

**THE LANGUAGE OF MAN AND THE LANGUAGE OF GOD  
IN GEORGE HERBERT'S RELIGIOUS POETRY**

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B.A. American University in Bulgaria, 2000

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May, 2003

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An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
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According to Burckhardt, the Reformation was an escape from discipline. The Reformation changed both the cultural and the religious reality of early modern Europe. Reformation theology and the new Renaissance understanding of self and of individuality required a radically new language in which to address God and at the same time demand a response. Medieval rhetoric of praise could no longer sustain the versatility of the Renaissance reader and could not provide the medium of searching for that response. The poetry of the metaphysical poets, Herbert in particular, bridges Christian discourse, rhetorical strategies, moral expression, radical dissent.

Herbert was an orator and a theologian. Just as he distinguished between a secular, political world and a world of praise and divinity, he recognized overtones of divine language and human language. For Herbert, human discourse explicates processes of communication, questioning, irresolution, and doubt. It is essentially a conditional language that creates spaces within which the speaker can complain and criticize *as if*

complaining and criticism were possible. The strategy of “if” in Herbert’s *The Temple* is to rewrite the stories that reader and speaker already know in a way that makes them accessible to experience. Thus Herbert encourages the reader to grasp the humanity of the speaker’s voice beyond theological dogma. The yearning and desire in Herbert’s “if” language confront the stable fixity of divine “must” language.

In one of his early essays dealing with language, Walter Benjamin discuss fallen human language and language as such. His distinctions pertain to the function of language as freeing agent. In language, God has relieved man of “divine actuality” and let him be creative. Along the same lines, Herbert tries to explicate the adequacy of fallen language to serve as a medium of speaking and writing. His plea is that if we could only “hear,” and if we could only “spell,” we would have access to the stable and fixed language of God; but such access is in fact impossible to human beings. However, when humans speak and write, they transform the Word into a meaningful experience, and Herbert’s poetry is an exercise in articulating that process.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Burt Hatlen for his patient and meticulous editing. His revisions, suggestions and recommendations along the way were indispensable. His attentive reading and astute sense of my weaknesses made the final version of this thesis better. Credits need to go to Tony Brinkley and Ben Friedlander who helped me crystallize my insights.

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If that be dark we cannot see,  
 The sun is darker than a tree,  
 And thou more dark than either.  
 ("Evensong" WM, ll. 9-16)

Yet if you go, I pass not; take your way:  
 For, Thou are still my God  
 ("The Forerunners," ll. 31-32)

In all of the passages quoted above, I emphasize the word "if" as it introduces an element of doubt and equivocation. These qualities, I propose, are characteristic of human language but not of the language of God. Therefore, in these passages Herbert establishes an opposition between human language, including his own, and God's language. The voice of Herbert as the speaker is the predominant voice in *The Temple*. We hear Christ's voice as He narrates the story of the Passion in "The Sacrifice"; and then on sporadic occasions, but only briefly, in such poems as "Redemption," "Love III," "The Collar." In the lines quoted above Herbert appropriates "if" to fictionalize language, create a language of his own to express both doubt and ambiguity, and also to generate possibilities which do not exist in the language of God. I want to argue that the language of God and the language of the poet are irreconcilably different; that the poet takes God's Word and makes it his own, and in doing so opens a possibility of love towards God, but also of disagreement with God. Thereby, Herbert empowers the human word to generate an actual and powerful response to God's Word. Herbert's speaker refuses to abide by expectations—he is the disappointed scholar of "Affliction I," the liberated rebel of "The Collar," the shooter in "Artillery"—and his refusal is communicated linguistically, not simply verbally. Herbert manages to free the Word from its immediacy, thus making possible a realm in which addressing God becomes insistence on the self. I am proposing that the capacity of human language to address

God, and to address the self at the same time and with the same words, is the virtue of “if” in Herbert’s poetry. Renaissance poetry, and specifically metaphysical poetry, put a new value on the deliberate reflection on the self, while still being tied to the biblical aesthetics of symbol and structure. The new language that emerges with the revival of the classics during the Renaissance articulates the clash between Catholic and Protestant rhetoric: Catholics sought to establish representational language, while Protestants alienated it. Herbert probably saw this inevitable linguistic dichotomy grounded in a religious struggle as a failure of language in the political realm. His position as the University Orator at Cambridge<sup>1</sup> gave him access to the practical application of contemporary rhetoric. But he was also trained as a priest of the Anglican Church. Many of Herbert’s critics, like Barbara Lewalski, argue that “the energy and power we respond to in much of this poetry has its basis in the resources of biblical genre [and] language” (5). I will not dispute this assertion, but I want to suggest that in Herbert’s religious poetry, truth becomes a function of the ability to respond in language to those resources in a way that moves beyond the biblical and doctrinal origins into an elegant rhetoric of the self. Thus the language that he asserts in his poetry refuses to abide by ideologies, either political or religious, and makes one single claim—that of being human.

In an early essay on language, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” Walter Benjamin makes an argument that there is a clear connection between the act of creation and spoken language. He seeks that connection in the Bible, which gives

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<sup>1</sup> George Herbert held the position from 1620 to 1628. The Public Orator was the spokesperson for the University. As such Herbert wrote all the University letters and made all the orations addressed to the king, the prince, or whoever came to the University. The position was very prestigious and served as a stepping-stone to a political career. Herbert’s two predecessors to the post had successful careers as secretaries of state and Herbert himself had aspiration to be appointed to such an office. As a public orator, Herbert was expected to praise the authority of the monarch.

evidence of “a special relationship between man and language resulting from the act of creation” (68). He follows the patterns of “creation” in Genesis 1 where every individual act of creation is preceded by “Let there be” and ends with “He named.” Benjamin’s concept of “name” becomes central to his theory and he defines it as “that through which, and in which, language itself communicates itself absolutely” (65). In fact, it is only after things have received their names, he argues, that their creation is completed. What becomes important to my argument about Herbert’s distinction between a fallen human language and language as such, is Benjamin’s definition of name as “the essential law of language, according to which to express oneself and to address everything else amounts to the same thing” (65). The argument that by addressing the self the poet also communicates his being to God reconciles the Renaissance fascination with dramatizing the self as it confronts issues of love, afflictions, conscience, with the understanding that all of its struggles happen within a religious context in which the same self keeps confronting God. In Chapter II, I discuss how the speaker in Herbert’s poetry creates private spaces by using language; within those spaces he communicates his discontents to God, but he also *names* himself—either as the child, as in “The Collar,” or as the shooter, as in “Artillery”—thus establishing a firm sense of the boundaries of the self. In Herbert’s “Affliction I,” or “The Flower,” two poems in which the speaker’s stories have meaning only when read as both an enactment of the “named” self and as a confirmation of faith, it is possible to see how “in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God” (Benjamin 65). Benjamin identifies this concept of language as one that “knows no means, no objects, and no addressee of communication” (65). Indeed, all of this happens in Herbert’s poetry: the energy of Herbert’s speaker focuses on his attempts to

communicate to God the essence of the self that exists beyond his ability to control it. Herbert never forgets that this communication remains possible only because it is validated and guaranteed by God, but the language in which that communication becomes possible remains free of restrictions. In naming—“the task that God expressly assigns to man himself”—man partakes of the language of God, but also, Benjamin argues, falls short of its creativity (70). This is the paradox that Herbert tackles in his religious poetry: how is his word going to be creative and not “mere prattle,” while at the same time being fallen and contingent. To use Augustinian terms, the paradox explicates Herbert’s sense of “restlessness” about human language. For the poet of *The Temple*, human discourse is not bound by decrees, as is divine discourse. The self-motivation behind human language in Herbert’s poetry transforms the static verbal mechanisms of the divine speaker into an essentially dynamic and contemplative language.

I am bringing up Walter Benjamin’s theory on language because none of Herbert’s critics—not even Robert Watson, or Michael Shoenfeldt both of whom have introduced the issue of language into their arguments—has developed an extensive and satisfactory discussion on how Herbert’s speaker appropriates and modifies divine language in order to address God in the voice of a single, self-willed individuality. Reformation theology and the Renaissance ideal of the new self required the learning of a new language in which to communicate with God.<sup>2</sup> For John Donne, who was twenty-one

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<sup>2</sup> The discussion of Renaissance individualism as a cultural fact in the history of early modern Europe starts with Burckhardt, who claims in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* that “man became a spiritual (*geistiges*) individual, and recognized himself as such” (qtd. in Kerrigan 11). William Kerrigan explains that for Burckhardt individualism meant “self-conscious uniqueness” (11). Burckhardt also argues that the Renaissance period gave recognition to the human spirit which “moved with victorious freedom in the new field which poetry had won” (167). He further states that the mode of expressing the new awareness of a renewed human spirit was defined by literature. Reformation theology, too, was colored by a heightened sense of a spiritual individuality and a new understanding of the role of the devout person in a Christian society. Burckhardt contends it is a “proof that the European mind was still alive . . . [that] religion again

years senior to George Herbert, that language was probably, as John Carey suggests, “an imaginative construct [that borders on] instability” (xxx). In his poetry, Donne explores the extremes of human thought and imagination—vice, wit, spirituality, “absence, darknesse, death; things which are not” (“A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy’s Day,” l. 18). But Donne is preoccupied with the potentialities of man to be blasphemous and pious at the same time, while Herbert’s metrical and symbolic meticulousness has allowed him to spend time on the medium of that expression—human language. Donne’s interest in language falls short of uncovering possibilities, whereas for Herbert, language is the key to communicating oneself to God. Herbert’s critics have tended to see Herbert as either a doctrinal poet and a devout Christian,<sup>3</sup> or as a poet who exercises power as a gesture of self-confirmation.<sup>4</sup> He is a devout Christian and he seeks self-confirmation, but to look at him in strictly one way or the other is to overlook his struggle with both orthodox doctrine and self-assertion. I want to read him as a poet whose humanity seeks to envision a radical language in which to address God, a language beyond anything that Catholic or Protestant ideology could envision.

Herbert concedes the self to God, but in his language he remains rebellious, seeking alternatives, contemplating possibilities. The “Child”-speaker in “The Collar” answers “My Lord,” but the self-confident voice in “Affliction I” declares: “Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.” I want to explore how the new spaces allowed by the “if” paradox reconstruct both in rhetoric and language our understanding of Herbert’s

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bec[a]me an affair of the individual and his own personal feelings . . . when the Church became corrupt in doctrine and tyrannous in practice” (259).

<sup>3</sup> Rosemond Tuve, Barbara Lewalski, and even Rosalie Colie in her *Paradoxia Epidemica* have insisted on the conventionally religious metaphors of Herbert’s poetry and have maintained this as the only possible meaningful interpretation of *The Temple*.

opposition to God. The opposition of Herbert's speaker has largely been misunderstood as "complaint," a straightforward defiance of God's rules. The term "complaint," which Arnold Stein uses to describe Herbert's afflictions and lamentations and his general sense of human—although I would also add, divine—failure, is too narrow to cover the whole range of possibilities in an "if." Stein argues that for Herbert the mystery of the human heart—"endowed with repining restlessness" (90)—"must be explored while complaining" (90). For Herbert, the mystery of the heart is truly in its "repining restlessness," in its elusiveness and ambiguity, in its refusal to accept a straightforward and restricted meaning, but Stein mistakes the meditative voice for complaint. The value of Herbert's "if" language is that it tolerates the poet's resistance to conclusions and closures, while "complaining" presupposes an ultimate resolution in an act of final self-abnegation. Herbert's speaker keeps coming back to the point of discontent, and in doing so he moves beyond mere "complaining," to an implicit affirmation of a distinctive human space. Arnold Stein states that lament in Herbert "subordinates the sense of opposition to its own dominant purpose, . . . and though it may express grief over the incomprehensibility of the human condition, it cannot explore the grounds for that condition" (91). Yet, he stops the argument here. I would want to expand it and say that Herbert's "if" language turns "complaining" into an articulate and self-defined human language which enters a realm of "if" possibilities, thus making it active, responsive and, if not absolute, then certainly independent. Herbert's human language remains intact and adequate although fallen.

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<sup>4</sup> William Empson, Michael Schoenfeldt, and Robert Watson have looked at Herbert's poems as either extremely ambiguous, bordering on multiplicity of meanings that are not necessarily confined to straightforward biblical references, or as worldly means of exerting power over a divine authority.

Herbert's poems in *The Temple* enact a process similar to Donne's cycle of meditation, expostulation, and prayer as explained in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Arnold Stein slightly modifies Donne's formula and talks about a cycle in Herbert of "complaint, praise, love." I believe that the engine behind this cycle is the inverting power of "if." In fact, Stein is right in asserting that Herbert's rhetorical organization is not one of simple progression "from praise to approval to love," and that complaint is, in Herbert, at least in its straightforward reference to reality, a "full inventory of the evils of life" (86ff). Yet I would like to keep Donne's original cycle definition and apply the power and truth of that prose text to the beauty of Herbert's poetry. Herbert's poetry reinvents Donne's prose cycle in a way that reinforces the painful insistence on the self as a seeking of God.<sup>5</sup> Herbert's cycle from meditation—"The Flower"—to expostulation—"Affliction I"—to prayer—"Love III"—transforms the dignity of human language into "strength of thought."<sup>6</sup> The transformation becomes possible because Herbert's "if" offers a possibility of movement

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<sup>5</sup> In the expostulation part to "Post Actio Laesa: The Strength and the function of the senses, and other faculties, change and fail" in *Devotions*, Donne says: "No man is so little, in respect of the greatest man, as the greatest in respect to god; for here, in that, we have not so much as a measure to try it by; proportion is no measure for infinity. And therefore how little soever I be, as *God calls things that are not, as though they were*, I, who am as though I were not, may call upon god, and say, My God, my God, why comes thine anger so fast upon me?" (14). God names, as Walter Benjamin, too, contends in his essay on language. What Donne adds to this is that God names things that are not as if they are. Herbert writes in that religious tradition. His take-off point from Donne is the understanding that the self, being a self in all conditions, can claim its existence by addressing God; not addressing God in a powerfully critical language, as if that language was possible, would mean annihilation of the self.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, "Life of Cowley" in *Samuel Johnson: Selected Writings*, p.404. In the critical essay on Cowley, in which the term "metaphysical poetry" is defined for the first time and the poets of Donne's school are recognized as "metaphysical poets," Samuel Johnson argues that wit's natural dignity comes from "strength of thought" and not mere "happiness of language." Wit, of course, should be "rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*, a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. . . . The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, illusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises" (404). I would like to make a note of this definition because I want to argue in the course of this paper that Herbert's poetry shows both "strength of thought" and "happiness

beyond the power of God and into the private world of the poet, as described by Michael Schoenfeldt. The private world is primarily a world that cannot be resolved syntactically, because Herbert keeps inventing dimensions of linguistic counterexpectations: “Let me not love thee, if I love thee not” is one such counterexpectation. The poet resists defining himself through Godly language. In his analysis of “The Collar”—the poem that most explicitly voices a refusal of authority that demands constant pleading—Schoenfeldt argues that if the speaker remains silent, “silence . . . would demand the erasure of the creative self”; therefore Herbert “chooses [for the speaker of the poem] to speak *as if* in a private space where even God could not overhear” (106, italics mine). The existence of the private space, as the language itself, is conditional. It is contingent upon the capacity of the self to empower it. Thus the realm of “if” is also the private realm in which expostulation and prayer reorganize the language of praise into a language of wit. The language of wit, as the ultimate language of metaphysical poetry according to Samuel Johnson’s treatise on “The Life of Cowley,” becomes the power of thought communicated to God.

If a reader is well aware of the religious tradition in which Herbert is writing, she cannot but notice that the source of this power, and also of this language, is God. Critics such as Pahlka and Schoenfeldt have suggested that Herbert relies on imitation to construct the theology of his poetry. They propose various types and levels of imitation. Pahlka talks extensively about Herbert’s strict adherence to metric regularity. He refers to St. Augustine’s theory of verse to argue that “as rhetorical structures, poems are the product of human invention; as metrically arranged syllables, poems are imitations of

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of language.” What Herbert’s speaker does is to invite us to experience the power of human language through its beauty.

divine reason” (19). Augustine’s theory is that the Word, the Logos, the truth that is contained in it, is identical with the unity of God, and is the only possible mediation between that unity and man. I want to suggest also that Pahlka’s statements are confirmed by a close parallel reading of the Psalms translated by Sir Philip Sidney and his sister, The Countess of Pembroke. Unlike Herbert’s poetry, the psalms offer a profound and insistent praise of God, but they share the same expressive, strong, and almost flawless rhythmic patterns that we see in the poems in *The Temple*. Herbert is a firm believer in the measurements and proportions of verse. Donne, on the other hand, who is writing religious poetry as well, is widely known for having ignored those rules. I would like to add that Herbert’s strict sense of measurement translates from the mechanics of poetry to the mechanics of the speaker’s dealings with God: like the speaker in “Redemption,” Herbert knows what he bargains for, namely, his own freedom to speak outside categories. Pahlka’s ultimate argument is that the measured language sets up the occasion for the continual surrender of the self and the will of the poet, in Herbert’s case, to God. Elizabeth Clarke expands that argument and emphasizes the importance of “emotion and rhetoric” in Protestant poetics (140). Her suggestion that the “reworking of a Psalm in the context of a new emotion and experience can be regarded as a kind of sacred text itself” (139) explicitly takes the idea of imitation and transforms it into creation. Schoenfeldt takes imitation to the level of courtly behavior. Despite the fact that in “The Thanksgiving” Herbert proclaims, “But how then shall I imitate thee, and/Copy thy fair, though bloody hand?” (ll. 15-16), Schoenfeldt still maintains that the speaker finds himself unable “to imitate his monarch or to offer appropriate thanks” (46). Although I find both of Pahlka’s and Schoenfeldt’s arguments compelling and valid, I also

want to suggest that in Herbert, the will refuses to surrender completely by repeatedly—and almost obsessively—articulating moments of consciousness in which the sense of the world comes out of appropriating and transforming, rather than simply reproducing, the word of God. Herbert is working with a biblical material that is familiar to us, but he appropriates and retells the stories of suffering and lament in a new language and with a radically new connotation.

## Chapter I:

### DIVINE LANGUAGE IN "THE SACRIFICE"

As I proposed in my introduction, while Herbert imitates the Word of God, and through that imitation attempts to mediate his relationship with God, he also changes the Word. Herbert's voice betrays a sense of relativity and uncertainty, while God's word is absolute. The speaker is someone who doubts, wonders, hesitates, suspects, mistrusts, and even disbelieves sometimes, while God is the narrator of objective facts who appears with absolute authority. I believe that this distinction is crucial in understanding Herbert's reality of opposition-submission, of protest-surrender, which becomes obvious at all levels in his poetry. The "if"-ness of Herbert's language, I am arguing, makes the speaker's refusal to surrender stronger, and ultimately infinite. In this chapter I will look at how the language of Christ in "The Sacrifice" contrasts with the "if"-language of the lines and stanzas I have quoted at the beginning of my introduction. At a general level, the opposition here at issue is between the "must" of God and the "if" of Herbert's speaker; at a deeper level the opposition is between ritual and interpretation, between the absolute law and the absolute intuitive perception.

Herbert opens *The Temple* with "The Sacrifice"—quite purposefully, I would argue. Only "The Church-Porch," and "The Altar" precede it. The language of "The Church-Porch" projects authority because it is the language of demand and rule. The language of "The Altar" splits the poem between God, as the creator of the altar, and man, whose heart, empowered by God, has to fit into that construction. In much the same way, the poems that follow "The Sacrifice" are an attempt to understand the assertiveness

of divine language, to investigate and approach it both as a powerful story and as a presentation of the objective reality of suffering. This particular poem has been a focus of opposing analysis. In a classical critical debate in the 1930s, Rosemond Tuve read "The Sacrifice" as a canonical poem with a clearly religious meaning. Tuve claimed that by reading the poem in accordance with the religious conventions and traditions of the seventeenth century she was remaining true to Herbert's intended meaning. Her argument focuses on the poems' ironies as representing contrasts and disproportions between God's actions and man's response to them. She insists that the most profound of these ironies is "man's wild misreading of the relation between the Creator and the creature" (49). In opposition to Tuve's "scholarly" reading, William Empson, her contemporary and also one of the leading new critics, offers a reading that refrains from pinpointing any certainty in the meaning of the poem and leaves space for double meanings and multiple levels of reading. I want to take those two views on "The Sacrifice" and suggest that Herbert excludes certainty because he sees religious conventions and traditions as a challenge to create a language that transcends those limits so as to become human. I agree with Tuve's insistence on rediscovering Herbert's biblical references, with her canonical understanding that Herbert saw poetry as a vehicle for metaphorizing the biblical story; I also empathize with Empson's constant search for double meanings, and persistent rediscovery of "the speed, isolation and compactness of Herbert's method" (231). Yet, I think that Herbert's theology surpasses Tuve's meticulous discussion of biblical references by making itself into a point of reference through creating a linguistic pattern of expression—a "must" language that has no mysteries and is measured by permanence and universality—which will be challenged

and argued in following poems. This, I believe, is unambiguous. By unsettling that referential language, I want to suggest, Herbert gains a freedom to use both biblical references and ambiguity as tools of conveying the uneasy reciprocity between a human and divine language.

In this opening sequence of *The Temple*, "The Sacrifice" culminates as the intense expression of God's Word and remains the one poem in which Christ is the only speaker throughout. He relates the story of his own suffering, abandonment and isolation: the only story in *The Temple* that has a pre-determined and familiar ending, that offers no hesitations, and that is paradoxically spoken with a fairly objective assurance by someone who is beyond objective reality. "The Sacrifice" is an exercise in condemnation, blame and disapproval. Clarke notes that "the dignity of the direct address, the . . . bare detail, and the stark stanza form throw emphasis on the saving truths to be assimilated inwardly" (80). That is, the mental experience is restrained and even precluded by the enumeration of assertive, forceful facts, but the process of writing and reading the poem becomes a process of bewildering the reader's consciousness. The reading and writing of the poem itself are the "other" language, the human language. In reading, the one who reads has to choose between Hebert's words and Christ's words, because the Word in "The Sacrifice" has both a divine and a human register. The reading and writing as actions transform the practicality of the poem's facts into interpretation. Thus interpretation, I would like to propose, becomes vital in understanding how Herbert juxtaposes human and divine language. Christ's story asserts authority: "they do wish me dead, / Who cannot wish, except I give them bread" (ll. 6-7), "They use that power against me, which I gave" (l. 11), "they seek me, as a thief / Who am the Way and Truth, the true relief" (ll. 37-38),

“Then they condemn me all with the same breath, / Which I do give them daily” (ll. 69-70). Tuve’s reading of those lines suggests “man’s blind misreading of the real” (68). I want to argue that these lines establish God’s identity not through committed deliberation, or contemplation, but through the power of storytelling, and that power is definitive because it relies on finite conclusions. Human language is a gift—at least, Herbert accepts it as gift—and as such it requires thoughtful contemplation; but divine language in “The Sacrifice” is a reminder of, not contemplation on, the worth of Passion. When Herbert’s speaker uses language to ponder and contemplate, he does so to escape discipline and order. For God, language is not a gift. Divine language cannot transcend order, nor can it be used for contemplation. What I want to suggest is that with Herbert, language functions also as identification. Herbert does not offer another version of Christ’s sacrifice retold with the voice of a different speaker. God is the narrator of objective facts, while for Herbert everything comes in a process of reflection and thereby becomes ambiguous, almost a creative imagination of the human rather than of the putatively objective “poet.”

In his preface to *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, Hegel states that “the divine life is in no doubt undisturbed identity and oneness with itself, which finds no serious obstacle in otherness and estrangement, and none in the surmounting of this estrangement” (81). Hegel’s philosophy explains Being as a process of “becoming another to itself, and thus developing explicitly into its own immanent content” (111). The content of Being establishes its existence first by negating it, and then by taking the negated, but evolved, content to be its own “determinate characteristic” (111). Herbert’s speaker moves through the same process of establishing a negative otherness; he does so



tragic love play-within-the-play performed for Hippolyta and Theseus as a testimony to the imagination and fantasy involved in art, stabs himself after seeing the bloody mantle of his beloved, thinking that she is dead. His statement is taken to be comical and nonsensical. It is, above all else, a performance, a form of art, a vision of the subjective imagination. Hamlet's speeches, too, participate in the same process of "naming" death. In his conversation with Horatio in the last scene of the play, Hamlet acknowledges his own death twice:

*I am dead*, Horatio. Wretched Queen, adieu!

...

Had I but time—as this fell sergeant Death  
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—  
But let it be. Horatio, *I am dead*,  
Thou liv'st. Report me and my cause aright  
To the unsatisfied.

...

O, *I die*, Horatio!

(italics mine 5.2.285-292)

The verbal gesture of announcing one's death invites no interpretation, only leaves the reader "unsatisfied," as Hamlet generously names those who will have to face Fortinbras as the new ruler, those who do not yet know his story of revenge. "But now I die" conceptualizes the inexpressible; it is beyond all objective reality that we know. When that becomes the case, only reading and writing the poem can further the process of aspiring to a meaningful and adequate language.

The Shakespearean flair of performance is certainly discernable in "The Sacrifice." The stanza that I quoted is interesting for two particular reasons: first, because of its last line, which is one of the two variations on "was ever grief like mine," and second, because of the transformation of Christ's "woe" into "man's weal." The latter manifests what I mean by "overcoming estrangement." The same process becomes

almost impossible for Herbert's human speaker present in the rest of the poem from *The Temple*. The speaker, but also Herbert himself, struggles with what Hegel names "the negative factor [which] appears in the first instance as a dissimilarity, as inequality, between ego and object" (97). The Christ of "The Sacrifice" comes to a point of closure without faltering between options of unconditioned loyalty and unconditioned freedom. For the writer of "The Sacrifice" those two possibilities create dissimilarities and inequalities; thus for the poet, overcoming "otherness" becomes a harder and almost impossible task. Christ also allows the mortal man to pronounce His death: "Only let others say when I am dead." In fact, Herbert's speaker never does. The authority to state that fact with confidence does not belong to man. God's request is impossible because he has already articulated his final word: "Never was grief like mine."

Contrary to long-established readings of "The Sacrifice," such as Mario DiCesare's argument that in this poem Christ's voice remains the only one we hear, Robert Watson proposes an implicit unification of voices in the last line. He argues that "the poet's own words plausibly unite across time with Christ's endless ones, which have all along been in a continuing present tense" (269). This reading comes closer to my general idea of language appropriation. However, I want to suggest that "Never was grief like mine" is Christ's response, rather than the speaker's response, to an impossible and unbearable request; it is a confirmation, in fact, of that impossibility. God requests submission; and even more than that, he requests that any meaning become contingent on divine language and divine actions. I believe that what Rosemond Tuve reads as "blind misreading of the real" is, in fact, a conscious resistance of the speaker to which God cannot make any other response but to express vulnerability. That, without doubt, makes

Herbert a bitter poet. The argument that this last line of “The Sacrifice” affirms Christ’s death by merging the voice of the human and the voice of the divine gives the speaker an authority that he simply does not have. To argue that Herbert’s speaker would betray his language by consenting to the finite and assertive “Never was grief like mine” means to ignore all other articulate pronouncements of “if”ness.

The other occasion on which the intensity of grief is not questioned comes in an alleged dialogue between Christ and God:

But, *O my God, my God!* why leav’st thou me,  
The son, in whom thou dost delight to be?  
*My God, my God—*

Never was grief like mine.

(ll. 213-216)

In this particular stanza human language remains excluded. For that reason, the last line here constitutes a refusal to address a human request. I would like to suggest that Watson’s comment on the unification of the poet’s words with the endless words of divinity becomes relevant at this instant. Within the context of “The Sacrifice,” this stanza can be read as either Christ addressing God, or as man addressing God. When Christ was put on the cross, he “cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ that is, ‘*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me*’” (Matt. 27:46). But I would also like to suggest that the poet, too, is the son who has been forsaken. The close parallel makes possible the argument of unification. God’s language translates itself into the language of the poet. As in the previous stanza, the affirmation of grief here is an affirmation of self-sufficiency. But the paradox is that in “The Sacrifice,” and for that matter in the whole of *The Temple* as well, Christ’s language is always an answer and is self-sufficient only as an authoritative reply. If we read the poem as a misreading

of the real, then we should also read it as a misreading of the Word's self-sufficiency:

"Never was grief like mine."

Thus "The Sacrifice" is a poem about the impossibility of responding properly to a language that is vividly and unbearably assertive, to words that do not attempt to pass beyond the present but intend to stay there as unchangeable entities. Empson discusses "The Sacrifice" as Herbert's doctrinal poem that "assumes, as does its theology, the existence of conflicts" (227). On a very obvious level, the conflict develops between Christ, as the tragic hero, and the crying, judging, unmerciful crowd, but I want to suggest that the conflict is also linguistic. Herbert's language is incapable of staying only in the present; it moves between options of the past and the future. The constant movement does not make his voice more authoritative but infuses it with an aura of mystery. The energy that comes from this linguistic motion clashes with the energy of the Word that seeks stability. In this stanza Herbert's speaker depicts a motion of the inner being: "why leav'st thou me, / The son, in whom thou dost delight to be?" In his study of Montaigne, Georges Poulet remarks that the soul "finds itself in the same confusion in the interior of the instant," where the instant "is the kingdom of the imperceptible" (45).<sup>7</sup> Herbert's speaker finds himself in the instant of the sacrifice, and in that instant he experiences a sense of total loss, and also sees himself as an entity in which God's delight is concentrated. While Christ depicts the occasions involved in the Passion, Herbert's speaker depicts transformations within those occasions.

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<sup>7</sup> In his essay "On the Inconsistency of Human Actions," first published in 1580, Montaigne argues that being can only be portrayed as a passage from one instant to another; thus being is, in fact, a "discontinuity of successive selves which are created by occasions" (44). George Poulet analyses Montaigne's essay in light of an infinite succession of unstable, unpredictable moments that are "isolated from exterior time" (13). He insists that Renaissance people, who kept the feeling that they "existed in all the reaches of space and duration," understood that they are "given no more than a moment in time, but each moment can be

As much as “The Sacrifice” is about the sacrifice of Christ, it is also about the sacrifice of the Word. God’s words are measured in blood: “Therefore my soul melts, and my heart’s dear treasure / Drops blood (the only beads) my words to measure” (ll. 22-23). For Herbert—unlike for Milton, who seeks to understand creation—every act is an act of painful sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> Herbert’s play with the image of Christ’s blood as ink also invites a reading of the image of the broken heart as a metaphor for a broken language. I want to propose that this metaphor articulates not only a failure of God’s language but also a space for a language beyond “measure.” Christ’s language does not defy “measure”; it invites “measure.” God’s Word is a construct; it constructs permanence. If Herbert’s speaker does not have the power to redeem Christ, he certainly has the power to redeem the Word. The drops “being tempered with a sinner’s tears / A balsam are for both the hemispheres / Curing all wounds but mine” (ll. 25-27). I want to take this reading a little further and argue that the above line is precisely the moment when God’s language slips into human language, when God’s language becomes insufficient in itself only. In order to become powerful, the Word, being measured by the drops of blood, needs to be appeased by a language that does not claim omnipotence. At this point space opens up for the ambiguity and uncertainty of human interpretative language. In “The

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one of illumination and fullness” (15). To apply this to Herbert’s poetry is to see how the speaker moves through all shades of changes, dissolves, diversifies, “absorbs all energies” (45).

<sup>8</sup> I would like to bring Milton’s poetry into this discussion because Milton like Herbert is preoccupied with religion and language. Milton’s and Herbert’s sources are Biblical. In *Remembering and Repeating: Biblical Creation in Paradise Lost* Regina Schwartz states firmly that Milton “was preoccupied with origins” but in *Paradise Lost* he becomes uncertain “that beginnings are accessible” (1). The creation stories in *Paradise Lost* are narrated by angels or reconstructed from memory but never recovered as they happen or by the creator himself; thus Raphael tells the story of the battle against Satan, and relates to Adam the account of the six days of creation, then Adam himself remembers the first impressions of his own creation. This gives Regina Schwartz reasons to argue that Milton “casts doubt on the ability of language to convey origins at all” (1). Herbert, on the other hand, is the poet of sacrifice, of pain, of sorrow. His concern with language is not so much with its incapacity to express that sorrow but with its capacity to resist divine authority.

Sacrifice” God’s words, in fact, do not address man directly; they tell about man. The word of man is the “world of sin, / The greater world o’th’ two; for that came in / By words” (ll. 205-207). The unexpected identification of the Word in “The Sacrifice” with both suffering and self-willed sin is repeated in other poems of *The Temple*. Language has to be sacrificed and redeemed. In his address to God in “Good Friday” Herbert reiterates the blood-ink metaphor:

Since blood is fittest, Lord, to write  
Thy sorrows in, and bloody fight;  
My heart hath store, write there, where in  
One box doth lie both ink and sin:

(ll. 21-24)

In Herbert’s theology human language cannot be anything else but an amalgam of “sinne” and “blood,” a conflict between the interpretative skills of man and the demanding nature of God. Yet for Herbert human language is a defiance against the “rules of reason, holy messengers,” “blessings beforehand, ties of gratefulness” (“Sin I,” ll. 4, 9); it becomes a part of the “one cunning bosom sin,” the pure voice of the self.

“The Sacrifice” offers another twist on the concept of storytelling, language, and the Word—silence. God is not only patient, but also silent at certain moments. In “The Sacrifice” Christ is extremely aware of the power that this silence gives him: “I answer nothing, but with patience prove / If stony hearts will melt with gentle love” (ll. 89-90). Silence is not the absence of language, but an even more powerful language that demands even stricter obedience. The silence of God makes him even more difficult to approach. The silence testifies to God’s omnipresence but also to humankind’s loneliness. Herbert’s speaker, like Herbert himself and the people “who pass by” (l. 1), cannot remain silent. They proclaim Christ’s teachings false, accuse him of blasphemy, “cry aloud still, Crucify” (l. 97), cry “Away, away, / With noises confused frightening the day”

(ll. 102-103). Christ's silence augments their cry, "Yet still they shout, and cry and stop their ears" (l. 105). Herbert's poetry does not tolerate moments of silence as Shakespeare's plays do. Herbert's speaker has become too involved with the world. His self-will has to be audible so as to be validated. In Hegelian terms, it has to move outside of its integrity, to counter itself in order to develop its content. Critics have argued that Herbert creates for himself an intimate world of seclusion, but yet this world is full of prayer, afflictions, sin; it is vocal. In that sense, the speaker's vociferousness can also be interpreted as a justification of guilt over the human incapacity to respond appropriately to the sacrifice of Christ. Christ's Divine will does not need any type of validation. I should propose that both readings target the mystery of Herbert's poetry as the mystery of language and its use to express a relationship with God and the world. Christ's silence in "The Sacrifice" creates a new space in which human language can be tested. If divine language is a language that requires no external validation and no naming, human language seeks to experience these same qualities and affirm itself through them.

While Herbert's words—as I will attempt to prove in the progress of this study—remain conditional and relative, Christ's language is absolute. In "The Sacrifice" that sense of finite absoluteness becomes expressed through "must." If Herbert's voice is an "if" voice, Christ's voice is a "must" voice. The distinction between these two voices, as simple as it is, underlies a fundamental notion in Herbert's poetry: man's opposition to God becomes the denial of the Word, but that denial is not the obliteration of a "must"-governed, yet spiritual world. Instead, the denial itself develops another Word, a new language which possesses levels of multiplicity. In "The Sacrifice" Herbert introduces an interesting interplay between words and actions: "Man stole the fruit, but I must climb

the tree” (l. 202), “for that came in / By words; but this by sorrow I must win” (ll. 206-207). In both situations God has to respond to man. In the first situation Christ alludes to the fallen man, the man of sin who has acted on his own will. “Man stole the fruit” expresses a definite fact; on the basis of that fact comes the conclusion—“I must climb the tree.” Christ claims that His “sorrow,” his sacrifice undoes what “came in by words.” Yet he himself must *use words* to communicate His “sorrow.” The “must” in the second line validates God’s action—the sacrifice of Christ. In both cases, however, “must” limits the freedom of human action and choice. Herbert’s speaker will restore that initial freedom through the virtue and power of “if.” For Herbert, language has the power to modify actions; it takes precedence over actions, and, in fact, annihilates their significance. In “The Sacrifice” God claims: “I, who am Truth, turn into truth their deeds” (l. 180). God’s language is the Truth, but its manifestation is “their deeds.” This merging of authorities supports my argument that Herbert appropriates language for his own end.

Before moving fully into the realm of “if,” I want to spend a little time discussing one final case of God’s affirmative, non-conditional language. “Redemption” follows “The Sacrifice” and is both ironic and daunting. In “Redemption” the speaker presents himself as the tenant “to a rich Lord” (l. 1). The tenant becomes bold enough to “make a suit” (l. 3) to his Lord. The irony comes in the last stanza when the tenant finds his Lord among thieves and murders instead of “in great resorts” (l. 10). Yet this moment also becomes extremely intimidating for the speaker because he witnesses—but does not pronounce—the death of his Lord. The speaker has already announced that his Lord is of “great birth” (l. 9). Herbert’s play with the metaphor of God as the Lord in possession of

land, of faith as the loyalty of a tenant, of the Sacrifice as a murder establishes a ground on which events, concepts and values can be sharply identified. The allegorical nature of the narrative transforms “Redemption” into a poem of contemplation in which reality “considered in allegorical terms . . . is both elevated and devalued” (Benjamin 175). At this point I want to come back to Walter Benjamin who develops a complete theory of allegory in his 1925 *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. He claims that the allegory of the seventeenth century “is not convention of expression, but expression of convention” (175). While the symbol attempts to reconcile contradictions and to represent “organic totality” (176), Benjamin defines allegory as allowing those contradictions to play out. Allegory itself is a fragment, a ruin; it is “in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (Benjamin 178). The essential character of “Redemption,” like the essential character of allegory, is the “schema,” and as “a schema it is an object of knowledge” (Benjamin 184). But as a schema it also constitutes an entity, a totality that has meaning in itself. Benjamin became interested in allegory because of that inherent contradiction: allegory is at the same time a totality and a fragment; it describes both the “transience of things” and “rescue[s] them for eternity” (223). The language of the divine in Herbert’s poetry expresses a totality that seeks resolutions, and as such it is schematic, namely, allegorical; the language of the poet in “Redemption” and “The Sacrifice” creates no new truths but empowers the expression of irresolvable conflicts, and as such is allegorical as well. Divine language needs the allegorical, fragmented structure of human language to support its own vulnerable integrity. The two languages resist each other but they unite across time. In fact, the point of unification is exactly the

point at which the poet manages to appropriate God's language and make it his own as happens in "Redemption."

In "Redemption" Herbert hardly leaves any room for active interpretation, either on the side of the speaker or on the side of the reader, thus taking away from the speaker, and the poet, any claim to authority. We know the answers to the questions that the poem might pose: the tenant seeks a "new small-rented lease" because he is dissatisfied, disappointed, discontented; the Lord dies among thieves and murderers because, as we already know from "The Sacrifice," he has been misunderstood and betrayed by the very people to whom he gives daily breath. The narrative becomes that simple, thus glossing over the identities of a God and a human who are involved in a dialogical structure. Yet what interests me most in "Redemption" is the last line which puts an end to the narrative: ". . . there I him espied, / Who straight, Your suit is granted, said, and died" (ll. 13-14). The canonical reading of this ending, proposed by critics such as Robert Watson and Rosemond Tuve, encourages an understanding of God's death as confirmation of human life and rescue from eternity. While I certainly agree with this reading, I want to emphasize again the language of "Your suit is granted." It is the same as the language of "The Sacrifice"—non-conditional and assertive—only with a positive connotation. I want to argue that at this moment the narrative stops, as it does in "The Sacrifice," because the speaker only reports a fact without introducing a motive. Yet we are invited to explore a whole set of connections and associations. Thus, I should propose, divine language has already dissociated itself from the material certainty of historical facts and has turned them into a narrative that needs to be explored.

But despite this invitation for further dwelling and exploration, divine language remains a “must” language. It possesses the power of the storytelling and exerts it over the poet’s attempts at contemplation. Divine language is also a silent language whose allegorical meanings are schematic and fragmented at the same time. The poet has to resist the silence and the supremacy of “must.” While this type of divine language determines the boundaries of an “undisturbed identity,” Herbert’s speaker has to wrestle with a linguistic “other” without an expectation of closure.

**Chapter II:**  
**THE VIRTUE OF “IF”**

“If” does not really have significance, or virtue, on its own; it is both anything and nothing in Herbert’s poetry. It remains “nothing” as long as one reads Herbert’s poetry as strictly religious, but it is the focal point that binds together the multiple faces of the poet. “If” shapes the speaker’s susceptibility, apprehension, adoration of God, but mostly, his awareness of a burning, severe, uncompromising self, which partakes in the unfolding of a diversified being. This chapter moves away from the discussion of God’s language and launches forth into an attempt to uncover and understand the power behind the discontinuity, the disquiet, and the inconsistency of human language. I am arguing in this chapter that “if” becomes not simply a response to God’s language but undertakes the function of creating the personality of the speaker by remaking his individuality linguistically, namely, against the Word. Thus “if” turns the human word into a place, makes it geographical and physical; it is the word that allows Herbert to create private spaces within which to speak, to play with Biblical texts to express human experiences, and, not least, to make choices. Herbert’s “if” is a place, but it is also a moment in time. It catches the moment of doubt, but also of phenomenological consciousness. Namely, the “if”-moment and the “if”-place are the points of “in-between”: “A wonder tortured in the space / Betwixt this world and that of grace” (“Affliction IV,” ll. 5-6). In *The Temple* Herbert’s speaker finds himself unable to say what is expected of him. The poet’s firm declaration in “Affliction I,” “let me not love thee, if I love thee not” (l. 66),

articulates an ultimate rejection of a fixed language that describes a fixed relationship with God. Because Herbert's "if" presupposes an opponent, a powerful "master" whose distance and isolation encourage an even deeper sense of sinfulness within the speaker, and because it participates in a cause-effect relationship, "if" develops into a strategy. I will expand this argument further on, but I want to emphasize at this point the conditional nature of "if" which triggers a reversal of power roles. "If" gives Herbert's speaker the power to make agreements with God. While "The Sacrifice" reveals a God for whom everything "is" and who can stand alone in his intensity of actions, the human speaker in the poems that follow "The Sacrifice" engages us in the urgency and doubt of "as if" and "like." The linguistic insecurity of "if-ness" intensifies life and impels the speaker to risk more and to go further. Herbert's "if" seeks to make God's understanding of us more approachable; it is his reconciliation with God; it provides the terms on which the speaker becomes ready to negotiate. The "if" gives him the freedom to respond to the Word, thus making him a responsive rather than an objective storyteller. In *The Temple*, God lacks the capacity for such freedom.

I want to discuss a range of Herbert's poems from *The Temple* and trace how the stories they tell lead to "if"-moments and "if"-places. I am not seeking patterns that were allegedly planned in developing sequences; instead, I want to uncover neglected aspects of Herbert's language which register the type of his awareness of God. Herbert's reinterpretation of Biblical texts through poetry and poetic expression gives meaning to the other "Word," the human word that has become fallen. He enacts it in every poem, thus encouraging its persistence as a construction of the perception.

Herbert praises God; and God is part of the new perceptual construction that Herbert builds in his religious poetry. Herbert's speaker attempts to imitate God and finds each time that absolute imitation is impossible, and absolute praise is inadequate. This canonical reading of Herbert has been developed by Lois Martz, Rosemond Tuve, Michael Shoenfeldt. In fact, those critics of Herbert who insist on the primacy of his theology seem to agree that the relationship between speaker and God in *The Temple* is elucidated by the human incapacity to deal with God's passion. Yet Empson and Michael Watson, who see beyond Herbert's religion as something more than a set of presumed dogmatic certainties, have searched in the processes of imitation and praise for some kind of grace. I want to suggest in this chapter that the dignity of Herbert's poetry comes with a fervent linguistic defiance of a persistent and compelling obligation to imitate and praise God. I would not deny that Herbert's speaker finds his capacities for praise and imitation insufficient, but so are his capacities to say what he is expected to say and in the language that he is supposed to use. The praise, not always without a touch of personal vanity, becomes the price for the right of the uneasy self to declare its integrity.

"The Thanksgiving," which many critics consider to be the answer to "The Sacrifice," is certainly a poem of grief and praise to the "King of wounds" (l. 3), but it is also a poem of interpretation that seeks to achieve meaning. "The Thanksgiving" both asks the fundamental question of imitation and answers it with what seems to be the only possible resolution—if/when you give to me, I will give to others:

If thou do give me wealth, I will restore,  
                   All back unto thee by the poor.  
 If thou dost give me honour, men shall see,  
                   The honour doth belong to thee.

I will not marry; or, **if** she be mine,  
 She and her children will be thine.  
 My bosom friend, **if** he blaspheme thy Name,  
 I will tear thence his love and fame.

(ll. 19-26)

**If** thou shalt give me wit, it shall appear,  
**If** thou hast giv'n it me, 'tis here.

(ll. 43-44)

The value of “if” is its power to bring into being what is lacking, what is not present, or possible. Out of that power the speaker in “The Thanksgiving” restores wealth, honor, love and chastity, respect, wit/poetry. What I mean by “restore” is exactly that quality of reciprocating and communicating to God in language the essence and spirit of the human love for the divine unity. Michael Watson points out that despite the apt ways in which the speaker will repay all the blessings, “each response falls two syllables short of repaying its metrical debt” (289). This acute observation confirms the critics’ theory of insufficiency with only one major discrepancy—the blessings are fictional after all; they have not yet been bestowed; they have remained in the domain of “if,” and so has the credit that the speaker wishes to take for his pertinent actions. Herbert’s use of “if” opens the reader to perceive and access that which the human tendency to shun and distance would otherwise close up. In “The Thanksgiving” Herbert’s speaker proposes imitation of God’s actions, not of God’s Word. For Herbert the whole issue of imitation stands as the dividing point between divinity and art. Imitation in Herbert’s poetry, Schoenfeldt and John Wall argue, is the transformation of praise into power.<sup>9</sup> Imitation in Herbert’s poetry, I want to argue, is a mimetic imitation because it expands the concepts it imitates and transforms the poems into the essence of those concepts. I find Paul Ricouer’s

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<sup>9</sup> Herbert held the position of public orator at Cambridge from 1620 to 1628. This gave him an opportunity—in fact, required him—to praise the authority of the monarch. In *Prayer and Power* Michael Schoenfeldt argues that in his orations Herbert praised the monarch for qualities he did not possess “in the

interpretation of mimesis suggestive of what Herbert seeks to achieve: “Word artisans . . . invent the ‘as if’ which comes to be meaningful in terms of praxis [; that is,] a mimetic work does not equate itself with something already given but produces what it imitates.”<sup>10</sup> Herbert explicitly seeks to imitate God’s grace, capacity for giving, honor, but the poem itself becomes an object of grace, and an enactment of poetic wit. If one reads carefully, one will realize that God is not the only object of prayer in “The Thanksgiving.” For Herbert every act is an act of sacrifice. “The Thanksgiving” is no exception: in giving back to the “poor,” offering one’s child, or renouncing a friend, Herbert imitates Christ’s sacrifice, and then praises sacrifice as he praises God.

What becomes most interesting to me in that sequence of “ifs” is how Herbert makes reality perceptible in language: “If thou hast giv’n it [wit] me, ‘tis here” (l. 44). If God has breathed into me the creative power to write poetry, Herbert contends, these words are the creative act itself. “If” has the ability to produce, not merely reproduce or imitate, the tangible reality of earthly concerns because it goes beyond the imaginable sphere of reality from which it originates. God’s presence, Herbert’s speaker argues, is in human words that are set free. “If” liberates the language in Herbert’s poetry by allowing the speaker to respond to God *as if* he is actually able to respond, to behave *as if* he had a choice between loving and not loving God, to criticize God *as if* His love could fail. This empowerment becomes the burden of self-expression, of the incessant Renaissance demand for individuality. With “if” Herbert’s speaker dissociates himself from the fixed certainty of the all-encompassing Word, and undertakes an adventure into speech that refuses to conform to expectations. The empowerment of divine language, on the other

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hope that [men of authority] will then try to live up to the terms of the praise,” but also that those indirect attempts to manipulate authority gave Herbert “a model for his own authority” (34ff).



because of its incorporation of two different modes of speech: “as if” and “I am here.” Herbert is painfully aware of his writing within God’s language. It is no coincidence that in “The Thanksgiving” the speaker echoes biblical language twice. The first such passage alludes to Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Shall I weep blood? why, thou hast wept such store / That all thy body was one door” (ll. 5-6).<sup>11</sup> A second passage echoes Christ’s word on the cross quoted in “The Sacrifice”: “*My God, my God, why dost thou part from me?*”<sup>12</sup> (l. 9). Yet before the end of the poem he is ready to declare “I am here.” The poet first creates a private space by using and recreating “God’s works.” He then *names* that space by establishing his existence within it. In its assertive overtones “I am here” belongs to divine language, but in “The Thanksgiving” it is human because it has been freed by the “as if” and because it remains hidden, not perceived.

Thus the poet writes and argues within God’s language, but transforms it by challenging its objectivity and by turning every word from fact into evidence. The affirmation of “I am here” is Herbert’s reversal of Abraham’s “Here I am.”<sup>13</sup> The speaker’s identification with Abraham relates to the context of the thanksgiving and allows the poet to participate in the actions of God which will bring him rest. But “The Thanksgiving” is not about God’s “rest,” it is about human “restlessness.” The speaker confirms that his “I am here” shall pass unnoticed, and his presence will remain unperceived. Herbert’s reality of “I am here” counters Abraham’s reality of “Here I am.” While Abraham speaks in a fundamentally unknown reality, which only gives clues as to

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<sup>11</sup> Before the betrayal and arrest in Gethsemane, Christ prays in the garden: “And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44).

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>13</sup> In Genesis 22, The Sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham answers three times “Here I am”: God calls him to test his faith and asks for the offering of his son, Isaac; Isaac calls his father and asks about the lamb for the offering; the Angel of the Lord calls Abraham and confirms his faith.

how to imagine the experiences of the speaker, the poet speaks in a reality that is established and validated by a language of his own. Herbert's new vocabulary is private and arguable. Herbert's poetry, I suggest, proclaims the understanding that it is the language and the vocabulary of the coming-to-being self, rather than the urgent immediacy and persistence of that self, that separates irreconcilably the speaker from God. The poet can invent selves that will be able to defy all discontents and breaks of custom, as he does in "Love III" or "The Collar." In both poems the speaker concedes to God's entreaties. However, the poet cannot defy, neither does he want to, the language inherent in the Renaissance awareness that the period of the Reformation was, in Burckhardt's terms, "an escape from discipline."<sup>14</sup>

The escape from discipline does not mean chaos in Herbert's world; it creates an ordered space to which we are drawn by anguish and sacrifice. Herbert makes a "home" of it for himself in which God participates only as a recipient of human words. "If" locates that home outside of the "world of woe" ("Home" l. 33), a world that he "must get up and see" ("Home" l. 34). Herbert's critics rarely approach "Home" in their discussions of *The Temple* poems, and their readings of the poem range from arguments on Petrarchan elements to elaborations on the yearning for home as the yearning for death.<sup>15</sup> While the readings encompass the larger meanings of the poem, I think that they

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<sup>14</sup> qtd. in Barzun, Jacques, *From Dawn to Decadence*, p.21.

<sup>15</sup> In *Transformations of the Word: Spenser, Herbert, Vaughan*, John Wall traces connections between the language of the lovers in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and the language of the speaker in "Home." Wall's parallels center primarily in the first stanza of the poem: "Herbert's speaker can insist that his Lord come, for 'my head doth burn, my heart is sick' ("Home." ll. 1-2), while Astrophil can describe his response to Stella's inaccessibility in similar terms: "My mouth doth water, and my breast doth swell, / My tongue doth itch, my thoughts in labour be" (Sonnet 37, ll. 1-2)" (229ff). While this comparison provides a different perspective on Herbert's language, John Wall does not take the argument any further. Robert Watson, on the other hand, takes a very literal approach to the poem and talks about "home" as the "locale of perpetual reunion, and so there is nothing to be feared from an apparent ending of the worldly and poetic journeys" (277).

fail to address the last stanza in which language and reason become suddenly intertwined by a peculiar play of the words “stay”/pray and “come.” “Home” starts with the contemplations of a man sick at heart over God’s “deferrings” in the coming of “my Redeemer dear” (“Home” l. 25). The poem breaks up naturally at the point where “if” appears for the first time and the poet moves into explaining that, in fact, God’s love has failed and has changed:

He did, he came: O my Redeemer dear,  
 After all this canst thou be strange?  
 So many years baptized, and not appear?  
**As if thy love could fail and change.**  
 (ll. 25-28)

In fact, the last line locates a space within which the speaker can act **as if** God’s love has failed and changed. The split between the short reflections on the distance of the divine and then the descriptions of the “weary world” (l. 37) implies that the use of “if” reverses the order and structure of the narratives in Herbert’s poetry, and sabotages any type of meaningful closure. It sets a standard for a linguistic instability which enables the human language of the poet to represent alternatives, options, variety, namely, to act against expectations. In that sense, *in* language, the poet aspires to regain freedom and creativity. Herbert echoes this capacity of human language in the very last stanza of the poem when he confirms that poetic human language breaks free from all divine demands: “And ev’n my verse, when by the rhyme and reason / The word is, *Stay*, says ever, *Come*” (ll. 75-76).<sup>16</sup> Although Herbert does not apply “if” directly in this particular stanza, he formulates a theory of human language which contends that language functions independently of divine logic or poetic rules. The human word is a vehicle of the

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<sup>16</sup> In his notes to The Oxford Authors edition of George Herbert and Henry Vaughan, Frank Kermode explains that “stay” is intended to rhyme with “pray”: “Come dearest Lord, pass not this holy season,

transforming, coming-into-being spiritual self, rather than a replica of truths whose meaning is expressed through powerful, structured narratives. Thus human language creates a “home” for the poet by appropriating and rewriting divine language: instead of “stay,” the word becomes “come,” instead of “must,” the word is “if.”

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I have talked about “if” as a concept of space, but it is also a concept of time. Herbert’s speaker changes and makes himself as he passes through moments of anger, rebellion, sacrifice, concession, even dissent. George Poulet insists that the profound change after the Middle Ages was the new perception of God as “the indwelling power” that renewed the continual existence of being; this meant that there were “no longer creations of permanence . . . but rather from top to bottom in the universal scale a . . . vivifying force which sustained the universe . . . only in its becoming” (8). Herbert writes within that historical understanding, and the constant flux of modes and dispositions in his poetry reflects that awareness. I want to argue that the poet creates a series of “if”-moments for the speaker in *The Temple*. As a moment in time “if” becomes a moment of choice, and for that reason it is a point of intersection of alternatives and a state of being in-between options. Herbert’s speaker makes decisions, proposes to take actions; linguistically, he expresses those moments of hesitation in “if” language. “If” is also a moment of self-affirmation when both the speaker and the poet truly discover themselves as entities that are contingent upon but also independent of God’s Word. Through language, but also *in* language, if we use Benjamin’s terminology, Herbert’s speaker deals with the world and approaches God.

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/ My flesh and bones and joints do **pray**: / And ev’n my verse, when by the rhyme and reason / The word is, *Stay*, says ever, *Come*.

The moments of choice in which language takes crucial part move outside of the poem itself and become questions to the reader. Herbert manages to transpose those moments of doubt to the reader, and thus, in actuality, relieve the speaker of any active responsibility of having made a choice, or of having taken an action. The literal use of “if,” or the poetic invention of “as if” situations, serves to reinforce the sense of the poem as incessantly eluding resolution. “The Collar” is a poem that uses no “ifs,” but its powerfully rebellious language works within “as if” situations. The poem has been widely discussed by Herbert’s critics for the way it first affirms and then denies an ideology of rebellion. It becomes interesting for my study precisely because of its multiple faces and the instances of doubt and hesitation that it introduces by having to maneuver between possibilities of love and disagreement with God. In fact, doubt would probably be the last element a reader notices in “The Collar”—a poem that speaks loud and most explicitly about the speaker’s disillusionment: “I struck the board, and cried, No more. / I will abroad” (ll. 1-2). Thus begins a series of accusations, a set of images—harvest, thorn, blood, cordial fruit, wine, corn—that rely directly on biblical narratives to produce meaning. As much as “The Collar” is indebted to those biblical narratives, what Herbert offers at the beginning becomes almost an anti-representation of the self. He offers a description of a hostile world in which the words that name him, and his Lord in the last two lines of the poem, become the moment of choice. But before he reaches that moment, the speaker has to affirm control over his circumstances, to seek “as if” resolutions that will be questioned, but not necessarily completely rejected, at the end. After a succession of firm, and rather vainly bold, statements of disappointment, Herbert introduces the first moment of disbelief and doubt: “Have I no bays to crown it? / No

flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted? / All wasted?" (ll. 14-16). The speaker starts questioning the rewards for his efforts, the reciprocation to his faith. Herbert puts the speaker in a biblical narrative—the story of Christ being tempted by the devil. For the speaker the resolution seems to come with an easy reply: "Not so, my heart: but there is fruit, / And thou hast hands" (ll. 17-18). But this closure in itself becomes problematic. The speaker suddenly becomes *as if* the devil. This moving away from the personal and individual puts the speaker in a position *as if* direct confrontation with God can be actual. Herbert's speaker chooses to speak as if from without by using "thou" instead of the direct "I" as he does in the strongly accusatory lines of the first part of "The Collar." The firm separation establishes a new level of relating to God in which distancing determines a relationship that is not necessarily negative but still allows the speaker the freedom to act, as if action were possible. This poetic "as if" situation is also the moment when the human word literally becomes "fallen," not only because of Herbert's introduction of the image of the devil, but also because of the knowledge of evil and the judgmental overtone that the preceding lines carry.<sup>17</sup> "If," both as a concrete word and as a specific circumstantial situation in time, is the contact zone between the human language that is fallen, that carries the knowledge of disillusionment, and the language of God that has the power to create and name. I want to suggest that Herbert's poetry opens the discussion and seeks to explicate the paradox of the contact zone, in which naming and knowledge

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<sup>17</sup> In his juxtaposition of the language of man and the language of God, Benjamin makes a distinction between two types of human language: one that is still unfallen, "paradisiacal" (71), the language of Adam before the expulsion from Paradise, and one that is fallen, the language of knowledge. For Benjamin "the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic, in order to become expressly, as it were externally, magic" (71). I want to suggest that this formula remains applicable to Herbert's rhetorical poetics because it seeks to understand how the language that has lost its intactness and has stepped out of its naming power has, in fact, retained its magic.



whether we want to have a poem that is fierce and wild, confused and self-defeating, or whether we want an affirmation of faith.<sup>19</sup>

I find Wall's argument extremely persuasive as far as it takes us. It confirms the moment of "if" as a moment of hesitation, in-betweenness and choice. I might add, however, that Herbert knows that there is an alternative to the answer "*My Lord*," but that alternative seems unspeakable unless it is spoken in the fallen human language. Herbert finds this option unsatisfactory; in order to overcome that shortcoming of the human language, he seemingly undermines his own statements by infusing them with doubt and equivocation. Namely, the "if"-ness of the moment, the doubt that it implies, translates into human language what is otherwise inexpressible. Herbert's struggle with the moment of choice is precisely the struggle with the inexpressible. To resolve this problem, he creates a divine speaker, as he does in "The Sacrifice," where divine language conceptualizes the inexpressible: "But now I die" (l. 249). In "The Collar" the divine speaker remains unidentified and only contingent upon the speaker himself. In fact, as Wall suggests, there is the possibility that no such divine speaker exists. For that reason, the moment of uncertainty and choice in "The Collar" can only be expressed in human language; the speaker's moment of hesitation—should he listen to the voice, or should he ignore it—becomes part of the contact zone at the point at which the voice touches upon the sacredness of naming the poet as "child," and God as "My Lord."

Herbert reenacts this pattern of seeking possibilities and taking the moment of choice outside of the poem itself in the Williams Manuscript version of "Love." The moment of "if" as the moment of choice invites the reader to participate in a rhetorical

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<sup>19</sup> See John Wall's discussion of Herbert's use of language in "The Collar" in *Transformations of the Word* p.208ff.

discourse that pleads for changes but lacks the power to act on them. What becomes even more intriguing is the persistent judgmental undertone that Hebert implies as he leads the reader through the poem to the final stage of having to choose.<sup>20</sup> Yet that undertone is inevitably censored by the understanding that within the contact zone of “if,” the possibilities of response, interpretation, and even choice itself, are numerous. “Love” begins with a reiteration of the uneasy, almost impossible relationship with God: “Thou art too hard for me in Love: / There is no dealing with thee in that art” (ll. 1-2).<sup>21</sup> The reason for the failure, as the poet explicates, is the uselessness of any efforts to “prove / Something that may be conquest on my part” (ll. 4-5). The language of the poem maneuvers and gets complicated as the speaker provides examples of the dimensions within which his actions have failed: purity and grace, praise and rest. Herbert sets up the scene for a number of discourses going on at the same time: between the poet and a supposed divine speaker, between the speaker’s actions and the actions of God, between the speaker and the reader, as a listener. Within those discourses, however, we can only hear the language of the speaker. This fallen human language provides the context for all of the discourses because it possesses the multiplicity that God’s language rejects. Yet, for Herbert, multiplicity is not necessarily negative, as it would be for Benjamin. Multiplicity is the function of human language that allows Herbert to explore all possibilities of relating to God.

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<sup>20</sup> In discussing the meaning of the Fall in terms of language, Benjamin argues that “in exchange for the immediacy of name that was damaged by [the Fall], a new immediacy arises: the magic of judgment, which no longer rests blissfully in itself” (72). Herbert’s “The Collar,” but also “Love,” specifically the last stanza, explicates how fallen human language can be judgmental.

<sup>21</sup> “The Reprisal,” which immediately follows “The Thanksgiving,” has a similar opening: “I have considered it, and find / There is no dealing with thy mighty passion” (ll. 1-2).

The multiplicity is kept until the very last stanza when Herbert introduces the element of choice:

Let me but once the conquest have  
 Upon the matter, 'twill thy conquest prove:  
 If thou subdue mortality,  
 Thou dost no more than doth the grave:  
 Whereas if I o'ercome thee and thy Love,  
 Hell, Death and Devil come short of me.  
 (ll. 19-24)

The speaker admits the essential paradox of the poem: his own success and winning only testifies to God's success, and thus the conflict that the choice of the word "conquest" suggest has no closure and is ultimately irreconcilable. But Herbert takes this a step further and offers a contract to the speaker, to the reader and to God. In this particular poem Herbert's "if" stretches not only to a moment of human choice, but also, at least in an "as if" circumstance, to a moment of divine choice. In this way, Herbert further validates the concept of "if" as a contact zone within which the poet can have the freedom to address God with the same language he would use to address man. At this point, having read the poem, the reader knows that winning the "conquest" probably proves nothing, but Herbert does not take this option away. If God allows the speaker and the reader to win by giving them enough moments in time to prove their worthiness, then they would lose by choice. If the speaker overcomes the demands of Love, then he can claim not only the knowledge but also the authority of evil. This last choice shifts the position of the speaker from being in God's grace to being God's opponent; namely, the speaker, but also the reader, has to evaluate how fair the invitation seems. To make any of the choices that Herbert's language propose means to agree to participate in the discourses that he outlines and to adopt a language that is not only radical in its openness but also asks for a bold definition of identity. If the language of "The Sacrifice" is the

language of instruction through admonition, the language of those last lines in “Love” makes a niche for a language of instruction through choice. It teaches how to respond to Love, that is, to God’s Word as well, because the language of this response will have implications on the individual within the community.

In this process of learning Herbert never forgets to insist on self-affirmation. He explicitly develops a poetry of the self and seeks to articulate the sense of its pure determination, and thus to present it as adequate. Herbert chooses conflict and combat as the context for the proof of this adequateness. But humility is certainly not a part of that context, or of the “if” contact zone. In fact, Herbert’s “if” requires a commitment to the self before any other commitment. His poetry attempts to explicate that this type of commitment incorporates, rather than isolates, God. “Artillery” is the poem that brings together this heightened sense of “I” and the understanding of “if” as a function of self-affirmation:

As I one ev’ning sat before my cell,  
 . . .  
 I, who had heard music in the spheres,  
 . . .  
 But I have also stars and shooters too,  
 . . .  
 Then we are shooters both, . . .  
 (ll. 1, 9, 17, 25)

My point is that part of the power of human language comes from Herbert’s understanding that the self needs to adopt an essential language of the self. Those first stanza lines set up the framework of the personal experience of relating to God as an equal in a “combat” (26). “We” in the last stanza both addresses an invitation to God and responds to God’s challenge at the beginning: “*Do as thou usest, disobey, / Expel good motions from thy breast, / Which have the face of fire, but end in rest*” (ll. 6-8). This

building up of “I”-s participates in a recognition of what the self can become as it recognizes the role of its language. The speaker’s response cannot be an easy one and as with other poems it cannot simply be a concession, or submission. He chooses to answer with an “if” language that cannot invoke the promise as binding:

. . . But I would parley fain:  
Shun not my arrows, and behold my breast.  
Yet if thou shunnest, **I am thine**:  
I must be so, **if I am mine**.  
(ll. 27-30)

What seems to be a merging of “thine” and “mine” is in fact a clear distinction between the position of the speaker and the position of God. The speaker promises God obedience, but immediately renounces full responsibility for that choice. “If I am mine” enhances the value that the speaker puts on himself as an individual who can overcome the negative “otherness” and be a coherent unity.<sup>22</sup> The use of “if” also presupposes the negative option of “I am mine,” which makes the speaker unworthy. Thus Herbert forces the speaker, and the reader for that matter, to the point of self-examination that requires self-affirmation. Herbert’s speaker is still in-between those options, but the language that he uses transforms the passive witness of shooting stars to a “shooter” himself. The speaker names himself as a “shooter” and thus becomes “his own.”

“If” has the virtue of creating comfortable spaces for human experiences and looking at options that correlate to different levels of relationship with God. When Herbert uses language that translates into “as if” situations, he grants freedom to the speaker to act freely and leaves the choices offered to him open-ended. Human language is fallen, but in its fallen state it seeks ways to respond to the Word in a meaningful way yet keep its integrity as human language. “If” charts the creation of a contact zone within

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<sup>22</sup> See the discussion on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* in Chapter I.

which doubt and ambiguity about language are acceptable to the speaker, the reader and God. The way the speaker operates and speaks within that contact zone has an immediate bearing upon his position within a community of people for whom God constitutes the major reference point. The virtue of "if" becomes primarily the virtue of the self because of their mutual validation.

### Chapter III: THE STRATEGY OF “IF”

Despite its abstractness and its overtones of doubt, hesitation and uncertainty, “if” is a strategic human word. It describes a cause-effect relationship within which the speaker’s choices in the poem are contingent upon previous choices and divine response, and human actions come as a consequence of the actions taken by a divine speaker. The poet perceives the divine speaker as one who remains in constant opposition and to whom words should be communicated in circumstances of conflict. Although Herbert’s critics have offered eloquent arguments that his language exerts power and seeks to establish authority over the language of the divine speaker, I want to add that “if” enables human language to be communicable. In its capacity to communicate the essential being of the human speaker in Herbert’s poems—self-affirmation, resistance, confusion—language becomes a celebration of the human word, which generates an original story of the self and thus provides an inner space within which all of the poets’ contemplations and expostulations are possible. The strategy of “if” is to rewrite the stories that the speaker already knows in a way that makes them accessible to experience. Thus Herbert encourages the reader to grasp the humanity of the speaker’s voice beyond theological dogma.

In “The Flower” the persistence of writing recapitulates the power of language as the key to communicating and expressing “all” (l. 21).<sup>23</sup> Herbert cannot envision any

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<sup>23</sup> “We say amisse, / This or that is: / Thy word is all, if we could spell” (ll. 19-21). I have quoted the full line in the group of quotations at the beginning of the Introduction.

other word except for “all,” to encapsulate his understanding of life as meaningful within the frames of a medium of communicating the self.<sup>24</sup> “The Flower” opens with a personal, spiritual experience, which Herbert chooses to explicate, as he does in many other occasions, using “if”: “As if there were no such cold thing” (l. 7). Herbert’s strategy in using “if” is to open, rather than close, possibilities for personal interpretation of the experience he had offered. The line is baffling because we have the awareness that there *is*, in fact, “such cold thing” as “snow,” or “grief.” I want to suggest that the conditional clause serves not simply as a reminder, but reaches out to discover the conceptual frames of human language within which it can be creative. In a poem that follows Herbert’s deliberations on “if” as choice and doubt<sup>25</sup>, Herbert comes back confident: “And now in age I bud again, / After so many deaths I live and write; / And relish versing” (ll. 36-39). In “The Flower” the poet reaches the balance point where language necessitates itself. The conflicts and uncertainties of his previous verse are lessened by his awareness that the language he has is his only chance of conveying meaning. “The Flower” celebrates God’s “returns” (l. 2) that infuse the speaker with “recovered greenness” (l. 9), but it also celebrates the verse of the poet. Herbert relates the story of a poet whose efforts to write have made his language stronger, “growing and groaning thither” (l. 25). The poet-speaker comes to the realization that his relationship with God and the Word announces itself in moments with language:

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<sup>24</sup> In the essay on language, Benjamin explains this existence without language as “an idea” (62). He reiterates in prose the notion of language as “all”: “The existence of language, however, is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression in which language is always in one sense or another inherent, but with absolutely everything” (62). My implication here is that in Herbert’s world, language as probably the one meaningful way to engage in a relationship with God and the universe takes precedence over discussions of the inadequacy of the speaker to respond, or arguments of exercising power.

But while I grow in a straight line,  
 Still upwards bent, as if heaven were mine own,  
 Thy anger comes, and I decline  
 (ll. 29-31)

The traditional reading of those lines has seen “a seed of sin” in Herbert’s use of the phrase “as if heaven were mine own,” a certain type of confidence that may be thought to rise to “the sin of pride.”<sup>26</sup> The only “sin of pride” seems to me to be the poet’s confidence that his human language can participate in the contact zone and be as eloquent and gracious as the Word itself. The ability to locate the experience of the power of language as a divine experience shifts the sense of being into a whole new level of relating to God. In writing, and more specifically, in “versing,” as Herbert clarifies in the stanza immediately following the lines I quoted, human language can sound as if it is divine language. Herbert does not need the mediation of the incarnate Word, the Word made flesh in Christ, in order to communicate adequately with the divine speaker. Herbert practices his language persistently, growing “in a straight line” as a poet. Only in that persistent process of writing, Herbert manages to keep his words alive and participating in a discourse with a divine audience.

A poem like “The Flower” cannot but reject the idea of surrendering language. It articulates the human struggle to retain it. Herbert, the poet and the priest of the Church of England, believes firmly that “Thy word is all, if we could spell” (l. 21). He knows that language is the key to communicating oneself to God. Herbert is not asking the reader to accept the fact that we cannot spell, but to understand that there is a fundamental and very dynamic relationship between language and truth. Humans “say

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<sup>25</sup> I have shown in the discussions of “Affliction I” and “Affliction IV” in Chapter II that by purposefully using the conditionality of “if” Herbert makes possible a radical dissent from God.

<sup>26</sup> See James White’s discussion of “The Flower” in *“This Book of Starres”*: *Learning to Read George Herbert*, pp. 242-249.

amiss / This or that is,” namely, human speakers may make mistakes in using language because they lack true understanding. The word “spell” reiterates the idea of correctness in writing, but it also emphasizes a painful awareness that language is an active process of learning that requires full will. “Spell” offers a chance of fulfillment rather than a promise of frustration; namely, it gives a glimpse into a future of learning. It does not take the reader back to a past, which cannot be reinterpreted but only lamented about, as does the divine speaker in “The Sacrifice.” The time strategy of “if,” just as its place strategy, which I explained in the previous chapter, distances human language from the divine speaker. Herbert seems to be implying that through human language man rewrites, rediscovers, and reinterprets familiar stories. How “truthful” and how “correct” those interpretations are is a different story. What becomes important is the faculty of human language to search persistently for God’s Word. The collection of poems in *The Temple* is Herbert’s enactment of saying “amiss / this or that is.”

Herbert proposes the idea of learning through language in an earlier poem:

all must appear,  
And be disposed, and dressed, and tuned by thee,  
Who sweetly temper’st all. If we could hear  
Thy skill and art, what music would it be!  
(“Providence,” ll. 37-41)

While in “The Flower,” the poet refers to written language as the gateway to knowledge and truth, the speaker in “Providence” implies that we can achieve the same sense of understanding through listening. In a way similar to Augustine’s interest in rhetoric, Herbert combines the verbal and written aspects of language both to point to methods of knowing and understanding and to establish the authority of the reader/listener. The correct spelling is spread out in front of us to see, the sounds of the music are all around us to hear. The speaker seems to be suggesting that we only need to reach out to attain a

full grasp of divine language and wisdom. Yet precisely because humans are still looking to find ways in which to make their language as if “music,” as if “correct,” human language remains extremely flexible. Thus Herbert reintroduces desire in human language. The desire to fill in the lacks, inadequacies, and limitations, makes it restless. When he uses “if,” Herbert justifies both the desire and its capacity to be the bearer of truth and understanding. If we could only “hear,” and if we could only “spell,” we would have access to the stable and fixed language of God; but such access is in fact impossible to human beings. However, when humans speak and write, they transform the Word into a meaningful experience, and Herbert’s poetry is an exercise in articulating that process.

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I started this chapter with an argument on the strategic design of Herbert’s language. To understand how this design works, we need to keep in mind that Herbert brings into human language biblical narratives, but then rewrites them so that they serve the purpose of a personal story in which the narrative itself loses its intended functions, namely, to praise God. Herbert feels at liberty to invert the order and meaning of narratives that were most probably well known to his Christian audience. He also “revises” particular references to the Bible, claiming them to be true with the same sense of authority with which they are spoken in the Scriptures. Thus for Herbert, the importance of human language lies in its faculty to escape dogmatic categories, and the act of reading becomes an engagement with this faculty.

A more complex example of how strategy works within Herbert’s poetry unfolds in “Affliction I.” The poem offers various grounds for interpretation and troubles the

reader because of its unrelenting tone. Unlike any of the other poems in *The Temple*, “Affliction I” follows an intensifying pattern of frustration with God’s actions.

“Affliction I” is a narrative that opens with the “gracious benefits” (l. 6) and “natural delights” (l. 5) of belonging to God.<sup>27</sup> The speaker feels “entice[d]” and “entwine[d] in God’s love; there seems to be “no place for grief or fear” (l. 16). In the first four stanzas the speaker describes his state of “sweetness” (l. 19). However, instead of offering a further praise, a confession, or an interpretation of Scriptures,<sup>28</sup> Herbert dramatically changes the tone to make an accusation: “And made me a party unawares of woe” (l. 24). For the next six stanzas the speaker emphasizes the role of his education as a divine tool for obscuring his personal affliction and misery: “Thou didst betray me to a ling’ring book” (l. 39), “Thou often didst with academic praise / Melt and dissolve my rage” (ll. 45-46). I will discuss the last stanza separately, not only because I want to emphasize the use of “if,” but also because I want to show how through “if” the religious rhetoric of the narrative shifts its pattern from sin-prayer-praise to praise-discontent-rejection. We need to keep in mind that early Christian writers used narratives as a rhetorical tool of persuasion.<sup>29</sup> Theologians with classical rhetorical education, such as St. Augustine, were writing about their lives and experiences of conversion. Those early autobiographies and “lives” start with a confession of sins and a critique of the wantonness of the early years. Some of the “lives” use a distinctive rhetoric of the body and talk extensively about the asceticism of Christians. Herbert, on the other hand, first

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<sup>27</sup> I should point out that the narrative of “Affliction I” reverberates in the cycle of the five “Affliction” poems. However, for the purposes of this paper I will be exploring only the narrative of “Affliction I.”

<sup>28</sup> I am particularly pointing here at early Christian writings, such as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, to which Herbert must have had access as a priest at Bemerton.

<sup>29</sup> For a thorough discussion of how Christian discourse embedded Classical rhetoric see the section on “Stories People Want” in Averil Cameron’s *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 1991. Cameron

introduces the reader to a blessed state, “a world of mirth” (l. 12). He starts at the point at which most early Christian narratives end—with praise. In the *Confessions*, for example, Augustine refers to the lack of moral emphasis in his rhetorical education. Augustine, unlike Herbert’s speaker, thinks of academic acclaim as an expression of personal vanity and not necessarily as a divine antidote to “rage.”<sup>30</sup> Herbert’s speaker feels trapped: “I could not go away, nor persevere” (l. 48), while Augustine feels liberated to give up teaching and start a silent process of acquiring knowledge through reading. By the end of Book X of the *Confessions*, we meet with a believer who has renounced the community of pear stealers to accept an authentic Christian community, who has rejected a world of no order and chance to welcome a world of order and necessity.<sup>31</sup> Herbert rewrites that ending and offers with the last stanza of “Affliction I” a rejection of all stable order. The speaker announces that he has to seek another master. As my note on the last stanza suggests, the possibility of a second master is unimaginable according to the gospel of Matthew in the New Testament for the simple reason that one cannot be loyal to both masters. It is important to notice in this particular case that Herbert refuses to *interpret* for his audience the meaning of Matthew’s words. The speaker, in fact, proposes a dramatically new story; such is also the ultimate intention behind the “if” in the last line.

In “The Collar” the imagined voice of a divine speaker impedes further discontent, but in “Affliction I” the speaker is on his own:

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discusses in larger detail the *Life of Antony* and refers briefly to Augustine’s *Confessions* as primary texts of early Christian narratives intended to persuade the reader to convert to Christianity.

<sup>30</sup> My rationale for bringing St. Augustine’s *Confessions* into the discussion is the similar preoccupation with the psychology of the inner life.

<sup>31</sup> The pear-stealing episode is described in Book II of the *Confessions*. Augustine uses it as a parallel example to the imitation of Scripture to show that imitation can be both authentic and inauthentic. The



seems to me that the last line of the poem is the culminating point of the series of inversions that Herbert subtly introduces in the poem. The same line in I John is a declarative statement. While it explains that the way to reach and know God is through love, it pertains only to a specific audience that can accept the statement as one of wisdom and truth. As I have been suggesting throughout the paper, the conditionality of Herbert's "if" line appeals to readers of various religious, emotional and intellectual backgrounds that might respond to that line in a multiplicity of ways. In his notes to the Oxford Authors edition of Herbert's poetry, Louis Martz comments that the line should be read as "I love you, and if I should not love you, I deserve the penalty of being denied the power of loving you." Cristina Malcolmson, whose study of the poem offers a comprehensive parallel reading with Sidney's sonnet #61 in *Astrophil and Stella*, states simply and quite straightforwardly that the last line could mean "if I don't love you, leave me alone" (105). Although I am tempted to align with her interpretation, I want to suggest that precisely because of the conditional, linguistic expression, Herbert had in mind all of those possibilities. He intends the energy and dynamics behind the state of irresolution to lead to knowledge and love of God and to reaffirm, at the same time, the distinctive human space within which the individual can practice human language.

Because Herbert was such a well-trained orator, both a rhetorician and a theologian, he knows how to give enough credit to his audience—the readers. He rewrites stories and narratives that were familiar to those who were reading his poetry. Yet he invites us to be his accomplices too. When Herbert chooses to use "if," he chooses to place the responsibility of interpretation and understanding onto the reader; thus he lets us rewrite the narratives and practice our human language with him. As a

good orator, his strategy is to implant in the audience the desire to test the limits of language, experiment with it, and use it to respond to divine language in a very personal, human way. Thus without really knowing it, we take a huge amount of responsibility by reading Herbert's poetry.

## CONCLUSION

One of the difficulties of dealing with “if” as part of the human language, and also conceptualizing it as a response to a language that is inexpressible, unless silent or human, comes as a result of our human insistence on experiencing truth as it is, either under the form of static closure, or as divinity. For Herbert, “if” is an insight into experiencing truth as dynamic interpretation. Namely, in Herbert’s poetry, “if” is the creation of the poet, as much as it is the creation of the reader. Herbert’s “if” is intended for those readers who are tuned into making and understanding their choices. The exchanges between the “if” discourse of the speaker in *The Temple* and the “must” discourse of God offers complex incentives for actions, a variety of interpretations, and an energy of human agency. The versatility of Herbert’s language, namely of poetic and human language, claims independence and authorship. By opposing the Godly and human discursive modes, the poet celebrates the complexity of human language. For Herbert, the language in which he writes poetry becomes an intermediary between Christ’s lament in “The Sacrifice” where language is strictly declarative, and the voice in “Love III” that uses language to express a process of meditation and contemplation.

It becomes challenging to explore how the idea of distinguishing between the divine and human registers develops after Herbert, particularly in the writings of John Milton and Virginia Woolf. This kind of study transgresses not only genre but also political, religious and social contexts. Each of those writers suggests in a different way the fate of the power of language, and what is even more interesting, the power of “if.” Herbert, Milton, and Woolf use “if” consciously and cautiously in order to create

distinctions between humanity and divinity, between good and evil, between stiff, unproductive discipline and creative vision, between past and present, between space and confinement. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which was published almost forty years after *The Temple*, "if" is a sign of fallen language since only Satan and the devils are heard to speak conditionally. Almost three centuries after Milton, Woolf redeems the aesthetic and meditative function of "if."

While for Herbert the polemics of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century participated in an unstable and shifting forum of the Reformation, for Milton the crisis of language came as a result of intense political competition before and after the Interregnum. Both Milton and Herbert, although through substantially different mediums, refuse to agree that the Fall makes human language inadequate, simply fallen and almost diabolic in its use of metaphors. But Milton offers a shift in the function of "if." He makes the conditional clauses a quality of the speech that belongs to Satan and the rest of the fallen angels. In his first monologue, Moloch claims: "Let such bethink them, if the sleepy drench / Of that forgetful Lake benumb not still" (II 73-74). Beelzebub speculates about the options and alternatives after the devils rebelled: "**What if we find / Some easier enterprise**" (II 344-345). The language of Adam and Eve, on the other hand, partakes both from the convoluted syntax of the fallen angels, and the pure Word of Christ. "If" becomes a manifestation of confusion, manipulative rhetoric, and inability to judge correctly. Milton makes the darkness of hell verbal. But, again, we need to keep in mind that he contextualizes "if" in the failed rhetoric of the disputes between the raging royalists and the revolutionaries of the late seventeenth century.

Woolf's historical context is certainly very different; there are no more religious concerns to be addressed. She uses "if" in *To the Lighthouse* in order to show the reader "imaginative speculation and defiance," as Eudora Welty points out in her brief introduction. The novel opens with Mrs. Ramsey's statement "Yes, of course, **if** it's fine tomorrow" (3). The line keeps coming back and coming back to the reader in a response to Mrs. Ramsey's "But . . . it **won't** be fine" (4). Woolf maintains the two linguistic registers of her characters and juxtaposes, or maybe complements, their spirituality and inner sensitivity. "If" suddenly turns into a fictive element to work with. It takes us to a place and resolves the situation syntactically. The ending of the novel leaves us with Lily Briscoe and her painting of Mrs. Ramsey: "With a sudden intensity, **as if** [Lily] saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done. Yes, she thought . . . I have had my vision" (209). She makes the leap as if she had the vision, as if she was able to see what was not there, as if she knew. In the twentieth century, Woolf regains the Shakespearean sense of virtue in an "if," but that is yet another story.

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