props of the believer—scripture and preaching, public worship and private devotion—are at once necessary and constraining and terribly fragile:

> Bibles laid open, millions of surprises
> Blessings beforehand, ties of gratefulness
> The sound of glory ringing in our ears:
> Without, our shame; within, our consciences;
> Angels and grace, eternal homes and fears.
> Yet all these fences and their whole array
> One cunning bosom-sin blows quite away.
>
> ("Sin [I]" [8–14])

A single sin can, at least in the experience of the speaker, outweigh both the props and the personal history of faith. Herbert moves beyond simply identifying the insufficiency of doctrine and language to recognizing its necessity and fragility even as he locates Christ as the stabilizing force behind devotional practice. As more voices join and share language, and the reference to a physical object outside the prayer but related to it lends stability to that prayer, so Christ ultimately stabilizes the never-sufficient

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45. Ibid., xxviii.

prayers and practices gathered in *The Temple.* As a divine, Herbert is aware that neither a linguistic nor a material approach to devotion can represent the excess of divinity. Christ is neither the words and doctrines of the church nor trapped in the physical objects. He exceeds both. Since nothing Herbert can reference can knit his project together, I argue that, for Herbert, Christ inhabits the central aporia of his doubly failed project that shadows the doubly failed church: they are both failing to represent the triune God in language or things, but as far as *The Temple* depicts these failures, so far also the Christian church throughout time and space can also point to the weakness at the center. Herbert vivifies Saint Paul's words: "And he [God] saide unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my power is made perfect through weaknes. Very gladly therefore will I rejoice rather in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may dwel in me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproches, in necessities, in persecutions, in anguish for Christ's sake: for when I am weake then I am strong."[46] If a reader recognizes this Christian paradox, of weakness as strength, as at the center as the "something understood" ("Prayer [I]" [14]) of prayer, the project has not failed. In succeeding, it answers the earlier question: Can Christ keep you from falling? Herbert's recursive return to weakness, to the infirmities of not only his text but all doctrine and practice make reliance on a more stable third term essential. By exposing the weakness at the heart of his poetic project rather than relying on sermons alone, Herbert expands Christian devotional reliance on God beyond the church, even as he winkingly transfers it to *The Temple*, and demonstrates the use status of all created objects as ultimately reliant on God for their function.

WHAT IS ESSENTIAL?

In tension with linguistic uncertainty, Herbert's speaker repeatedly claims specific effects may follow from his poems, as in "The Church-Porch" when he advises, "Thou" (intimately and directly, the first word upon opening to the poems) "Hearken unto a Verser, who may chance / Rhyme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure" (1, 3–4). Here, the agent of "good" is the "Verser," who forms the "bait" for the good of the "Thou" immediately addressed. The following couplet, however, slides the agency to the "verse": "A verse may find him, who a sermon flies, / And turn delight into a sacrifice" (5–6). Once made, the verse operates independently of the maker. "Verser" is shortened to "verse," the repeated syllable echoing through the stanza. Does it require a speaker, though, to voice its prayer, or does the prayer remain constant even without an added voice? The interplay between intentional artisan and completed object inflects the questions of many Herbert

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46. 2 Cor. 12:9–10 (image 224).

poems, posing another layer of ambiguity in the formulation reader-poem/ object-Verser-divine truth. If the poem/object held no power, writing would be futile. Minimally, the poem can return the speaker to a familiar mental space and frame of mind, although Herbert's poems in their shadowing of liturgical objects suggest they also retain additional capacity to operate independent of a speaker immediately present. The Verser composes something at times efficacious, but neither the Verser nor the reader seem to know when or how that efficacy operates, making the reading of a poem something akin to the much-debated mystery of the Eucharist. Ensuring the reader must approach the poem as more than mere words—as overflowing its linguistic status and additionally existing as a liturgical object—is one way Herbert's speaker reconciles his fears regarding the insufficiency of language with his poetic practice. Herbert relies on the common "inference" "that all arts possess both a temporal and spatial aspect."[47] Herbert's poems emphasize the space of the church and time, whether arguing that the speaker recalls a former, now-settled restlessness or that the poems record the heat of an unsettled mind and heart with shocking immediacy.

Attempts to standardize confession evident in the proliferation of doctrinal confessions—of which the Westminster Confession (1647) is the most famous—are foolish when, in the words of Herbert's "The Holdfast," "to have nought is ours, not to confess / That we have nought" (9–10). Not even the capacity to claim nothing can rightfully ground worship, and Herbert's speakers often contrast futile language with some other embodied or symbolic response, as here when in response "I stood amazed" (10) and only after this amazed silence can the poem produce a clear doctrinal statement:

> That all things were more ours by being his.
> What Adam had, and forfeited for all,
> Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall.
> ("The Holdfast" [12–14])[48]

Words, as all else, must fail before Christ's inability to fail can be understood. The word "confess" reverberates throughout the poem, appearing three times in three consecutive lines, losing meaning with each new sounding: "We must confess, that nothing is our own. / Then I confess that he my succour is: / But to have nought is ours, not to confess / That we have nought" (7–10). "Christ" resounds in the final line, said but once, unrhymed and sonically distinct from the patterning of the rest of the poem. "Christ

47. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 77. Stanley Fish offers an excellent overview of the history of Herbert criticism and in particular these debates around the status of time in the introduction to his *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

48. Another reading would take the speaker as being satirized, although I think this reading is difficult to maintain in light of the concerns addressed throughout *The Temple* as a whole text.

keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall" (14) recalls the earlier placement of the "fall" in the final line in the first verse of "Easter-Wings": "Then shall the fall further the flight in me" (10). Reading one poem by way of the other, the fall proves fortunate for the speaker of "Easter-Wings," because Christ "who cannot fail or fall" is there to rescue him. The positioning of the "fall" as final in both verses, though, links them spatially, an uncomfortable link because the one fall repeats. The assurance of "The Holdfast" is undercut by the memory of that other repeated fall. If Christ cannot fall, can he prevent the speaker from falling, or from falling again? Herbert, as other poets, builds with images, sidestepping confessional demands of shared creeds and history. Yet by referencing and creating communities for collective meditation and prayer, Herbert also (and contradictorily) recognizes the need for doctrine to be upheld with rituals shared among a group. Indeed, the church itself was a site of great tension and debate on community and hierarchical social and clerical authority and standing. Christopher Marsh contends, "There existed in early modern England a deeply rooted and influential consensus about the importance of maintaining a sense of community. At its heart, this involved an aspiration to oneness that was articulated in a variety of contexts, but most powerfully and regularly in and through the parish church."[49] As a location for sorting out the contradictions inherent in concepts of community, as well as the necessity for materiality to bind together a confessionally, economically, socially heterogenous community of worshippers, Herbert's verse temple provides a shadow site for thinking through these needs and difficulties.

Consistent with the historical author's ministerial role in the Church of England, the speakers of the poems discussed in this essay do not affirm radical antinomianism, but rather call for doctrine to be vivified, refined, and shared by faithful. Herbert offers poems, not sermons, as a space of convergence and potential unity. "The poetic image is an emergence from language,"[50] and Herbert realizes doctrine alone cannot sufficiently unify. He offers images bound into poems that suggest they can function as objects.[51] Emerging from *The Temple* is an invocation of liturgical community throughout time, centering shared liturgical spaces, objects, and times, and concerned with doctrine but not championing divisive sectarian views, as the popularity of his poems across confessions demonstrates.[52] In a time when doctrine frequently offered a pretext

49. Marsh, " 'Common Prayer' in England," 71.
50. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, xxvii.
51. Of course, we must also always keep in mind that his means of communicating images is always through language. Herbert uses language to transcend the suffocating effects of language on a congregation, evident in England's raging doctrinal debates.
52. Clarke, *Theory and Theology*, 9.

for violence, Herbert's insistence on common confession stabilizing the-oretical doctrine, paired with the capacity of images to circumvent the need, at least for a moment, for shared history and doctrine in order to evoke community, may be understood as a pastoral response to the era's religious upheaval. *The Temple* insists that doctrine divorced from collec-tive life could only remain a "brittle, crazy glass," ready to shatter.