"Wrapt in Nights Mantle":
George Herbert's Parabolic Art

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From the oft quoted "The Collar" to the equally popular "Love III," contemporary scholarship has focused repeatedly on Herbert's fictions—his ingenious narrative poems scattered almost randomly throughout *The Temple*. Barbara Harman and Stanley Fish identify these tiny narratives as exercises in self-representation and self-consumption which end by acknowledging the primacy of God's Word.[1] But in analyzing these poems as autobiographical sketches or as fictions designed to catechize the reader, they overlook the parabolic technique on which Herbert's narratives are based—a technique which C. A. Patrides highlights in his introduction to Herbert's poetry, and which Chana Bloch treats in *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible*.[2] Because Patrides and Bloch do not examine Herbert's commentary on parable in *The Country Parson*, however, they fail to recognize the relationships which Herbert establishes between the use of this narrative form and the aptitude of an audience. In fact, Herbert's discussion reveals his affinity with the Christian humanists who describe parable as the finest of accommodating arts.[3]

All commentary on parable (whether ancient or modern) has focused on the issue of audience response, and even the most recent critical studies find this aspect of parable the most fascinating. In *The Genesis of Secrecy*, a book which traces the relationship between the use of parable and a theory of interpretation, Frank Kermode candidly reminds us that parables "Can always be enigmatic and can sometimes be terrible,"[4] noting the same exclusionary aspect of the genre that Calvin found so compelling during the Reformation. To Calvin's way of thinking, Christ employed this narrative strategy to separate the "insiders" from the "outsiders," making only the elect privy to his secrets. Parables were thus a rhetorical road block, denying access even to the highly educated and becoming for the learned "a shut and sealed book in which they cannot read."[5] Christ accomplished this kind of partitioning in two ways—by couching the Word in the "darkness" of figurative language and by "striking his listeners with dullness and their minds with stupidity so that they are blind amidst bright sunshine." For Calvin, then, parable neither concealed meaning nor revealed meaning; rather, it impeded meaning—allowing only the "insiders" to be present when the mysteries were explained.

But despite recent attempts to read George Herbert's work in Calvinistic terms,[6] Herbert's parables show a marked departure from Calvin's exclusionary conception of the genre. In fact, Herbert places his parables directly in the hands of his readership, making them the primary agents in uncovering a multifaceted truth. In this sense, Herbert is closer to those reformers who described parable as an open form—Erasmus and Zwingli in particular.[7] Concerning this type of metaphoric language, Erasmus had noted,

> Of the other ornaments of style, each makes its own peculiar contribution to its charm and flexibility: metaphor taken alone adds everything in fuller measure, while all the other kinds add one thing each. Do you wish to entertain? Nothing adds more sparkle. Are you concerned to convey information? Nothing else makes your point so convincingly, so clearly.[8]

Moreover, in his *Paraphrases upon the New Testament*, Erasmus had underlined the pedagogic value of Christ's favorite teaching device, drawing much of his theory from early patristic commentary.[9] Like Erasmus, Herbert too turns back to Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom, and Augustine—appropriating the very Christological techniques which they illuminate.[10] In synthesizing their understanding, he creates lively, dramatic narratives—parables intended to find and transform each reader (regardless of spiritual aptitude) through the interpretive act. A brief overview of patristic theory will allow us to recognize the extent to which Herbert takes up these strategies.

Origen (who was, perhaps, the first reader-response critic in 200 A.D.) describes how the Bible operates on three different levels according to receptivity of the readership.[11] The "simple" are edified by the "body" of scripture; the "advanced" by the soul of Scripture and the "perfect" by the Spirit. This hermeneutic range is possible because the "body" of the Word offers "secret" senses; in fact, it signals the reader towards additional truth through strategically placed "interruptions" in the narrative form. These "obstacles or bolts" (as Origen calls them) lock the reader out of the ordinary meaning, forcing him or her to take a "narrow path" upward and so arrive at sublime Truth. The "turns" in the narrative thus become the point of divine entry—the moment in which the reader is transformed by an unprecedented discovery.[12]

Gregory of Nyssa dramatizes this hermeneutic encounter even more completely by making the meeting a deeply personal one. Again the Word—or in this case, Christ—shows tremendous versatility, for, according to Gregory, he "adapts himself to the capacity of each one who receives him. To some He comes as a Babe, to others as one advancing, to others in full maturity." Christ thus assumes different ages and adopts different roles in order to meet each person at his point of greatest need.[13]

For Augustine, too, the encounter between Christ and his audience is multi-faceted—but Augustine highlights dialogue rather than the "chameleon" nature of Christ, underscoring the question and answer strategy which is central to Christ's pedagogy. Noting that "it was not to learn anything that Christ asked questions of any, but only to teach them,"[14] he concentrates on Christ's ability to read the minds of his interrogators, and to respond with shocking accuracy to their hidden thoughts.[15] According to Augustine, this divine insight transcends time, for Christ's words, even in written form, continue to find a wide-ranging audience as the Spirit brings new meaning to light in the hermeneutic act:

> For what could God have more generously and abundantly provided
> in the divine writings than that the same words might be understood in
> various ways.[16]

Aspects of this parable theory are evident throughout Herbert's prose work, *The Country Parson*, where we find him repeatedly advising his fellow ministers to "know the pulse" of the parishioners in order to offer them the appropriate instruction.[17] In "The Parson preaching," he encourages them to accommodate the Word to an audience through "stories, and sayings of others" because "them also men heed, and remember better than exhortations" (233). And, in "The Parson in Circuit," he underlines the advantages of parable in particular, emphasizing the sensitivity necessary in correctly assessing one's auditors:

> In this [the parson] distinguisheth; for if [the listener] be a plaine
> countryman, he reproves him plainly; for they are not sensible of fineness:
> if they be of higher quality, they commonly are quick, and sensible, and
> very tender of reproof: and therefore he lays his discourse so, that he
> comes to the point very leisurely, and oftentimes, as *Nathan* did, in the
> person of another, making them to reprove themselves. (248)

If his auditor is "plain," the minister adopts the plain style; if he is "quick"—a word which signals physical, intellectual, and spiritual liveliness—the minister tells him a parable, just as Nathan the prophet told David. The fiction thus becomes an educational "remedy" which the reader or listener must interpret and apply, the minister merely providing the prescription.

The Temple is, of course, the culmination of Herbert's art—allowing him to put into poetic form the various strategies he suggests in *The Country Parson*. Thus, Herbert writes his parables for a range of spiritual aptitudes, sometimes using simple metaphors to illustrate spiritual truth and thus "to serve" a reader in what "he knows not" (256-57). Other times he writes for a "quick" reader, creating fictions which are narrated by the "person of another"—neither the divine story-teller nor Herbert himself. Such a strategy removes Herbert altogether from the

charge of "self" representation, even as it throws into sharp relief the parabolic underpinnings of each narrative. As each persona treads the multi-referential ground of biblical parable, each seeks the meaning which has somehow eluded him. In "Redemption," he goes in quest of a "new lease," in "The Collar," freedom, in "Love III," worthiness in the love relationship. And true to Gregory of Nyssa's understanding, Christ appears to each seeker differently. Sometimes arriving as a baby, other times as a master, a father, or a friend, he alters his appearance and his dialogue to meet each struggling persona where he is most needy.

Somewhere along the way, the persona and the reader begin to merge—for we too are on a quest. As we move from these miniature fictions to the lyrics which frame them, we find clues for their decoding, often discovering in the emotional reactions of the next speaker an index for our own responses. When the parable-teller recounts a moment of personal insight, the lyric response which succeeds his narrative offers a joyous musical refrain. But when the speaker tells an outraged tale of mistreatment and loss, the lyric which follows frequently offers an alternative perspective. In this way Herbert makes the hermeneutic process a gradual recovery of meaning, allowing us to evaluate each narrative through additional corrective lenses.

Having created his parables with patristic strategies and provided the guidance of *The Temple* framework, Herbert turns them over to us. Perhaps because parables always hinge on the issue of reception—on whether we "have the ears to hear and the eyes to see" (Matt. 13: 15)—the dramatic irony built into these fictions allows us no easy out, no "holier than thou" attitude, no intellectual superiority. Instead, they force us to see, through the fun-house mirror of comedic distortion, the shape of our own egos. With this self-knowledge, we discover—along with the speakers of Herbert's parables—a similar holy acceptance.[18]

In "Christmas" we find a perfect example of how Herbert adapts patristic strategies to the parable form. As we move through a syntactically suspended, convoluted opening, we are halted repeatedly by a series of caesuras:

> All after pleasures as I rid one day.
>> My horse and I, both tir'd, body and mind,
>> With full crie of affections, quite astray;
> I took up in the next inne I could finde. (80)

We are, of course, in the presence of a first-person narrator who has used himself up, leaving us only with an account of his flagging energy. Even in this retelling, his narrative comes out in short, suspended gasps, his "All after pleasures" establishing a curious parallel with "The Prodigal Son." That he has run the gamut of emotions, that he has gone "quite astray" seems to bear out such a correlation. We know, however, that the "Son" turned homeward on foot, that the narrator is riding, and that, as Origen hints, the horse seems to be getting in the way of any

standard reading. Confronted with this incongruous "horse," we might very well wonder what the "spiritual" implications are. If we have not yet figured it out, the title "Christmas" and Herbert's friend Lancelot Andrewes provide us with a double clue. Describing a hypothetical search for Christ, Andrewes concludes:

> When they came thither, they would never go to an inn, or ostrie, but to the very best house in the town. Or if to an inn, to the fairest chamber in it; or to a chamber at least; never to the stable, there to look in the manger for *Christ*. To the stable we go to look for a horse . . . (Is.i.3) . . . never thither to seek for the Saviour of the world.[19]

Although the narrator never fully admits it, it is his horse that brings him (and us, as well) to the stable and to Christ. His narrative has been hinting at the horse's significance all along, offering him top-billing in the second line, and inverting the usual hierarchies of man over beast, mind over body, to increase our awareness of his fallen human condition—"my horse and I, both tired, body and mind." Having sunk to the level of the beasts, another characteristic he shares with the prodigal son, the narrator hopes only for a place to rest—his destination no more carefully thought out than "the next inne I could find." His state of physical and spiritual fatigue leaves him altogether unprepared for what happens next:

> There when I came, whom found I but my deare,
>   My dearest Lord, expecting till the grief
>   Of pleasures brought me to him, readie there
> To be all passengers most sweet relief? (80)

What was before the most inauspicious of settings becomes the place of his greatest discovery, for only now does he encounter the love he has looked so hard to find: "There when I came, whom found I but my deare." The pun on dear/deer not only blurs the hierarchical distinctions between animal, Man, and God to join them in perfect union; it also foreshadows the loving conditions of this "hunt."

But, having described this meeting as a rather remarkable coincidence, the narrator, on second thought, knows better. In the sixth line he gives us the other side of the story, identifying his "dearest Lord" as the one who has been "expecting" him all along—knowing, in fact, that it would take the "grief of pleasures"[20] to bring him home at last. Now seeing eye-to-eye with the narrator, we recognize the prodigal we were expecting, a man whose difficulty in "coming to himself" has made it equally difficult for us. What we may not yet realize is that the end of our hermeneutic quest also awaits us *here*, for, according to Andrewes, "the place [Christ] was born in, an inn, is for all passengers of what country soever"[21]—a place where even a passing reader can find that "sweet relief" offered generously to all. But the narrative thread we are so earnestly pursuing, having

once doubled back upon itself, now takes a U-turn upwards and trails off in questioning wonder. The story appears to be finished—but not as stories usually are.

This shift occurs at the turn of the sonnet, allowing us to enter what Chana Bloch calls a "poetic time-warp" (151), so that we find ourselves (in the present moment) with the Christ-child in the stable. The narrator is still talking, but his words are no longer directed to us. They turn instead, with prayerful attention, to the Christ-child of the Incarnation:

> O Thou, whose glorious, yet contracted light,
>   Wrapt in nights mantle, stole into a manger;
> Since my dark soul and brutish is thy right,
> To Man of all beasts be not thou a stranger.

The thread of the narrative has not ended after all. Rather, in this epiphany of wonder we find the shining Other side of the narrator's account, for the earthly and spiritual meanings are inextricably intertwined. Our narrator knows now that a horse can point out a Truth and that a child "Wrapt in nights mantle" can conceal his nature as the Son/sun, not—we now see—to obscure His light, but to temper His brightness.[22] Reflecting Gregory of Nyssa's understanding, Christ enters the narrator's frame of reference as a babe, and, subjecting Himself to his limited perspective, he becomes accessible to him in two ways: first, he wears the "dark" mantle of a mutual humanity, and second, he places himself in a manger—the feeding trough for a horse—to meet him at the level of his "brutish" appetite.[23] Indeed, it is Christ's unfaltering willingness to find him at his lowest point that gives the narrator grounds for hope. Turning his prayer upward and inward, he offers the Child "better lodging" in the Inn of his soul, requesting him to do whatever remodeling He finds necessary:

> Furnish & deck my soul, that thou mayst have
> A better lodging than a rack, or grave.

In the end, the "rack or grave" reflects at once the death of Christ and the hardened response of those who find no place for him—who turn him out. That Christ too is a wandering Son in quest of lodging proves to be the final Mystery, bringing the narrative full circle. The narrator, however, has become the Innkeeper offering a room, the lover rejoicing in reunion, the man welcoming a Son. As the parameters of this parable collapse into their opposites, they reflect the double-sided mystery of grace as one "Son" finds another to complete the divine text:

> He came unto his own, and his own received him not; but as many
> as received Him, to them gave he the power to become Sons of God.
> (John 1:11, 12)

In this story of mutual acceptance—at once human and divine—two Sons are found, received, and re-united as a transforming Word progressively eliminates the boundaries between them.

In moving to the outer frame of this parable, we must acknowledge that the Word shining behind all of the narrator's words is Christ—offering Himself, as he always does, in a mediated form. Now "wrapt" in the darkness of language, He accommodates Himself to our hermeneutic sensibilities, surprising us into wonder at the junctures of a story at once human and divine. If we are to undergo the transformation which this parable celebrates, however, our encounter must turn—as does this sonnet—upon our "reception." In this parable as in all parables, the question of whether we have the ears to hear and the eyes to see is both the first and the last question.

"Christmas," however, is not quite over, for the narrator now gives voice to his wonder in music. As he turns from narrative to song, he replicates the movement of the biblical nativity story so clearly described by Lancelot Andrewes:

> So have you the sign and the song, the one to balance or counterpoise
> the other; the song to sing away the sign, to make amends for the manger.
> The sign very poor and mean, the song exceeding high and heavenly.
>   (Andrewes, 194)

Through melodic lines which are at once old and new, the narrator-become-singer conflates the divine pastoral of Psalm 23 and the parabolic language of John 10 to describe the Shepherd's care. The "streams" of divine grace have begun to flow within him, allowing him to initiate a divine singing contest against the constraints of earthly time:

> Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers
>   Outsing the day-light houres.
> Then we will chide the sunne for letting night
>   Take up his place and right:
> We sing one common Lord; wherefore he should
>   Himself the candle hold.

Because "Shepherd and flock" appear in the proper order, the "Shepherd" of the Soul leads the "flock" of the body, so that neither can go "astray." Rather, both harmonize in this act of mutual praise.

Taking up his music, then, the singer escapes the limits of traditional pastoral, "outsing[ing] the day-light" when most pastorals end. In fact, he "chides" the earthly sun for allowing darkness—a musical turn which brings him back to this night and the Child they have all paused to celebrate. Like the "turns" in the earlier story, this melodic shift from "night" to "one common Lord" signals a new, spiritual level of understanding. He now realizes that it is Christ—not the length of his song—that is important, and it is He who "should Himself the candle hold," lighting the singer's dark pathway in time and music alike.

The Singer closes by beginning his quest for that greater "sun" who "Shall stay till we have done," positing an opening—not a conclusion—in a time beyond time:

> Then we will sing, and shine all our own day,
>   And one another pay:
> His beams shall cheer my breast, and both so twine
> Till ev'n his beams sing, and my musick shine.

As he adopts a transcendent idiom in which light resonates and music shines, we catch a glimpse of another world where joyful reciprocity so heightens perception that light and song themselves become mutually reflective modes of praise.

But the speakers of Herbert's parables seldom come to the same degree of insight as the narrator of "Christmas." Many reveal their deafness and blindness to divine truth—their misinterpretation of the Word and the divine presence who encounters them. This is nowhere more apparent than in the parable "Time," a fiction which has rarely been read with the kind of "quickness" Herbert hoped he would find among his readership. If we listen very carefully to the speaker, we begin to recognize that this is not the "saintly naif" whom Richard Strier identifies,[24] but someone who reads the right words in all the wrong ways. The opening lines are enough to indicate a proud, over-confident persona:

> Meeting with Time, Slack thing, said I,
> Thy sithe is dull; whet it for shame.

Because the personification of "Time" interrupts ordinary discourse almost immediately, we must recognize (with Origen) that Time contains secret senses. The speaker, however, seems oblivious to Time's multireferential possibilities. Quickly identifying him as the "grim reaper," he initiates the conversation with name-calling and then moves on to criticism. As he berates Time for a dull scythe and short working hours, the truth becomes all too clear: this speaker *wants* to be cut down. Time is unmoved by this abrasive encounter, responding with genteel politeness:

> No marvell Sir, he did replie,
> If it at length deserve some blame:

> But where one man would have me grinde it,
> Twentie for one too sharp do finde it.

Gifted with the insight of Augustine's Christ, Time hears behind his antagonist's words his unspoken thoughts. Aloud he notes that his timing, no matter what "length," is always wrong, and that he has the interests of a larger audience in view.

At this point the speaker decides that Time merely lacks the requisite information. In the first six lines he reminds Time that he has lost his status as the "grim reaper" and that the terror he once held over earlier audiences no longer exists:

> Perhaps some such of old did passe
> Who above all things lov'd this life;
> To whom thy sithe a hatchet was,
> Which now is but a pruning-knife.
>> Christs coming hath made man thy debter,
>> Since by thy cutting he grows better.

Invoking the parabolic imagery of John 15, he recognizes in Time's hands the "pruning-knife" of Christ. The implement clearly suggests the method of the divine gardener:

> Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit.
>> (John 15:2)

But the speaker misinterprets the purpose of the tool. Revising the "pruning" technique, he conflates the two kinds of cutting which Christ employs. He thus describes someone who, after being cut down, "grows better" in another World—not someone who, having undergone "pruning," becomes productive and fruitful on earth.

In the next stanza, the speaker takes another tack to achieve his "end"; perhaps flattery will succeed where criticism has failed:

> And in his blessing thou art blest:
> For where thou onely wert before
> An executioner at best;
> Thou art a gard'ner now, and more,
> An usher to convey our souls
> Beyond the utmost starres and poles.

Again, he gives away his skewed priorities. Dismissing Time's past position as an "executioner," he passes over his present status as a "gard'ner" too. His interest clearly lies in Time's role as an "usher" to that World outside of Time. The desire

to be translated into Eternity lies behind every word he has spoken, a desire which is all but stated in his final speech:

> And this is that makes life so long,
> While it detains us from our God.
> Ev'n pleasures here increase the wrong,
> And length of dayes lengthen the rod.
>> Who wants the place, where God doth dwell,
>> Partakes already half of hell.

Time, as the speaker sees it, has been "detaining" him. In keeping him from that other World, Time is partially responsible for the "increased wrong" that he is doing, and, because of this, the punishment that will be meted out to him. Torn in two directions, toward earthly "pleasures" and toward God, he remains in a continual state of unfruitfulness—"half in hell" as he so tersely puts it. With his anger and bitterness finally out in the open, he blames Time for this "strange length"—this bizarre interim position—which "excludes" him from eternity. At this point, however, Time loses his gentlemanly composure:

> Thus farre Time heard me patiently:
> Then chafing said, This man deludes:
>> What do I here before his doore?
>> He doth not crave lesse time, but more.

With the subtle pun in his parting question—"What do I here/hear?"[25] Time establishes a witty connection between what the speaker has revealed and what Time now identifies as his inopportune arrival. That this speaker "craves" the "more time" of eternity with the same lust that he turns upon all earthly things makes it all too obvious that he cannot move to a higher spiritual plane. That he craves "more Time"—indeed, maturation time—is Time's concluding assessment. With these words Time prunes him and abandons him to time, leaving his final cutting remark to echo in the deafening silence of his departure.

Lest we misinterpret the point of this parable—desiring, like the speaker, an easy form of closure—the next lyric, "Gratefulnesse" does not drop the issue. Instead, this lyric speaker conveys additional insights about the purpose of time. His request for a "gratefull heart," an attitude curiously lacking in the speaker we have just heard, suggests a very different spiritual sensibility. As he associates himself with the friend at midnight (a parable told in Luke 11:5-8), he believes, like the friend, that his persistence will be rewarded: "See how thy beggar works on thee / By art." Far from desiring a quick escape, he realizes that he must use his "art" for greater increase, a truth he finds in the parable of the Talents:

> He makes thy gifts occasion more,
> And sayes, If he in this be crost,
> All thou hast giv'n him heretofore
>   Is lost.

Unlike the speaker who precedes him, he knows that the purpose of Time is to "occasion more," not to bury his talent in hope of eternity. To fail to do this, he makes clear, is to lose "All thou hast giv'n" and to end up with nothing. Thus, each verse of "Gratefulnesse" reveals a new level of understanding until, in the last stanza, the speaker measures out a new kind of Time—turning his heartbeats into music:

> Not thankfull, when it pleaseth me;
> As if thy blessings had spare dayes:
> But such a heart, whose pulse may be
>   Thy praise.

To "occasion more" suggests that the journey is never over—that "art" must find continually new avenues of praise. As if to illustrate this point, yet another parable-teller succeeds the singer of "Gratefulness." He reveals a different kind of "craving," reflecting his desire in the title "Peace" and his opening question:[26]

> Sweet Peace, where dost thou dwell? I humbly crave,
>   Let me once know.

With more information than the speaker of "Christmas," and more humility than the speaker of "Time," he nevertheless suffers from his own hermeneutic deficiencies. Instead of misinterpreting the Word, however, he over-interprets it, rigidly expecting "peace" to take the same form it took in the past. Reading the Bible like a do-it-yourself manual, he hopes to recover "peace" by traveling the same ground as his biblical predecessors. Augustine's awareness that "the same words might be understood in various ways" has not occurred to him, for he has yet to discover a divine Presence who appears in the metaphoric twists of narrative itself.

Recapitulating biblical history, then, he carefully retraces the steps of prophets, priests, and kings. His first stop takes him to the "secret cave" of the prophet Elijah who took refuge here after fleeing political upheaval:

> I sought thee in a secret cave,
> And ask'd, if Peace were there.
> A hollow winde did seem to answer, No:
>   Go seek elsewhere.

Elijah, of course, heard beneath the wind "a still, small voice," the voice of God. Expecting the same divine encounter, the narrator hears only an echoing "no." Uncertain both of what he "seems" to hear and how to interpret it, he turns next to something more tangible. He finds this in a visible "sign" of peace—the rainbow offered to Noah and later represented on the hem of Aaron's priestly robe:

> I did; and going did a rainbow note:
>   Surely, though I,
> This is the lace of Peaces coat:
>   I will search out the matter.
> But while I lookt, the clouds immediately
>   Did break and scatter.

As he is watching, however, the rainbow vanishes, taking his sense of security with it. Indeed, the rainbow is the most transient of signs, one immediately subject to erasure.

The speaker must find something more lasting, and he looks for it in the promise of an eternal Kingdom made to David:

> Then went I to a garden, and did spy,
>   A gallant flower,
> The crown Imperiall: Sure, said I,
>   Peace at the root must dwell.
> But when I digg'd, I saw a worm devoure
>   What show'd so well.

But his ability to "spy" corruption at the root of the political system proves even more disconcerting than the vague uneasiness created by his two previous encounters. The fragility of the "Crown Imperiall" before a "devouring worm" leaves this speaker in a veritable no man's land—without divine voice or tangible sign or even a firm hierarchical structure on which to depend.

At a loss as to where to turn now, he continues to wander. He sums up the passing days, months, and years with a succinct "at length," dismissing the temporal aspect of his quest out of hand. Indeed, His entire tale is "prelude" to a meeting, but, by the time he describes his encounter with the "reverand good old man," he has lost all sense of decorum. His rather surly "demand" for peace calls his "humility" into question as it underscores his anxiety and restlessness.

The rest of the story is not his to tell. The old man he encounters finishes the narrative, relating a parable filled with "secrets" for the speaker and for us. In this sense, "Peace" never escapes the bounds of interpretation, never offers a final "answer" to literal-minded seekers. Through the metaphoric language of parable,

however, the old man accommodates his words to the absences in the earlier narrative, completing the quest on every level. In place of the riddling "wind," he offers words; in place of the transient "rainbow" a handful of "this grain" and in place of a Kingdom threatened by schism, a Kingdom which is born out of death, dispersing "through all the earth" by means of narrative:

> For they that taste it do rehearse,
>   That vertue lies therein
> A secret vertue bringing peace and mirth
>   By flight of sin.

The Prince whose story he tells is, on the one hand, the mysterious Priest of the Most High God who encountered Abraham (Gen 14:18) and offered him "bread and wine." He is also the "King of Peace" identified in Hebrews 7:1.2 as the One who provided the bread of the New Covenant by offering himself. Thus, he is the "prophet, priest, and king" for whom the speaker has looked so intently as well as his source of "Peace." It is a peace, we discover, passed on by parable-tellers.

Not surprisingly, we have come again full circle. The speaker's story is, in fact, a "rehearsal" twice over—first about the difficulties of interpretation and the "absences" built into narrative, and second about the way these gaps become the point of entry for a "presence" we must always discover for ourselves. Again the moment of closure is the moment in which the text opens a final time—to take us in.

By employing these parabolic strategies—Origen's metaphoric "interruptions," Gregory of Nyssa's chameleon "arrivals," Augustine's divine dialogue and multireferential possibilities—Herbert surprises us too, making us aware of that Presence which glimmers just beyond the metaphoric bends in the narrative. As his parables heighten our hermeneutic skill, they illustrate the dangers of misinterpreting or overinterpreting—of using the Word to reinforce our interests (as does the speaker of "Time") or reducing it to an easily manageable formula (as does the speaker of "Peace"). Finally, because of the role of these speakers in the sequence of *The Temple*, we begin to understand the value of an interpretive community, of those who will overhear, respond, and correct. Herbert thus allows us to glimpse—at least in outline—the network of supportive relationships that he envisioned when he constructed *The Temple* to involve and transform a readership.

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Notes

[1] Stanley E. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), *The Living Temple* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), and Barbara Leah Harman, *Costly Monuments: Representations of the Self in George Herbert's Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[2] *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C. A. Patrides (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), pp. 10-11 and Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 197-214. Chana Bloch notes that "Herbert rarely speaks as a prophet," but, like the prophets, uses parabolic techniques (p. 199).

[3] Because in biblical Hebrew the word *mashal* could refer interchangeably to allegory, parable, and proverb, biblical writers and those who employed their techniques often blur the distinction between these forms. I use the term "parabolic" slightly more selectively, to designate all of Herbert's poems which involve stories.

[4] Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 33.

[5] See Jean Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing, 1815), 2:103, 128.

[6] Gene Veith, *Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1985).

[7] Zwingli, like Erasmus, indicates that parable is employed so that "those who might be otherwise dull and unwilling are persuaded to listen, and the truth which is discovered is received the more fully and valued the more highly" *(Zwingli and Bullinger* [London: SCM Press, 1953], p. 73). Both, in this respect, are close to Origen's understanding of the purpose of figurative language; Origen was Erasmus' favorite early commentator.

[8] *The Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Writings Antibarbari/Parabolae* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 130.

[9] *The Paraphrases of Erasmus upon the New Testament, 1548* , intro by John N. Wall, Jr. (New York: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975).

[10] George Herbert's reformation Christianity is rooted in a Christian Humanism which looks back to the earliest Christian commentators. Although recent criticism has generally ignored his attention to the Fathers, we find this emphasis in his Latin poetry and in sections of *The Country Parson*. See *The Latin Poetry of George Herbert*, trans. Mark McCloskey and Paul R. Murphy (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1965), pp. 47-49. Later, in his prose work, Herbert notes that "the parson by no means refuseth" the Fathers' interpretive aid *(The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941], p. 229).

[11] Herbert may have been drawn to Origen because Lancelot Andrewes employs Origen's hermeneutic strategies.

[12] Origen, *De Principis*, Book IV, Chapters 1 and 11 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 4:359.

[13] Gregory of Nyssa, *From Glory to Glory*, ed. Herbert Musurillo, S.J. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979), p. 168.

[14] Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1849), 2:943.

[15] Although Stanley Fish traces this question and answer strategy to early catechism *(The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978], pp. 20-23), this was not the only place it made its appearance. The same method is clearly visible in early Christian commentary where Chrysostom and Augustine describe Christ's question and answer strategy extensively, linking it very closely with his use of parable as a teaching device (Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Hebrews* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906], pp. 85-91, 119). Herbert, in fact, makes this same subtle connection, closing his discussion of catechizing by highlighting the importance of "similitudes" or parables—to be offered "if the answerer sticks" (pp. 256-57).

16 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), p. 102.

17 *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 233. Herbert is quoted from this edition throughout this article.

18 I echo Chana Bloch who discusses the persona along similar lines in *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 197-214.

19 Lancelot Andrewes, *Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity* (London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, [1898]; rpt. 1955), p. 196.

20 That "pleasure creates its own hunger" is Jerome's interpretation of the prodigal son's predicament. Other commentators (from Jerome onward), interpret the meeting between Father and Son as the Incarnation. See Stephen L. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus's Parables* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 236-245.

21 Andrewes, *Andrewes Sermons on the Nativity*, 238.

22 In his *Homilies on the Gospel according to St. John*, Augustine writes, "not that [He] should be obscured, but that [His] brightness may be tempered" (2 vols. [Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1848], 1:484). Lancelot Andrewes paraphrases this theological point in Sermon VI of his sermons on the Nativity, preached at Whitehall, December 25, 1611: "Through the veil of His flesh such beams He cast, as behind those clouds they might know there was a sun; as that way only could he be made visible to the eyes of flesh, which otherwise could not behold him" *(Andrewes Sermons on the Nativity*, pp. 93-94).

23 In a similar way, Gregory the Great describes the Gentiles as a "wild ass" wandering in the "fields of pleasure" until they find "grass" at the manger where they take in the "grace of the Incarnation" *(Morals on the Book of Job*, 3 vols. [Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844], 1:369).

24 Richard Strier, *Love Known* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 122.

25 I owe this insight to one of my students, Monique Shay.

26 For alternative readings of "Peace," see Rosemond Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1952), p. 164; Joseph Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and His Art*, (1954; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 175; Saad El-Gabalsawy, "The Pilgrimage: George Herbert's Favorite Allegorical Technique," *CLAJ* 13 (1969/70), 413; and Michael West, "Ecclesiastical Controversy in George Herbert's 'Peace,'" *RES* 22 (1971), 445-51.