Herbert’s Nature

“"A Creation Every Moment”: The Anticipation of Judgment and Rescue in Herbert’s “Nature”

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1

The early modern poet and priest George Herbert understood the danger of combat. Of course, he had turned away from a life of public service, and as a result never was compelled to pick up a sword to defend his England from invasion by forces from Spain or France. Although, Herbert possessed no military experience, he was intimately familiar with the theological (and political) conflicts that characterize the Reformation in England. However, Herbert refrained from participating publicly in those disputes, and after what was undoubtedly a difficult struggle with his ego, desires, and aspirations, took holy orders and eventually served a small parish in rural Bemerton. Herbert’s pastoral temperament thinly veils what he reveals in texts such as his poem “Nature” and his practical treatise A Priest to the Temple; he was a seasoned veteran of the strife between the darkness of sin and the light of God’s grace. In these texts, Herbert confesses that he is an individual who is, because of his nature, sinful and unclean, yet at the same time, he also recognizes that he lives as a mere part of a much larger broken natural order. His awareness of his dual identity manifests itself in his anticipation of both Christ’s judging and rescuing as necessary actions that will restore the integrity of his individual nature and the beauties of the creation he inhabits.

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George Herbert’s commitment to combining his devotional and poetic practice affords him a great opportunity to confess his role as a condemned sinner in a wounded world. However, his texts also echo the language and content of the church’s more public prayers. In that sense, Herbert’s Temple resembles a “book of common prayers” and his texts express devotional thoughts consistent with the public liturgical worship the Book of Common Prayer frames (Targoff, 94). One example of this occurs when a reader compares Herbert’s poem “Nature” with the concerns the church voices during the season of Advent. Instead of functioning merely as a means of extending the celebration of Christmas, Advent has historically served as season of penitence and preparation for the coming of the Christ child as savior, as well as the second coming of Christ as judge. The pericopes for the

1 See Chapter 3: 1624 and The Temple (pp. 53-63) in Cristina Malcolmson’s George Herbert: A Literary Life (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) for a concise but thorough catalogue of theories to explain the timing of Herbert’s ordination and his move to Bemerton.

2 A Catholic Dictionary (Donald Attwater, Ed. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961) defines Advent as the season “leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ on Dec. 25, beginning on the Sunday nearest St. Andrew’s Day (Nov. 30), which Sunday is the first of the Church’s year. The liturgy of Advent makes continual reference to the forthcoming event (especially by passages from the prophecies of Isaias), for which it prepares by penitential observances; Te Deum is omitted from Matins and Gloria in excelsis from Mass; purple vestments are worn and organs must be silent (except on Gaudete Sunday)... Except by permission of the ordinary, the solemn nuptial blessing may not be given at marriages from the beginning of Advent to Dec. 25 inclusive.”
Second Sunday in Advent in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer emphasize how both broken nature and broken people anticipate the “end times”:

There shall be signs in the Son, and in the Moon, and in the stars; and in the earth the people shall be at their wittes end, through despair. The sea and the water shall roar, and men’s hearts shall fall them for fear, and for looking after those things which shall come on the earth. For the powers of heaven shall moue. And then shall they see the son of man come in a cloud, with power and great glory. When these things began to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nye. And he shewed them a similitude: beholde the fygge-tree, and all other trees, when they shote furth their buddes, ye see and knowe of your owne selues that sommer is then nye at hate. So lykewyse ye also (whe ye see these thinges come to passe) be sure that the kyndome of God is nye. Verely I saye unto you: this generacion shall not passe, tyll all be fulfilled: Heauen and earth shall passe: but my worde shall not passe. (Luke 21:25-33)

This text provides a clear eschatological perspective for those who live in a fallen world: in the last days, both the elements of nature and the people of the world recognize the dire circumstances in which they live. The waters of the earth will “roare,” but perhaps more significantly, individuals will be “at their wittes end” and filled with “despayre.” Their “heartes shall fayle them for fear.” Clearly, a sinful world lives in fear as it anticipates the coming of the “sonne of man”: he will judge this fallen creation.

At the same time, however, Luke’s text moves us beyond the concept of fear. It encourages Christians to recognize Christ’s return as a means by which their “redempcion draweth nye.” The person of Christ is their redemption, and even though the temporal world “shall passe”, they should find comfort in Christ’s promise that Christ’s “worde shall not passe.” Luke’s text then anticipates Paul’s assertion to the church in Rome that all the members of a corrupted creation groan in “earnest expectation” for that day when Christ will transfigure all things and restore harmony with God (Romans 8:18-22). The reading also emphasizes the image of the fig tree, which Christ employs as a means of confirming the Christian’s hope for renewal and restoration before God. Christ, the seed promised throughout the Old Testament, bears his greatest fruit as he sheds his blood on the tree of the cross. Likewise, he encourages the Christian to find comfort as she feeds upon the food that has its root in the seed of Christ. When she sees the “buddes” and later the fruit of the “fygge tree,” she can rest in the surety of Christ’s “worde” and his affirmation that “the kyndome of God is nye”: Christ establishes and preserves his church through the proper administration of his sacraments; he feeds his church through the preaching of his gospel; and he comforts his church with the reality of his incarnation and his promise to return again.

In his poem “Nature,” George Herbert faces the complex (and at first glance contradictory) promises of both judgment and salvation. In his text, Herbert’s speaker immediately identifies himself as a sinful participant in a fallen world, and consequently, Herbert’s reference to “nature” in the title has clear implications for both his flesh and his soul. C. S. Lewis recognizes as much when he reconciles the title and substance of Herbert’s poem:

Nature means ‘we human beings in our natural condition’, that is, unless or until touched by grace. This is what ‘Nature’ means as the title of one of Herbert’s poems. It is about the element of the untransformed, ungraced human nature in the poet—his Old Man, Old Adam, his vetustas, full of rebellion and venom, untamed, precarious, and perishing. The classic place for this contrast is the Imitation (iii, liv): ‘Diligently watch the motions of nature and grace... nature is subtle and
always has self for an end... grace walks in sincerity and does all for God.’ In the next chapter the author adds a linguistic note: ‘for nature is fallen and so the very word ‘nature’ (though she was created good and right) now means the weakness of fallen nature.’ (54)

Lewis correctly identifies the diagnostic element at work within the poem: human nature and the natural world in which it dwells are corrupted and condemned. However, Herbert goes even further in recognizing God’s gracious prescription for correcting our “fallen ness” and the compromised mortal position of the natural world. Herbert clearly expresses his realization that Christ comes as judge to destroy, but it is destruction guided by a gracious purpose: the incarnate Christ dares to enter this fallen world, allows himself to be destroyed, and ultimately works through that destruction to rescue and restore the human nature.

Herbert opens the poem with his confession. His speaker captures the essence of the natural world in general and the speaker’s human nature in particular. From Herbert’s perspective, the individual is filled with thoughts of “rebellion” (line 1). This rebellion manifests itself in the speaker’s willingness to “die,” “fight,” “travel,” and “deny” that God has anything to do with him. The rebellion that Herbert describes here is reminiscent of an image he presents in Chapter 30: “The Parson’s Consideration of Providence” of A Priest to the Temple. In this chapter, Herbert captures the manner in which “God’s goodness strives with man’s refactoriness” (245). Herbert reminds his readers that “man would sit down at this world” while “God bids him sell it” (245). He then offers this parable to make his case:

...just as a father, who hath in his hand an apple, and a piece of apple under it; the child comes, and with pulling, gets the apple out of his father’s hand: his father bids him throw it away, and he will give him the gold for it, which the child utterly refusing, eats it, and is troubled with worms: so is the carnal and willful man with the worm of the grave in this world, and the worm of conscience in the next. (245-6)

The speaker’s art lies in his efforts to evade God; his flesh foolishly clings to the worms and grave of this dead world. Eventually, he must concede that he needs God to “tame” his “heart” (line 4). However, Herbert sees God’s action as more than a taming of the sinful human heart; he describes God’s ability to “captivate” the “strongholds” of the human heart (line 6) as his “highest art” (line 5).

In this stanza, Herbert presents a context in which the intimate relationship between God and the individual is not bound by temporal boundaries. In one sense, Herbert’s prayer is much more than a personal request. One can recognize his prayer that calls upon God to remake, not only the speaker, but the Christian church as a whole. Herbert also moves outside the limits of chronology. Yes, the reader can understand Herbert’s poem as referring to the moment when God justifies, and consequently redeems, the Christian. At the same time, Herbert’s repeated stanza structure suggests that Herbert is describing the continual sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the poem. In a real sense, Herbert captures the daily prayer of all the baptized when he implores God to remain united to both the church and individuals. Herbert indicates the unity between Christ and the poem’s speaker is his use of end rhyme. Herbert rhymes “heart” with “art” (lines 4 and 5) to locate Christ and his work in the life of the individual. He also rhymes “me” and “thee” (lines 3 and 6) to emphasize that, though separated by the reality of the Fall, Christ and his church, as well as Christ and the individual Christian, share a significant and intimate unity. This unity then serves as the perfect impetus for Christ to feed and preserve Herbert’s weak faith, and as a result, reanimate his mortal heart.

In the second stanza, Herbert continues to contrast his sinful nature with God’s goodness. His speaker acknowledges that if God were to allow the “venom” of his rebellion to “lurk” in his heart and “fume and work” into all sorts of “suggestions” (lines 7-8), then the speaker would be lost
eternally. If God fails to intervene, he is permitting the speaker’s sinful nature to fester unchecked, then his “soul will turn to bubbles straight” and will vanish “into a wind” (lines 9-11). What is worse, the loss of the speaker’s soul transforms the “workmanship” of God’s saving art into “deceit” (line 12).

Herbert’s speaker does not want to be the cause of God’s wasting his saving work. Instead, in the third stanza, he begs God to intervene and “smooth” his “rugged heart” (line 13), and, essentially, practice his highest redemptive art on him. This is both the church’s prayer and the individual Christian’s prayer, and as such, Herbert suggests that the “art” of God’s reply to these prayers can take two forms. First, God can choose to “smooth” the speaker’s “rugged heart” and “(e)ngrave” his “law” and a “fear” of the law on the speaker’s heart (lines 13-14). Herbert’s speaker then asserts that God may choose to simply “make a new” heart for him because the “old” one has grown “sapless” as a result of sin (lines 15-16). The poem closes with Herbert’s speaker returning to the theme with which he opens the poem: the problem of his broken nature. His old sapless heart is a “stone” that “much fitter” for hiding the “dust” of his mortal and corrupt flesh than for serving as a place to “hold” Christ and his healing gifts (lines 17-18).

The poem closes, and Herbert’s prayer anticipates two important responses from God. The first is Herbert’s acknowledgement that God transforms human flesh and shapes it into a receptacle fit for him. In the incarnation, a New Man (a receptacle of dust) also shares the divinity of the Godhead. Herbert’s prayer suggests that through God’s word and his sacrament action, Christ fills and transforms the stone of the church and the dust of each individual believer into entities that receive their essence from him. One can assume that John’s gospel influences Herbert’s thoughts. Herbert shares John’s conviction that Christ

was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in his name: who were born, not of blood, not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:10-14)

Texts such as Herbert’s “Nature” and excerpts from his practical A Priest to the Temple emphasize the paradox that manifests itself when the incarnate Christ’s willingly enters a world that is at once his own and yet completely hostile to him. The paradox continues when one realize that Christ’s appearance within this world results in judgment (and destruction) on the one hand and rescue (and restoration) on the other.

Herbert certainly wrestles with this paradox throughout his writings, yet in Chapter 34: “The Parson’s Dexterity in Applying of Remedies” of his A Priest to the Temple, he moves toward a reconciliation of Christ’s identity as both judge and savior. He encourages the parish priest and individual Christian to find comfort and peace in the consistency of God’s preserving work in both the natural world and the life of each individual. Likewise, Herbert desires that we view ourselves and the world we inhabit as a “continued creation” (254). That perspective lifts us out of the boundaries of time and forces us to view God’s work in Genesis, as well as God’s work in Christ, as performing “a creation every moment” (254). Herbert envisions God as performing his saving work in both his acts of creating and his acts of preserving (or re-creating). His gratitude for God’s ability and desire to make all things new leads him to challenge any Christian to dissociate God’s preserving work from God’s creating work:
He conceives not possible how he that would believe a divinity, if he had been at the creation of all things, should less believe it, seeing the preservation of all things, for preservation is a creation, and more it is a continued creation, and a creation every moment. (254)

For Herbert, God’s ongoing process of creation, even when it actively involves judgment and destruction, serves the purpose of the gospel. In fact, Herbert encourages the Christian to closely examine the duality of human experience: both the natural world and each individual are corrupted and fallen, yet God loves his creation so much that he pours out his wrath on his son and destroys him. Therefore, Herbert can find solace when he dives unto the boundless ocean of God’s love and the unspeakable riches of his loving kindness. He hath one argument unanswerable. If God hate them, either he doth it as they are creatures, dust and ashes, or as they are sinful. As creatures, he must needs love them; for no perfect artist ever yet hated his own work. As sinful, he must much more love them, because notwithstanding his infinite hate of sin, his love overcame that hate, and with an exceeding great victory which in the Creation needed not, gave them love for love, even the son of his love out of his bosom of love. So that man, which way soever he turns, hath two pledges of God’s love that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established: the one in his being, the other in his sinful being: and this as the more faulty in him, so the more glorious in God. And all may certainly conclude that God loves them, till either they despise that love, or despair of his mercy: not any sin else but is within his love; but the despising of love must needs be without it. The thrusting away of his arm makes us only not embraced. (256)

As the artist whose words have crafted this world, God loves his creation, and loves it so much that he sacrifices his greatest love, his son, to restore it to perfection and unity with him.

As Herbert wrestles with his own fallen nature and the corruption of the world around him, he finds himself facing a God who both promises both the reality of judgment and the continual hope for restoration. In his poem “Nature,” along with selections from A Priest to the Temple, such as Chapter 30: “The Parson’s Consideration of Providence” and Chapter 34: “The Parson’s Dexterity in Applying of Remedies” he develops four important themes regarding the individual’s contact with a God who is continually either damning or saving. First, he defines God’s saving work according to its synthesis of language and action. Herbert understands God’s word or speaking as equivalent to his act of creating. From this perspective, Herbert confesses a doctrine of creation per verbum, which implies that God’s hypostatic, spoken, and written word are all actively creating and preserving the church, as well as the new heaven, and a new earth that will replace our temporal reality. Readers of Herbert should not be surprised then by his emphasis upon God’s engraving of the heart; that action serves as the impetus for Herbert’s own poems and prayers, as well as the prayers of the Christian church at large.

At the same time, Herbert describes God’s saving work in terms of action, which connotes his omnipotence. God’s prescription for this sinful world in general, and sinners in particular, lies in his ceaseless activity: he works everything in everything that is (Althaus, 110). God is the driving dynamic force that impels and moves creation; he assists the order of creation that he has established (Preus, 202). Herbert reflects this in his focus upon God’s intimate physical corrective acts of smoothing, engraving, or even remaking the individual and the world he inhabits.

A third theme that Herbert identifies as integral to God’s saving work is the immediate and intimate relationship that God maintains with him. Herbert recognizes that God is present in his creation
now: in his creatio continua, God’s ongoing creative activity preserves, sustains, and directs the elements of his creation, as well as the individuals and institutions within his creation. This divine providence assures the Christian of God’s operative dynamic personal presence in the world (Preus, 204-5). The intimate tone of Herbert’s texts, especially “Nature,” demonstrates his belief that the incarnate Christ is completely capable of destroying the Old Adam and continually remaking him into the likeness of the New Adam.

Finally, Herbert emphasizes the comfort that the individual Christian finds as he observes an omniscient Christ’s judging and rescuing of a fallen world. All things and events are before God; he sees, knows, and understands our reality now. As a result he addresses each individual’s past, present, and future concerns and needs. Herbert writes as one who realizes that he is never out of Christ’s purview and care. This perspective is reminiscent of Luther’s assertion that no matter where one goes, one can only fall into God’s hands:

Where does a man who hopes in God end up except in his own nothingness? But when a man goes into nothingness, does he not merely return to that from which he came? Since he comes from God and his own non-being, it is to God that he returns when he returns to nothingness. For even though a man falls out of himself and out of all creation, it is impossible for him to fall out of God’s hand, for all creation is surrounded by God’s hand. So run through the world; but where are you running? Always into God’s hand and lap.3

Clearly, Herbert and Luther share the recognition that the conflicts we experience within ourselves, with other corrupted individuals, and with the compromised natural world all work together to define the fallen nature of the world in which we dwell. We should not be surprised when our guilty consciences turn the world of God’s creation into an arena of enmity and anxiety for us. However, George Herbert’s texts provide us with a cogent assessment of the dual nature of God’s work in this world. He cannot help but see God’s work through the incarnate Christ as always dynamic, eschatological, and soteriological in character. When Herbert confesses his own sinful nature and considers God’s own works of judgment and redemption, he most likely turned to texts such as the collect for the Second Sunday in Advent. In the text of that prayer, he would speak of God, who like him, relies on the power of words during the act of creation:

Blessed lord, which hast caused all holy Scriptures to bee written for our learning; graunte us that we maye in suche wise heare them, read marke, learne, and inwardly digeste them; that by pacience, and coumfort of thy holy woorde, we may embrace, and euer holde fast the blessed hope of euerlasting life, which thou has geuven us in our sauiour Jesus Christe. (34)

In this prayer, the church confesses, along with Herbert, its belief in the possibility of God’s words: to condemn the individual’s sinful nature and world he inhabits; to transform the Christian’s heart and life; and finally, to lead to the new heaven and the new earth. The engraving of Herbert’s texts, as well as the prayers of the church, identify God’s act of engraving his word upon hearts and lives as the destructive means by which he erases our old identities and old ways of life. But more importantly, both God and Herbert realize their greatest glory when the poet sets all conflict aside and simply rests in the hand that transforms him into a new creation every moment.

WORKS CITED


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A Lutheran Primer
By Les "Gutenberg" Stahlke
In the Lutheran Comedy Classic: “Martin Luther’s Last Surviving Classmate”

Look!
Look and see!
See Luther run!
Run, Luther, run!
Luther ran!
Oh, oh!
It is raining!
It is pouring!
See the Lightening!
See Luther get scared!
See Luther hide under that big tree!
See Luther pray to St. Anne.
“If you save me,” prayed Luther, “I will become a monk, okay?”
“That’s okay with me,” said St. Anne, “but if you don’t get out from under that tree, you will become a friar.”

Oh, oh!
See the lightning hit the tree!
See the tree get rent asunder!
“Ach! Yammer!” said Luther.
See Luther clearly define Law and Gospel.
See Luther go to the monastery.
See Luther learn that indulgences are wrong.
“Wholly unnecessary, Batman,” said Luther.
See Luther write 95 Theses.
See Luther nail the Theses to the church door.
See Luther bang his hammer.
Bang your hammer, Luther, bang your hammer.
See Luther bang the wrong nail. “Uff dah!” said Luther.

Oh, oh!
Now the Pope is mad.
See the Pope send Luther an angry letter.
It is a Papal Bull.
“That is a lot of bull,” said Luther.
See Luther barbecue the Pope’s Bull.
“You burned my Bull,” said the Pope.
“Now you will have to go to a Diet of Worms.”
(A Diet is a long synodical convention with no meals.)

Oh, oh!
See King Charles tell Luther to shut up.
“I can’t,” said Luther.
“Then recant,” said King Charles.
“I can’t recant,” said Luther.
“Then go start the [Wisconsin] Synod!” said King Charles.
“Oh, goody,” said Luther, “now I can get married.”
See Luther look for a wife.
See Luther find nun.
See Luther and Kitty get married.
See Kitty get morning sickness.
“What does this mean?” said Luther.
“We shall have a little Lutheran soon,” said Kitty.
“Is this true,” said Luther, “or are you just ribbing me?”
Kitty said, “This is most certainly true!”