

## Redemption in the Poetry of George Herbert

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In the eleventh of the thirty-nine *Articles of Religion* of the Anglican Church, ratified in 1571 at the order of Elizabeth I, the bishops state the new church's position on the contentious issue of the justification of sinful man before God in language that locates the Church of England squarely in the camp of Reform. Humankind, unable to redeem itself by adherence to the Law given to Moses, has been redeemed by God Himself through the incarnation, passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Believers "are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings."<sup>1</sup> Justification by faith, believers are assured, "is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort".

Those desiring further elucidation are referred to the Church's officially sanctioned *Book of Homilies*, expanded from one to two volumes that very year. The "Homily on the Salvation of Mankind" to which the eleventh article refers was probably the work of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, author and compiler of the original *Book of Common Prayer*. While the content of the sermon differs in no significant way from doctrinal formulations on the subject made by continental Reformers at the time, it is an official statement of Church of England doctrine, composed and circulated in the vernacular, and as an integral element of the intellectual culture of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England bears consideration in a discussion of devotional literature, specifically the poetry of clergyman George Herbert. At the risk of burdening this introduction with redundant theological citations, it may prove fruitful to a discussion of the central Christian teaching of redemption as it appears in Herbert's collection, *The Temple*, to quote a passage from the "Homily" as a keynote for the themes that such a discussion hopes to touch on. Drawing from St. Paul as scriptural authority, the author of the sermon enumerates "three things which must go together in our justification..."

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<sup>1</sup> "Articles of Religion," *The Book of Common Prayer*. 17 Nov. 2005. Society of Archbishop Justus. 4 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1662/articles.pdf>>

Upon GODS part, his great mercy and grace; upon Christ's part, justice, that is, the satisfaction of GODS justice, or the price of our redemption, by the offering of his body, and shedding of his blood, with fulfilling of the law perfectly & thoroughly; and upon our part true & lively faith in the merits of Jesus Christ, which yet is not ours, but by GODS working in us...<sup>2</sup>

In other words, correct understanding of Christian salvation must acknowledge that humankind is redeemed only by the singular, incommensurable event of Christ's sacrifice. This redemption is definitive and has a legal status similar to (although superseding) acts of personal or collective atonement set forth in the Old Testament, as well as those leading to the redemption of slaves, land, or firstborn children<sup>3</sup>. Any act of expiation on the part of the individual would be superfluous, if not a sign of unbelief. However, the believer participates in the mystery of redemption through its symbolic commemoration in the liturgy, thus publicly affirming and strengthening his or her faith. This faith is affirmed above all in the believer's humility before the gift of redemption, by the offering up, as stated in the 51st Psalm, of "a broken and a contrite heart", in a spirit of thanksgiving and praise.

Numerous passages from Donne's sermons could have no doubt presented the doctrine in a language richer in rhetorical flourish. However, I believe the above quotation from the *Homilies*, with its tone of pedantic scholasticism, serves as an example of the doctrine's official expression in the language of the time, and thereby can provide a foil against which to examine Herbert's deeply *personal* and varied literary expression of it. The emphasis here on the personal nature of Herbert's work, rather than on its engagement with a specific doctrinal tenet, is not gratuitous. Taking the author at his word, we should remember that *The Temple*, according to its subtitle, is comprised not only of "Sacred Poems," but also of "Private Ejaculations". The literary edifice that the poet constructs is not an imposing, universal *civitas dei*, but a structure of more modest proportions, perhaps not unlike the parish church at Bemerton, renovated by Herbert himself.

We might also bear in mind Robert Ellrodt's crucial insight into the religious poetry of the seventeenth century as an expression of a nascent "modern subjectivity", in which each poet manifests a distinctive, whole and original self in his work, despite the common adherence to more or less orthodox doctrine.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Book of Homilies." *The Anglican Library*. 1999. Natosha House Theological Seminary. 4 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.anglicanlibrary.org/homilies/index.htm>>

<sup>3</sup> The pertinent sections of the Old Testament are Numbers 8, in which God commands the dedication of the Levites to his service as a priestly caste responsible for animal sacrifices to be made as redemption for the firstborn taken during the Egyptian captivity, and the 25th and 27th chapters of Leviticus in which specific instructions are given for the conduct of transactions during the jubilee year and the redemption of land, houses, livestock, and bondservants. Biblical references or citations are drawn from *The Bible : Authorized King James Version*, Oxford, OUP, 1998.

According to Ellrodt, one defining characteristic of Herbert's personality as a poet is the *dialogic quality* of his poems. "His poetry is talk; and God, speaking or silent, is the poet's constant interlocutor."<sup>4</sup> Outside of the actual snatch of conversation Herbert stages in the poem plainly titled "Dialogue", the overwhelming majority of poems in *The Temple* are addressed directly to his God, and the two brief narrative poems discussed below, "Redemption" and "Love (3)", present parabolic accounts of individual encounters between the poet and his Saviour. The reader is an invited eavesdropper on an ongoing conversation whose topic is the place of the individual believer in the drama of redemption, a drama whose primary elements are Christ's sacrifice, paradoxically defined as both legally binding and incommensurably beyond the scope of human comprehension, and the sometimes tragic, sometimes absurd inability of the poetic "speaker" to acknowledge his own redemption by it. The "modernity" to which Ellrodt refers is manifest in the "subjectivity of feeling and expression", "flashes of humour and irony" and the "very surge of emotion [...] controlled [...] by the poet's critical self-awareness" that characterize these personal, and eloquently human exchange<sup>5</sup>.

We can observe the plain humanity, some critics say "homeliness", of these staged interactions by considering the way in which Herbert dramatizes the disruptive appearance of Christ's sacrifice in the mundane consciousness of the believer in the poem "Redemption."<sup>6</sup> In a 1983 article in *The Review of English Studies*, Dennis H. Burden analyzes "Redemption" as a crystallization of the contractual aspects of Christian salvation in a parable that depends for its efficacy on the reader's familiarity with the Old Testament strictures on land use as set forth in God's statement of the conditions of the covenant with Israel in the book of Leviticus. The speaker in Herbert's poem adopts the persona of a tenant farmer, who, not prospering, seeks out his wealthy landlord in order to make a suit to him, to afford/ A new small-rented lease, and cancel th'old". The significance of this persona, Burden points out, lies not only in likening "the basic situation of man's life on earth...to a tenancy of land", but in the scriptural references to the legal relationship between God and Israel as it relates to "the Lord's ownership of (the land of Canaan) [...] man's neglect of it, and [...] the breaking of the covenant". Burden points out an additional reference to the conditions set in the twenty-fifth chapter of Leviticus defining "a legal concept of land tenure, in connection with the right to buy back land."<sup>7</sup> With both these references in mind the reader follows the progress of Herbert's humble petitioner as he seeks out his Master, knowing well

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Ellrodt. "George Herbert and the Religious Lyric", in *Essential Articles for the Study of George Herbert*, ed. John R. Roberts, Hamden, Connecticut : Archon Books, 1979, p. 3-32, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Ellrodt, *op. cit.*, p. 9

<sup>6</sup> All quotes from Herbert are taken from *George Herbert : The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin, London, Penguin Books, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Dennis H. Burden "George Herbert's 'Redemption'", *The Review of English Studies*, Ns 34 1983, p. 446-451, p.447

that he represents the figure of abject man struggling under the untenable burden of Old Testament law. The narrator goes first to the "rich Lord's" manor house in heaven, but is informed that his Master "was lately gone/About some land, which he had dearly bought/Long since on earth, to take possession." Returning to earth, the narrator looks for his Lord in the usual haunts of the rich and powerful, "In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts", but to no avail. The culmination of the narrator's heretofore-fruitless search is described sparsely in the three final lines :

At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth  
Of thieves and murderers : there I him espied,  
Who straight, *Your suit is granted*, said, and died.

No description is given of the scene; the "ragged noise and mirth" of the criminal company provides an aural background on which the reader may embroider the details with his or her own imagination. The sinister brouhaha could come from the notoriously low company Christ kept during his mission on earth, or rather it could be the infernal cacophony surrounding his Passion, the jeering taunts of the murderous crowd, the howls and groans of the two thieves crucified on either side of him. The latter interpretation seems the more likely of the two and would allow for a reading of the poem as both a jarring send-up of the worldly Christian preoccupied by his own affairs, and a vivid enactment, in the brutal interruption of the poem's shaggy-dog narrative, of the absolute, unconditional supremacy of Christ's redemptive sacrifice over all forms of human activity. Burden views the poem as an example of Herbert's sadly underestimated wit, and admires the poet's skill in creating "an outrageous comedy of accident out of the situation,"<sup>8</sup> but this seems an exaggeration of the narrative's comic bent. All comedy is banished in the sudden shock of Herbert's bumpkin turning the corner and walking into a scene of unimaginable horror. He is furthermore personally implicated in the crime on which he has stumbled; recognized, he is addressed directly by the victim, who with his last breath grants the request which the petitioner has not even had time to make.

The power of the poem resides in its employment of an irony more tragic than comic. One could apply to "Redemption" with equal justice a comment made by Robert Ellrodt on the ambiguous refrain of "The Sacrifice" ("Was ever grief like mine?"), Herbert's long meditation on Christ's passion : its "attention is focused not on the sufferings of Christ, nor even on the mystery of Redemption, but on man's blindness as discerned by the dreadful, yet loving omniscience of God."<sup>9</sup> Yet man's blindness, as an episodically recurring rather than chronic condition, is in part due to the difficulty of comprehending, let alone answering to Christ's incommensurable sacrifice, and the vacillation of the believer's faith, the ongoing

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<sup>8</sup> Burden, op. cit. p. 451

<sup>9</sup> Ellrodt, op. cit. p. 11

struggle to maintain a clear vision of salvation before man's fickle, wavering gaze is itself part of "the mystery of Redemption". Throughout *The Temple* expressions of frustration ("Busy inquiring heart, what wouldst thou know?", "The Discharge") and dismay ("It cannot be. Where is that mighty joy, / Which just now took up all my heart?", "The Temper") alternate with admissions, either joyous or defeated, of powerlessness ("I have considered it, and find/ There is no dealing with thy mighty passion", "The Reprisal"). The presumptuous sinner who would, in a perverse deformation of belief, equal or better God's infinite goodness is lampooned in "The Thanksgiving", a poem whose enthusiastic, though misguided speaker, works himself into a lather trying to imagine by what possible means he might compensate Christ's redemptive sacrifice ("Oh King of wounds! How shall I grieve for thee..."). The speaker rushes breathlessly through over a dozen increasingly grandiose, and ultimately futile possibilities, beginning with weeping blood and moving on through the composition of devotional poetry (a sly, self-conscious mockery) to charitable works, even to a demiurgic usurpation of power, ultimately finding refuge from his own hubristic mania in scripture study and then collapsing into a shamefaced admission of impotence before the immensity of Christ's sacrifice : "Then for thy passion – I will do for that – / Alas, my God, I know not what". By virtue of its placement in the collection immediately after "The Sacrifice", a vividly conceived, sequential meditation on Christ's passion, the scholar Ilona Bell has made a convincing argument for reading of "The Thanksgiving" as an implicit, satiric condemnation of Ignatian practices of visualization and self-mortification. However, Bell's consideration of the poem is part of a larger discussion of Herbert's theological position in the complex landscape of English Protestantism that falls outside the scope of this paper<sup>10</sup>.

Without touching on the long, ongoing critical discussion concerning whether Herbert comes down more clearly on the Puritan or Anglo-Catholic side of the ideological divide, we can acknowledge the importance he gives, as a poet, to the liturgical life of the Church without making distinctions as to whether his liturgical celebrations are "low" or "high". In a more general Protestant context, the liturgical life of the Church represents the safe enclosure in which the believer may participate in the mystery of redemption by symbolically reaffirming his or her faith in the salvific power of Christ's death and resurrection. As many critics have pointed out, Herbert is a profoundly liturgical poet, his one collection of poems structured in an architectonic form that serves as a virtual church in which liturgical acts of commemoration and thanksgiving are performed in language. While *The Temple* is often read, quite rightly, as a highly stylized form of spiritual autobiography, the more numerous intensely intimate poems are punctuated by evocations of church music and of dates on the liturgical calendar, antiphons, and songs of thanksgiving that point the reader towards public worship, the collective

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<sup>10</sup> Ilona Bell, "Setting Foot into Divinity : George Herbert and the English Reformation", *Essential Articles for the Study of George Herbert*, ed. John R. Roberts, p. 63-83.

affirmation of the communion of saints<sup>11</sup>.

The central event of liturgical life, however, is the celebration of the Eucharist, a symbolic act which while performed in the company of others is itself intensely personal. It is communion both with the collective whole of the Church, and with Christ himself in the symbolic assimilation of the fruit of his sacrifice by the individual believer. Ilona Bell, among other critics, points out the significance of the Eucharistic celebration for Herbert, specifying, however that "the Church of England, like other Protestant denominations, insisted that the Lord's Supper offered *only* a 'sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.'"<sup>12</sup> And yet, while careful to avoid any images that might lead the reader to infer an adherence to the "popish" doctrine of transubstantiation, Herbert, in his gently beautiful poem "Love (3)" manages to convey the profound depth of communion granted the believer by virtue of his or her confession of sin and humble acquiescence to Christ's offer of redemption. Again, the believer's salvation is contingent not on any external act or sign, but on the individual's spiritual disposition. The poem, occurring at the end of *The Temple's* central sequence of poems, *The Church*, takes the form, like "Redemption", of a brief narrative, in this case that of a weary vagrant arriving at a strange door seeking hospitality. Its Eucharistic significance is implicit in the situation, with its implied play on the two meanings of the word "host". The setting, as in the final scene of "Redemption", is left to the reader's imagination, perhaps to allow the little drama enacted to occur on a bare, empty stage in the reader's soul. The narrator stands at "Love's" invisible doorway, hesitating, one foot poised over the threshold. "Love bade me welcome : but my soul drew back, / Guilty of dust and sin". Attentive, "quick-eyed Love" moves forward and escorts the timid visitor in, trying to put him at his ease. The wanderer continues to proclaim himself unworthy of Love's hospitality, casting his eyes down in shame. But as he continues to insist on his guilt, Love in turn becomes gently more insistent in his invitation, leading the visitor to table where he finally informs him of his absolution :

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
My dear, then I will serve.

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<sup>11</sup> As an interesting aside concerning not only the doctrinal ambiguity on liturgical practice in early Anglicanism, but also Herbert's enthusiasm for both the personal and public value of ritual, one might consider the historian Eamon Duffy's use of a fond account of Rogationtide processions from Herbert's *A Priest to the Temple (or the Country Parson)* in a discussion of the forms and function of corporate worship in the Tudor period. Despite the fact that Rogationtide, a feast day associated with Ascension Thursday with barely concealed pagan origins, was seen as an embarrassing bit of "popish" superstition by the more ardent reformers and banned and reinstated at least once between 1550 and 1575, over 50 years later Herbert sees the processions and ritual "beating" of the parish boundaries, as a thoroughly blessed event, allowing for greater cohesion among the local community of believers. See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars : Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 136-137.

<sup>12</sup> Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 73

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat :  
So I did sit and eat.

The poem manages to encapsulate in eighteen lines of simple, starkly evocative language all of the three elements integral to salvation enumerated in the scholastic definition from the *Book of Homilies* cited above. Love's insistent and inexplicable hospitality stands for God's "great mercy and grace"; in Love's revelation of his having assumed the "blame" of his guest we see the "justice" enacted by Christ's sacrifice; and the wanderer's ultimate acceptance of the invitation to "sit and eat" portrays the "true and lively faith" with which the believing Christian accepts his Saviour. While the poem, in its bare simplicity and in the flatness of its characters, would seem to suggest a kinship to the edifying parables of an earlier time or to Bunyan's later Puritan allegory, it bears the mark of a more complex, subjective sensibility in its deft handling of the two gentle, sometimes interweaving voices which seem to hint at a richer, more nuanced interiority. A consideration of this divided-self could lead to further examination of the relationship between the Protestant doctrine of "justification by faith" and the development of the "modern subjectivity" Robert Ellrodt has brought out and magisterially developed throughout his studies of the poetry of the period.