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Breaking *The Church*: George Herbert's Problem with "Obedience"

by Jonathan Gallagher

*This essay begins by asking why, in revising, restructuring, and extending his work in the Bodleian Manuscript, George Herbert broke the original sequence of *The Church* after "Obedience." I then offer a speculative response to this question based on a close reading of "Obedience" and an effort to historicize its theological and social content. Three claims are central. First, I suggest that particular devotional and theological significance ought to be attributed to "Obedience" in relation to *The Church* sequence overall. This is true, as I figure mainly through the writings of Martin Luther, insofar as the poem addresses what for Reformation theology was a definitive principle of Christian liberty. Correspondingly, "Obedience" purposes to conduct what for the Christian subject is a defining but only potentially redeeming act of consent to God's Law. Second, through close reading and discreet reconstruction, I consider how this act of consent is obstructed in Herbert's poem. Above all, I suggest, this obstruction should be understood in terms of a social and religious contest for the voice of the first-person speaker, and a failed introspection of the Christian neighbor. Finally, I argue that "Obedience" not only marks a theological impasse that was decisive for Herbert's restructuring of *The Church* in the Bodleian manuscript, but additionally, and crucially, that it also shows us how his poetry and theology were vitally responsive to changing social and class relations in England during the early seventeenth century.*

THE sequences of George Herbert's poetry in the Bodleian (B) and Williams (W) manuscripts diverge most sharply and fully after "Obedience."¹ In W, six poems follow "Obedience," begin-

¹ All references to the respective manuscripts are from Mario A. Di Cesare, ed., *George Herbert "The Temple": A Diplomatic Edition of the Bodleian Manuscript (Tanner 307)* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1995); and Amy Charles, ed.,

ning with "Invention" and "Perfection/The Elixir," and ending with "Love (III)." In *B*, "Love (III)" again ends the sequence, but an additional seventy lyrics now stand between "Obedience" and "The Elixir."² Establishing dates for these additions and changes has proven difficult for textual scholars. However, broad consensus is that the poems in *W* were written in the period from 1615 to 1625, while Amy Charles and Mario Di Cesare make a good case for the authority of the *B* manuscript as Herbert's "final intention about the text and order of his poems," dating its composition to 1627/28.³

Critics across several decades now have also shown us the scope of interpretive issues at stake. In revisions for "The Elixir," Charles Molesworth and Helen Vendler see Herbert rejecting fears of damnation in favor of an expression of faith characterized by "untroubled confidence."⁴ Similarly, Sidney Gottlieb finds that "the quick and disturbing shifts in tone and mood so much in evidence in *W*" are "smoothed out" in *B*; the extended sequence rejects earlier tendencies to self-abasement and works to establish a "high" church architecture for the poems.⁵ Janis Lull offers a compelling and comprehensive study of individual revisions. She draws on Stanley Fish in maintaining that Herbert redrafted in order "to shape more precisely the experience his readers would have"; his poems "train their readers in the methods demanded by the Bible—ironic, figurative, and indirect."⁶

One other contribution is especially valuable and will be important for the argument to follow. Cristina Malcolmson has observed in the organization of *W* a "structure of self" that is determined by an emergent

The Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems: A Facsimile Reproduction (Delmar, NY: Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, 1977). The *W* manuscript carries both titles for this poem, "Perfection/The Elixir"; for ease of distinction I will refer to "Perfection" when discussing the *W* manuscript, and "The Elixir" when speaking of the *B* or 1633 text.

² "Invention," renamed "Jordan (II)," falls several places back in the series.

³ See *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xxxvii; and Charles and Di Cesare, introduction to *The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems: A Facsimile Of Tanner 307* (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1984), ix. Both Charles and Di Cesare are of the view that *B* was used by Thomas Buck as the copytext for the 1633 edition of *The Temple*.

⁴ Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 235. See also Molesworth, "Herbert's 'The Elixir': Revision towards Action," *Concerning Poetry* 5 (1972): 12-20.

⁵ Gottlieb, "The Two Endings of George Herbert's 'The Church,'" in *A Fine Tuning: Studies of the Religious Poetry of Herbert and Milton*, ed. Mary A. Maleski (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1989), 58.

⁶ Lull, *The Poem in Time: Reading George Herbert's Revisions of "The Church"* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 13.

Protestant work ethic.⁷ The doctrine of particular and general callings, preached in England by William Perkins, provided a complementarity between social advancement and inward purity that appealed to the scholar-poet's secular ambitions. However, with his prospects of preferment finally at nought under Charles I, Herbert attempts to divest his poetry of a devotional model that had quickly shown itself a threat to the static and hierarchical structure of English social relations.⁸ The later *B* manuscript works to purge a self that is "intent on promotion, and to replace it with an inner purity of mind 'breaking out' into social appearances."⁹

Yet while each of the above critics makes an integral contribution to how we understand the development of *The Temple*, their accounts of that development overwhelmingly focus on the revisions in *W* and *B*. Thus they share a compelling and basic omission that will provide the starting point for this essay: Why, in revising, restructuring, and extending his work, did Herbert choose to break the original sequence of *The Church* after "Obedience"?¹⁰ To be sure, the question has verged on formulation several times. Lull, for example, notes a conceptual and metaphorical contiguity among "Obedience," "Invention," and "Perfection" built around references to English land law. "After carefully setting up this metaphorical progression," she asks, "why would Herbert choose to break it apart?"¹¹ Richard Strier, too, has discussed the apparent

⁷ Malcolmson, *Heart-Work: George Herbert and the Protestant Ethic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2.

⁸ In *Treatise of the Vocations* (1603), Perkins addresses and tries to resolve this tension in the doctrine of vocations, noting that "when we begin to mislike the wise disposition of God and to think other men's callings better for us then our own, then follows confusion and disorder in society. . . . [H]ence comes treacheries, treasons and seditions, when men, not content with their own estate and honour, seeke higher places: and being disappointed, grow to discontentments, and so forward to al mischief" (quoted in Malcolmson, *Heart-Work*, 149). Malcolmson believes that Herbert gave up his pursuit of high office after Charles declined to attach a position of employment to a grant of land he made to George and Edward Herbert following the death of their mother in 1627. As such, Malcolmson also dates the revisions of the *W* manuscript to this year or shortly after. See her *George Herbert: A Literary Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2004), 100–101.

⁹ Malcolmson, *Heart-Work*, 100.

¹⁰ This question is doubly important if the earlier *W* text is understood as a finished work, as several scholars maintain. See Greg Miller, "Scribal and Print Publication: The Case of George Herbert's English Poems," *George Herbert Journal* 23 (1999–2000): 14–34; and Lillian Myers, "Facing Pages: Layout in the Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems," *George Herbert Journal* 21 (1998): 73–82. Of course, there is no evidence that Herbert oversaw production of *B*. Myers is convinced that had Herbert supervised the production of the Bodleian manuscript, it would be "a significantly different work" (72). However, neither is there conclusive evidence that *W* is autograph.

¹¹ Lull, *Poem in Time*, 126.

contradictions and formal irregularity of "Obedience" at length, attributing these to a period of "theological development."¹² But despite the heavy revisions in *W* to directly subsequent poems, as well as the whole rearrangement that pivots on this lyric in *B*, no wider or specific significance for "Obedience" has yet been posited.¹³

In the pages that follow, I offer a speculative engagement with these issues based on a close reading of the poem and an effort to historicize its theological and social content. Three claims will be central. First, I will suggest that particular devotional and theological significance ought to be attributed to "Obedience" in relation to *The Church* sequence overall. This is true, as I will figure mainly through the writings of Martin Luther, insofar as the poem addresses what for Reformation theology was a definitive principle of Christian liberty. Correspondingly, "Obedience" purposes to conduct what for the Christian subject is a defining but only potentially redeeming act of consent to God's law. Second, through close reading and discreet reconstruction, I will consider how this act of consent is obstructed in Herbert's poem. Above all, I suggest, this obstruction should be understood in terms of a social and religious contest for the voice of the first-person speaker, and a failed introspection of the Christian neighbor. Finally, I will argue that "Obedience" not only marks a theological impasse that was decisive for Herbert's restructuring of *The Church* in the Bodleian manuscript: but additionally, and crucially, that it also shows us how his poetry and theology were vitally responsive to changing social and class relations in England during the early seventeenth century.

I

The books of the Old Testament contain no separate word for "obedience" or "obey" (from Latin *oboedire*: *ob-* "in the direction of" + *audire* "hear"). The *Dictionary of the Old Testament* notes that "obey" translates various conjugations of the Hebrew verb "to hear": לְשָׁמוֹעַ, הִקְשִׁיב, הִשְׁמָעוּן.¹⁴ Also notable in this context are relations between land and obedience in the OT. On some occasions God punishes *disobedience*, or unhear-

¹² Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 96.

¹³ Lull concludes that "it was a decision to elevate the single element over the aggregate, to encourage readers to see in the poems . . . not puzzles and 'darke instructions' but simplicity and light" (*Poem in Time*, 127).

¹⁴ See Genesis 22:18 and Isaiah 42:24. All subsequent biblical references are from the 1611 King James Version and are cited parenthetically in the main text.

ing, by exile—i.e., from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:22–24) and from the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 4:25–28); on others, obedience itself entails exile and the forgoing of one’s homeland (Genesis 12:1). Issues around personal and social relations to land are central to Herbert’s “Obedience,” but at this point I mainly want to stress how the Judeo-Christian concept of obedience is defined by this dynamic with hearing and is understood as contiguous with faith. It is not possible for any term in this series, insofar as it relates to Christian experience, to be affected without qualitatively affecting the others. This is also reflected throughout New Testament writings. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the emphasis is on how Abraham’s obedience is born of faith or from listening to God’s call (Hebrews 11:8). Similarly, in Romans, the obedience called for is an obedience of *faith* (Romans 1:5 and 16:26). And again, with an important difference in emphasis, the same dynamic is found in 1 Peter 1:1–2, where “Obedience is the result (*eis*) of the sanctifying work of the spirit and the electing and foreknowing work of God the Father.”¹⁵

Importantly, Martin Luther also focuses on this binding contiguity early on, in *Christian Liberty*, to articulate the doctrine of justification by faith alone:

Thus the soul, in firmly believing the promises of God, holds Him to be true and righteous; and it can attribute to God no higher glory than the credit of being so. The highest worship of God is to ascribe to Him, truth, righteousness, and whatever qualities we must ascribe to one in whom we believe. In doing this, the soul shows itself prepared to do His whole will; in doing this it hallows His name, and gives itself up to be dealt with as it may please God. For it cleaves to His promises, and never doubts that He is true, just, and wise, and will do, dispose, and provide for all things in the best way. Is not a soul, in this its faith, most obedient to God in all things? What commandment does there remain which has not been amply fulfilled by such an obedience? What fulfillment can be more full than universal obedience? Now this is not accomplished by works, but by faith alone.¹⁶

This passage sets forth a specifically theological meaning and understanding of obedience, which aims at personal and universal fulfillment of the Law. Though a degree of mutuality is hardly in question, this nevertheless should be distinguished from the concept’s secular appli-

¹⁵ Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), s.v. “Obedience and Lawlessness.”

¹⁶ Luther, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, Harvard Classics 36, ed. W. Eliot Charles, trans. R. S. Grignon (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1963), 351.

cation in other Reformation contexts, which concern merely the avoidance of transgressing the law as constituted by particular jurisdictional authorities.¹⁷ Both contexts have a bearing on Herbert's "Obedience," but the specifically theological significance of the concept will be central to my account of how the poem does and does not work.¹⁸

With this in mind, furthermore, we should also note that within Luther's complex formulations is embedded a reciprocal recognition that is decisive for Reformation theologians: true obedience belongs to Christ alone.¹⁹ For Luther, "the promises of God give that which the precepts exact, and fulfil what the law commands."²⁰ Such promises are known only through God's Word, expressed above all in Christ: "He alone commands; He alone fulfils."²¹ Thus individual faith of heart, on the promise of imputed righteousness, is the only meaningful expression of obedience to which fallen humanity can aspire: "For what is impossible for you by all the works of the law, which are many and yet useless, you shall fulfil in an easy and summary way through faith."²² In a dichotomy that is crucial for an elaboration of Herbert's poem, it is the quality of faith, in contradistinction to works of the law, that above all determines the Christian subject's capacity for true obedience.

The above passage is not, however, without important theological

¹⁷ See Glenn Burgess, "Political Obedience," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 83–99.

¹⁸ Among other sources, this approach is based upon Nicholas Tyacke's view that a solifidian view was still dominant at Cambridge and Oxford Universities up to and for most of the 1620s. See Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c. 1590–1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 173. See also Strier on Herbert's indebtedness to Luther's doctrine of justification by faith and Luther's influence in England more broadly (*Love Known*, xiii). The theological significance of obedience can also be observed in further Reformation debates on whether imputed righteousness pertained solely to Christ's *obedientia passiva* or included his *obedientia activa*. Johannes Turretin states the issue in *Elenctic Theology* (1679–85) under "The Matter of Satisfaction": "Is the satisfaction of Christ to be restricted to the sufferings and punishments which he endured for us? Or is it to be extended also to the active obedience which perfectly fulfilled the law in his whole life?" (quoted in Edwin Tay, *Priesthood of Christ: The Atonement in the Theology of John Owen (1616–1683)* [Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2014], 114). Earlier Lutherans, like George Kargius and Johannes Gerhard, had restricted the principle to Christ's passive obedience, as had Johannes Piscator, on the Reformed front, in *A Learned and Profitable Treatise of Man's Justification*, translated into English and published in 1594. However, the doctrine never obtained unanimous agreement. See Tay's discussion of this issue (*Priesthood of Christ*, 114–33).

¹⁹ On the broad importance of this theme for Luther and for his doctrine of justification specifically, see Ian Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (London: Yale University Press, 1970), 144.

²⁰ Luther, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, 350.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

ambiguities. Expressed in this way, for example, *sola fide* remains indebted to Augustine, for whom a voluntary assent to obedience is integral, despite the human will's deficiency for the task of salvation.²³ For Luther, the only meaningful embodiment of this principle in human terms—of obedience, that is—depends upon ascribing to God the “glory of truth and of universal goodness, as it ought in truth to be ascribed.”²⁴ Such an ascription is the “something widely different” from self-serving exertions of body and soul that is “necessary for the justification and liberty of the soul.”²⁵ In the broader context of Luther's theology, however, “as it ought in truth to be ascribed” is a complicated dictum. For although Lutheran and Augustinian models of faith both emphasize transcendence and the autonomy of God's love (or *agape*), Luther's moment of ascription emerges in a situation of deeper precarity: namely, in a creature whose spiritual and rational faculties are irremediably debased.²⁶ Thus a *truthful acceptance* of God's love on these terms—total autonomy and value on one side, broken contingency on the other—must ultimately encompass the question of what kind of acceptance a creature without value can offer or perform. What would constitute a true or correct form of acceptance, which is to say obedience? More pressingly, how might it be falsified? This is at least partly Luther's concern in saying “as it ought in truth to be ascribed,” and it relates to a condition of subjective truth, an order of inward tension, that constitutes the only valid basis and experience of faith.

Such concerns are also ubiquitous and paramount in Herbert's poetry. They are heard in “Affliction (I),” where the speaker implores, “Lord let me not love you, if I love you not” (66); and in “The Holdfast,” “But to have nought is ours, not to confess / That we have nought” (9–10).²⁷ Here, as often in *The Temple*, Herbert uses chiasmus and an-

²³ On Luther's relation to Augustine on this issue, see Harry McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, “The Bondage of the Will”* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 142–45 and 330–32.

²⁴ Luther, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, 354.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 346.

²⁶ Especially instructive on this issue is Matt Jenson's *The Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther and Barth on “homo incurvatus in se”* ([London: T&T Clark, 2006], 47–97). See also Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 70; and Denis R. Janz, *Luther and Late Medieval Thomism* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983), 154.

²⁷ See also “Dialogue”: “But when all my care and pains / Cannot give the name of gains / To thy wretch so full of stains; / What delight or hope remains?” (5–8); and “Love (III)”: “Ah my deare, / I cannot look on thee” (9–10). All citations are from Helen Wilcox, ed., *The English Poems of George Herbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

tithesis to produce moments of paradox and shock whose depths are a response to Luther's insights on the incurvature of the religious person. The type of astonished vigilance that Herbert's poetry frequently and consequently calls for forms a crucial strand of *The Temple's* devotional work and development overall. In this light, it is not difficult to see why, as many critics have shown, determining the full intentional, theological, and historical scope of Herbert's lyrics can require vigilance of a similar order. This is the spirit in which the present argument will continue. "Obedience," I want to show, is a poem that rewards patient and discreet reconstruction with key insights into Herbert's theological and poetic development. Yet just as importantly, this approach also provides us with a striking view of the critical and discursive substance of this poetry in relation to broader religious and sociopolitical transformations of the period at large.

II

My God, if writings may
 Convey a Lordship any way
 Whither the buyer and the seller please;
 Let it not thee displease,
 If this poore paper do as much as they.
 ("Obedience," 1-5)

The first line of "Obedience" couples "God" and "writings." Furthermore, in a clearly deliberate but still obscure signal of intent, "if" has been made positionally central to this coupling and to the beginning of the poem. Contingency, that is, imposed at the level of linguistic form, determines the speaker's stance in the moment of approach to One with whom he is incommensurable. Additionally, from a logical point of view, the supplication appears to telescope an act of mixed hypothetical reasoning—"if writings" segueing to a major premise. This perhaps marks no more than a routine acknowledgment that the efficacy of the prayer to follow will not be dependent upon the persuasive force or artifice of the poet, that the speaker is solely reliant upon the grace of God. In theological terms, of course, such contingency is legitimate only when shaped by the inscrutability of God's love and power (and not by the gift-agency of the speaker, for example). And this sense is reinforced with "may," the modal verb positioning the phrase within the authority of one who is able to determine what may or may not be permitted.

The scope of these potentials takes more substantial form in lines

two and three. The appeal instead, and directly, turns upon the claims and limitations of language's conventional aspect: upon the social efficacy of "writings" in the conveyance of "Lordship." Helen Wilcox has glossed this as "a reference to the frequent sales of 'Lordships' by the Crown in the early seventeenth century."²⁸ The broader social character of the phenomenon is expressed more clearly in John Donne's *Paradoxes and Problems*. There, among the world's requirements for a variety of Green, we find need of "a *Goose-green* for sudden *new men enobled* from *Grasiers*."²⁹ In "Obedience," Herbert is more terse and analytical still: the divine fixture of "Lordship" now serves at the pleasure of "the buyer and the seller"—an inversion of social obligation and norms of obedience to which "writings" are notably and ominously integral.

As the sole use of the term "Lordship" in Herbert's poetry, it is reasonable to infer that the broader historical implications of this opening statement are purposive. The *OED* notes that "Lordship" denotes "sovereignty," "the land belonging to a lord," or "the territory under a lord's jurisdiction."³⁰ Thus the juxtaposition in lines 2 and 3 of "Obedience" is of a social order in which political authority is personally embodied and divinely fixed, with one in which authority and property is above all subject to commerce. Expressed in the guise of a hypothetical proposition, furthermore, what the poem explicitly questions is not merely symbolic appropriation or the commercializing of social obligation but the validity of a material change in traditional structures and practices of rule, as well as their characteristic mode of reproduction.

With this reading, three historical perspectives emerge for the work of Herbert's poem, two of which we have already noted. First, there is the proliferation of titles and lordships under the Stuart kings—in actuality, to generate revenue and consolidate the social basis of monarchical power. This featured prominently among the complaints of Parliament and English liberties discourse more broadly during the early decades of the seventeenth century.³¹ Second, there is the encroach-

²⁸ Wilcox, *English Poems*, 376.

²⁹ Donne, *Paradoxes and Problems*, in *Selected Prose*, ed. Helen Gardner, Timothy Healy, and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 19.

³⁰ *OED Online*, s.v. "sovereignty," defs. 1.a. and 2.a.

³¹ On the importance of this practice for the reproduction of social forms of court life, see Heide Gerstenberger, *Impersonal Power: History and Theory of the Bourgeois State*, trans. David Fernbach (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2009), 178. On the emergence of English liberties discourse, see David Harris Sacks, "Freedom to, Freedom from, Freedom of: Urban Life and Political Participation in Early Modern England," *Citizenship Studies* 11 (2007): 135–50.

ment of "the buyer and the seller"—merchants and prosperous yeomen, or the "middling sort"—upon the social and political power of the nobility, anxiety over which is widely observable during the same period and has been examined at length by historians.³² And finally, there are the "writings" by which these transformations are seemingly achieved: contractual models of exchange that are evidently impersonal and permit the free alienation of property and social obligation, as well as (magisterial) authority more generally.³³

Identifying the concerns of the speaker of "Obedience" in the midst of this nexus, however, is far from straightforward. And here we can particularize what feels like another potential disjuncture between the title and the opening of one of Herbert's lyrics.³⁴ In line with the theological understanding of obedience discussed above, we could expect this poem to enunciate a spiritual advance upon the mechanics of "Submission," an earlier lyric in *The Temple* that attempts a straightforward censoring of the will. Rightly understood, the latter forms a preliminary for the possibility of obedience. But the beginning of "Obedience" instead offers a dilemma that turns upon one's understanding of "Lordship" and the true power of "buyers and sellers" and "writings." This establishes critical ambiguities over voice, agency, and intention. One available reading, for example, could see the order of contingency scan-

³² Thomas Wilson's observation in 1600 is typical: "but my young masters . . . not contented with the states of their fathers to be counted yeomen and called John or Robert . . . must skip into . . . velvet breeches and silken doublet and, getting to be admitted into some Inn of Court or Chancery, must ever after think it scorn to be called any other than gentleman" (quoted in Nigel Wheale, *Writing and Society: Literacy, Print, and Politics in Britain, 1590–1660* [London: Routledge, 1999], 21). Christopher Hill argues for a significant development of capitalist social relations in England prior to the English Revolution that encompassed sections of the English gentry and yeomanry in a "rural bourgeoisie"; see Hill's final statement of this argument in "A Bourgeois Revolution?" in *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 109–39. See also Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641*, abridged ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967). Stone posits a crisis in the English nobility's structures of material and symbolic reproduction between 1580 and 1620, seeing the rise of the gentry as to some extent, though by no means entirely, "an optical illusion in the social fabric" (9–10). Finally, consider also Robert Brenner's superb *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³³ For a rich discussion of the "contracting subject" and how the language of economic contract encroached and acted upon relations of political and social obligation in early modern England, see Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640–1674* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1–25, 41–48, and 279–84.

³⁴ Anne Ferry offers an illuminating study of this issue, in "Titles in George Herbert's 'little Book,'" *English Literary Renaissance* 23 (1993): 314–44.

dalously reshaped, so that the speaker begins with a personal stipulation of terms over the possibility of rendering obedience—a reversal that defrauds covenant theology of any credibility whatsoever. Another more conventional and acceptable reading would see the operation of agency suffer a no less fateful diremption at the outset. In this case, the efficacy of sacred resignation is made dependent upon, and thus potentially sundered by, the objective status of language in contractual models of exchange. Compulsion, of course, is implicit in both models. But the speaker's motivation at this point is unclear and the tone is difficult. It isn't the spiritual hesitancy or humility that we find elsewhere in *The Temple*, as in "Dialogue," for example:

Sweetest Saviour, if my soul
 Were but worth the having,
 Quickly should I then control
 Any thought of waiving.

(1-4)

A degree of naivety could be attributed to the opening petition of "Obedience," but otherwise the tone is jarringly formal. No doubt it is excessive, and of course it feels so, to find a tone of aggressive bargaining or a bartering for guarantees—a reading that would see the speaker lobby for a more fluid system of property rights as a condition of Christian obedience. But strikingly, this notion cannot be discounted within the opening five lines. If it is, we proceed on the basis of common sense on how not to "displease" God rather than on the particularity of the poem. Furthermore, the common-sense approach, combined with a Latinate inversion in line 4, carries back over the opening lines a suspicion that the speaker does not in fact believe that writings may do so: that "writings" may "Convey a Lordship any way / Whither the buyer and seller please" (2-3). The mood, potentially, is subjunctive rather than conditional. With this, the speaker's values become resolutely feudal and aristocratic and opposed to the arbitrary commercial flux of buyers and sellers. They also carry across the semicolon: a falsification of "Lordship" and the uncertainty of a buyer's rights now shadow the efforts of "this poor paper," of the poem itself, to "do as much as they."

Both in terms of voice and explicit content, then, the status of the poem is in question from the outset, as is the human institution of language. Elizabeth Clarke has examined the influence of Juan de Valdes's "system of mortification" in Herbert's poetry, and she sees similar questions arise in "The Holdfast":

Then I confess that he my succour is:
 But to have nought is ours, not to confess
 That we have nought. I stood amazed at this,
 Much troubled, till I heard a friend expresse,
 That all things were more ours by being his.

(8–12)

"One by one," writes Clarke, "all human statements are invalidated by a mysterious Other who overturns the logic of human discourse."³⁵ The poem's final two lines demonstrate the hoped-for outcome of this methodology: they "are designed to represent an absolute conflation of human rhetoric and divine voice. . . . [D]ying to human rhetoric should mean that the divine language comes in to take its place."³⁶ Also valuable on such issues is William H. Pahlka's study of Augustine's divine teleology of verse and its bearing on Herbert's poetics:

For Augustine, writing poetry and human sinning were fundamentally inseparable. *De Musica* makes it clear that the human voice in poetry has no more claim to Truth, Beauty, or Being than the human voice in rhetoric can claim. *De Musica* does not take back anything that is given away in *De Doctrina Christiania*. The difference is simply that in rhetoric, the human voice speaks alone; in poetry, the corrupt and unreliable human voice is joined by divine voice.³⁷

Augustine makes an essentially Neoplatonic argument for the divine character of meter: language arranged by stress and number provides an opening for human discourse to be sacralized. The conventional and arbitrary may by procedures of imitation embody a divine rationality of number that animates the created universe. Thus relation to the Logos is within the ambit of poetry's possibility and function.

In Herbert scholarship, these models are often discussed with reference to the "Jordan" poems and what they are thought to espouse of Herbert's aesthetic theory. "Jordan (II)," in particular, is widely held to be a mature statement of Herbert's poetics. Here the poet expresses a wish to move beyond the "trim invention" and "lustre" of his early verse, beyond the "Thousands of notions" that had overrun his brain (2–3 and 7). The poem calls instead for a plain style that is more strictly reliant upon the inspiration of God. Yet Herbert qualifies, and possibly

³⁵ Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 237.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Pahlka, *Saint Augustine's Meter and George Herbert's Will* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1987), 17.

reverses, the Sidneian model of imitation and expressive sincerity. The governing command is no longer “look within thy heart and write” but instead “*There is in Love a sweetnesse ready penn'd: / Copie out onely that, and save expense*” (“Jordan (II),” 17–18). As Rosemond Tuve commented: “If you would look upon Love, the imitation thereof would be poetry.”³⁸ And as Pahlka elaborates: Herbert’s “‘Jordan’ poems show that, for his own poetry at least, the excellence of imitative technique is not so easily separated from the excellence of the object of imitation.”³⁹

Less often noted in these discussions, however, is that “Jordan (II),” which is certainly the most explicit testimony of Herbert’s poetic development in *The Temple*, begins life in the *W* manuscript under the title of “Invention” and as a direct follow-up to “Obedience.” Furthermore, it seems not yet to have been considered that a meaningful and discursive relationship might obtain between these two poems—that issues raised or encountered in “Obedience” may in fact be pivotal to “Invention” and to Herbert’s mature poetics more broadly. This, indeed, is an argument that I ultimately want to make, and I will pursue it fully in the latter parts of this essay. Yet neither is it difficult to see how such an oversight could occur. For “Obedience,” of course, will afford only the most partial appropriation of the aesthetic models discussed above. We have seen that an object of imitation is proposed explicitly in the poem’s opening lines: it is not the excellencies or sweetness of Love or God, but the dubious efficacy of legal contract. If this is read as a moment of class-based irony and social commentary, which instead entails the sort of claims for “this poor paper” that are made for verse in “The Quiddity,” then still the opposition faced is not one of divine voice and human discourse, nor is it an authentic contemplation of God’s self-sameness versus an ardency of human feeling. The conceptual opposition is between *verse* and “writings [that] may / Convey a Lordship whichever way the buyer and the seller please.” That is, an individual and sacred practice of mimesis is opposed to legal contract. And the latter is presented as an objectification of social relations that not only permits the alienation of land but also claims the right to determine the validity of political authority. Crucially, in “Obedience,” the possible preponderance and agency of this objectification—of said “writings”—over social relations are implicit from the outset.

In summary of my argument and reading so far, then, a form of imi-

³⁸ Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert* (London: Faber, 1952), 193.

³⁹ Pahlka, *Saint Augustine’s Meter*, 13.

tative theory is articulated in the opening lines of "Obedience," but it is unclear which. Possibly, a relation that should be determined by love, that can be achieved and sanctified only through *faith* and *hearing*, is made dependent upon legal obligation—which is to say it is secularized and alienated in works of the law. This is an obviously and carefully counter-Lutheran approach to obedience, but we have seen already that it is not simply that. For it allows two distinct readings to emerge. In one, a definitive act of Christian devotion and theology is instrumentalized and used as a basis for the advance of self- and class-interest, suggesting a social and religious profile of the speaker—in this instance, it is safe to assume—closer to "buyers and sellers" than "Lordship." This also presents an identifiable target for critique at the outset. Alternatively, we have seen that the tone could be ironical or dispirited, pertaining to a pessimism about the ability of the poem's language to be truly separated or redeemed from its everyday instrumentality: the material of legal contract and commercial exchange.⁴⁰ Language's potential for mystical union equally accommodates the alienation of God's ordered social hierarchy of "Lordship" and property.

Between these poles, it is easy to feel implicated in the drama of misreading that Heather Asals observes in *The Church* and in Herbert's sacramental use of irony, paradox, and tension.⁴¹ Yet it is also important, I suggest, to note a further potential among these coordinates: namely, that the opening petition of this prayer is split at its source. And in this case, moreover, it is of utmost significance that the occurrence would seem less a poetic device by which the author as "efficient cause" seeks de-creation than a contest of social identities that fills the space within which grace or Love might otherwise work.⁴² With these broad social and religious contexts in mind, along with our possible speakers and readings, let us now turn to consider the second and third stanzas.

⁴⁰ Elsewhere, and predominantly in *The Temple*, we can note that language's sacred aspect in poetry depends upon a refusal of precisely the facile reduction to unity here proposed. See especially "The Quiddity," which affords to "verse" a privileged devotional function and status that is determined negatively against various traditional symbols of aristocratic and bourgeois prestige and "is that which while I use / I am with thee, and Most take all" (11–12).

⁴¹ Asals, *Equivocal Predication: George Herbert's Way to God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 6–7.

⁴² See Pahlka, *Saint Augustine's Meter*, 237–38.

III

On it my heart doth bleed
 As many lines, as there doth need
 To passe it self and all it hath to thee.
 To which I do agree,
 And here present it, as my special Deed.
 ("Obedience," 6–10)⁴³

The standard emblem of the devotional appeal for transformation, "my heart," has been withheld until the second verse. Intervention or assistance is in this instance unnecessary, however: the speaker's heart, of its own accord, "doth bleed / As many lines as there doth need / To pass itself and all it hath to thee" (6–8). Unlike other poems such as "Mattens," in which the speaker asks for heavenly light so as to see the work to be done, in "Obedience" the speaker has clarity enough. The tone of assurance is also unlike other moments of confidence and quiet strength in *The Temple*, such as can be identified in "Affliction (III)": "making it to be / A point of honour, now to grieve in me, / And in thy members suffer ill" (14–16). This kind of feeling and humility is absent in "Obedience." Its assurance is more strident and parallels more closely the effort of submission by deed in "The Pearl":

I know all these, and have them in my hand:
 Therefore not sealed, but with open eyes
 I fly to thee, and fully understand
 Both the main sale, and the commodities;
 And at what rate and price I have thy love;
 With all the circumstances that may move.
 (31–36)

Notably, in "The Pearl," these sentiments are tagged with a characteristic mitigation and reversal:

Yet through the labyrinths, not my grovelling wit,
 But thy silk twist let down from heaven to me,
 Did both conduct and teach me, how by it
 To climb to thee.

(37–40)

As throughout *The Temple*, the yet-construction here carries a motion of return to the eternal present and priority of God's love. Claims of

⁴³ W "As many lines as it doth need" (7); B "To passe it self, & all it hath to thee." (8); and W, omitting comma (10).

self-worth that border on transgression are tempered and offset with the acknowledgment that God loves first. "Obedience" offers no such deflection, however. Virtually nothing, in fact, can be found in this poem by way of self-deprecation or abasement. Addressing what I have proposed was for Reformation theologians the definitive principle of Christian liberty, and purposing to conduct what for the Christian subject was a defining but only potentially redeeming act of consent to God's law, stunningly, "Obedience" intimates a condition of sinfulness only to the extent of pronouncing its future impossibility by way of the speaker's present and conclusive act of exclusion:

If that hereafter Pleasure
Cavil, and claim her part and measure,
As if this passed with a reservation,
Or some such words in fashion;
I here exclude the Wrangler from thy treasure.

(11–15)

This stricture on "Pleasure" builds on the "special Deed" of the second stanza to produce in "Obedience" a posture of caricatured Pelagianism. In each instance, the speaker proclaims a devotional autonomy that is deemed sufficient for the task of salvation.⁴⁴ Of course, Pelagianism featured mainly as Puritan obloquy against the Laudian regime in the later 1620s, as repression of Nonconformist elements in the English Church intensified.⁴⁵ Yet the "Pelagian errors" of the Laudians, as Nathaniel Bernard disclaimed in 1632, pertained to "high altars, crucifixes, bowing to them, and worshipping them, whereby they very shamefully symbolize with the church of Rome."⁴⁶ Accusations of autonomy and self-sufficiency, notably, fell within the rhetorical sphere of anti-Puritan sentiment. It is in this vein, for example, that Herbert attacks the Puritan Andrew Melville and the Scottish Presbyterians in *Musae Responsoriae*

⁴⁴ We can compare here Augustine's anti-Pelagian take on the myth of the self-made man in *Sermons*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, 3.2, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1990): "It is he who made us and not we ourselves (Psalms 100:3). After all, why should he add *and not we ourselves*, when it would have been enough to say *it is he who made us*? Why indeed, if not because he wanted to warn against that invention whereby people say 'we made ourselves, that is, of course, we made sure of being just, we made ourselves just by our free will'" (94).

⁴⁵ See John Spurr, *English Puritanism, 1603–1689* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998), 79–93. On the relation of Puritan reform movements to prevailing social divisions and traditional culture in the 1620s, see also David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 44–73.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Spurr, *English Puritanism*, 90.

(ca. 1620–21), for a pride that “quits with leaders, quits with teachers (*5:14).”⁴⁷ Malcolmson notes that the view of society that emerges in this collection of Latin verse is “of an earthly but sacred harmonious order” and that Herbert’s Puritans “are primarily characterized as uncontrolled and vulgar in their refusal to accept the principle of hierarchy.”⁴⁸ Such quitting was also of acute concern to the political and religious establishments over the colony in Virginia, which attracted increasing numbers of Puritan immigrants as the 1620s wore on. In *A Sermon Preached to the Honorable Company of the Virginia Plantation, 13 Nov. 1622*, Donne, now Dean of St. Paul’s, warned of those “that goe thither . . . to live at their libertie . . . to devest *Alleagance*, to bee under no man,” and those that “propose to themselves present benefit, and profit, a sodaine way to be riche.”⁴⁹

In one of the more obscure periods of his life, Herbert sat as a member in the Commons for the 1624 Parliament, during which James I revoked the Virginia Company’s charter. Also worth mentioning, perhaps, is a contest that had played out over the several years previous. In 1619, a “gentry party,” led by Edwin Sandys, wrested away control of the Virginia Company from Thomas Smith and its merchant leadership. Its success relied by and large upon arguments decrying the merchants’ willingness to exploit their commercial monopolies to the detriment of the general joint stock.⁵⁰ This not only endangered the colony’s economy as a whole but also jeopardized the religious purpose that had been used to legitimize the settlement from the outset. Among the gentry party’s leading activists were John Danvers and Nicholas Ferrar, step-father and spiritual brother to Herbert respectively. Amy Charles surmises that the poet must have been “gravely troubled” at the outcome in 1624.⁵¹ “Through his step-father,” Charles writes, “an active supporter of the company, he should have known more of its affairs than many of the shareholders themselves”; moreover, “Nicholas Ferrar and various relatives of Herbert’s interested in the venture probably also conveyed to him something of their growing concern over the fate of the colonies

⁴⁷ Quoted in Malcolmson, *A Literary Life*, 34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁹ Donne, *Selected Prose*, 194.

⁵⁰ See Frank W. Craven, *The Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century, 1607–1689* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), 126; see also Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 98.

⁵¹ Charles, *A Life of George Herbert* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 107.

that Herbert later described as 'not only a noble, but also as they may be handled, a religious employment.'"⁵²

Undoubtedly, such contexts can seem remote from the concerns of "Obedience." However, by pursuing an exposition of the poem's conceptual structure, language, and tone within its historical and theological moment, a perspective emerges in which their significance becomes increasingly apparent. Importantly, this significance resides not only at the level of content—though in this instance it is found there also. But rather, in the above contexts we begin to see an essential structural homology with "Obedience" that corresponds to an ideological view in which commercialism and religious transgression combine to fracture and destabilize divinely sanctioned hierarchy in the political nation. I have tried to show how "Obedience" foregrounds this issue at the outset. Furthermore, we have seen that its elaboration depends not only upon a grasp of the ecclesiastical and political splintering that occurred in England during the 1620s, but equally, and typologically, on a Pauline and Lutheran dichotomizing of faith and law, along with a sense of how both of these were objects of direct and compelling experience during this period. With these contexts in mind, and in light of the discursive field established by the lyric's opening verses, let us now turn to stanzas 4 and 5 of the poem, whose tonal register has also perplexed several critics:

O let thy sacred will
 All thy delight in me fulfill!
 Let me not think an action mine own way,
 But as thy love shall sway,
 Resigning up the rudder to thy skill.

Lord, what is man to thee,
 That thou shouldst minde a rotten tree?
 Yet since thou canst not choose but see my actions;
 So great are thy perfections,
 Thou mayst as well my actions guide, as see.

(16–25)

Mood and tone shift dramatically here as the speaker, possibly aware of transgression, now takes a more doxological approach. At first hearing, certainly, these verses resonate more soundly with Augustinian sentiments expressed earlier in the collection. Strier has remarked that the

⁵² Ibid.

"language of willing and contracting has once again been deceptive. The speaker does not want to steer himself to God but to be steered by God, to become an object on which and through which God's will—that is, His love—works."⁵³ Beyond a transformational instability of consciousness, Strier sees a manner of deception to which the legal and commercial figurative register is merely incidental. No further explanation or motive is given: the deception remains untargeted and obscure.

Yet what Strier proposes as a reversal in the ultimate subject-object relation could, I propose, just as conceivably read as the most contrived blandishment and act of self-exertion in the entirety of the poem. Such a reading would not merely convert "saintly impertinence" to blithe and transgressive assurance, furthermore, but would see impassioned devotional speech hollowed out by a switch in attitudinal and figurative registers that is at once too quick and gauche to be credible.⁵⁴ This reading does not view in these stanzas the "arduous effort" toward a love of God that William Empson spoke of, but rather crude and strained exertions of voice and form that offer a cracked mirror image of such effort and that produce a shattering effect on the trust necessary for sacred artifice and utterance.⁵⁵ "Obedience," in this view, acquires the cryptic feel of a "love you not," in the sense of a potential falsification of obedience and truthful ascription, as discussed at the outset of this essay.

To account for such an occurrence in Herbert's poetry—or to simply countenance its possibility, perhaps—we can appeal to several contexts. The first and most obvious of these are the divisions that beset the English Church during the 1620s, as touched on above. The view of Herbert and his poetry as largely cloistered from these polemical and ecclesiastical contests has been successfully overturned for some decades now. Gottlieb considers "Conscience," which directly follows "Obedience" in the *B* manuscript, to be at the heart of a cluster of poems "that debate which of the contemporary devotional styles characterizes the true church."⁵⁶ This debate reaches a triumphant conclusion in "The

⁵³ Strier, *Love Known*, 93.

⁵⁴ In *Love Known*, Strier insists that "[t]here is no mistaking the 'saintly impertinence' of 'since thou canst not choose' and the jaunty quality of 'Thou mayst as well.' The lines are playful because they are happy" (ibid.).

⁵⁵ "One may also distinguish between the love of God which is an arduous effort towards a goal and the love of God which has achieved its goal, which being a mystical illumination has no doubts and is its own reward" (Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity: A Study of Its Effects on English Verse*, 3rd ed. [London: Chatto, 1953], 184).

⁵⁶ Gottlieb, "Herbert's Case of 'Conscience': Public or Private Poem?," *SEL Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 25 (1985): 114.

British Church," Herbert's unambiguous celebration of the *via media*. However, Gottlieb is also adamant that "not enough has been made of how the disagreeable alternatives through which the British Church navigated with great difficulty are dramatized before we reach the triumphant resolution of this poem."⁵⁷ In this light, we might see "Obedience" as just such a dramatization, with Herbert choosing to expose the crude naivety and false consciousness of the Puritan—distinctly and threateningly of the "middling sort"—from the perspective of one who is committed to sacred hierarchy in social and ecclesiastical relations.

Yet another approach to "Obedience" might also emerge by weighing more carefully the revisions of *The Church* undertaken in the *B* manuscript and, importantly, the attempted self-purging that critics like Gottlieb and Malcolmson have identified. In *Heart-Work*, Malcolmson demonstrates in rich detail what she sees in Herbert's poetry as "the anxiety of one caught between status categories."⁵⁸ A younger son of the nobility, Herbert suffered financial insecurity for the better part of his adult life, and, in electing for life as a country parson, he chose a socially indefinite role, "neither manual laborer nor established gentleman."⁵⁹ But this anxiety is also ideological. Malcolmson follows Max Weber in crediting seventeenth-century preachers, and William Perkins in particular, with having constructed in their sermons "a new structure of self."⁶⁰ Above all, this entailed sacralizing the value of labor in a secular calling. While for Perkins, however, the goal was an ethic of work that would check private covetousness and social mobility in "an ambitious age of medlars," in Herbert's early poetry the coupling of devotion and business is used "to provide a justification for the acquisition of status and wealth."⁶¹

A double irony emerges, which may be characteristic of English social relations during this period more broadly, in that Herbert had little option but to misuse Perkins's teaching on labor in order to pursue the same goal: as an impoverished and downwardly mobile noble, the acquisitive and performative impulse of the buyer and seller had become necessary for a nominal preservation of traditional status and hierarchy.⁶² Yet in Herbert's revisions for the Bodleian manuscript, Malcolm-

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁸ Malcolmson, *Heart-Work*, 111.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶² See Robert Brenner's important study, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe," *Past & Present* 70 (1976): 30–75.

son sees an attempt to “erase such a justification as a form of pollution.”⁶³ Furthermore, at some level “a resolution of the contradictory dual class position inhabited by Herbert is a systematic purpose of ‘The Church’ from the outset.”⁶⁴

What I want to propose in this essay is that an attempted and failed resolution of these class positions in “Obedience,” which are imbued with conflicting religious ideologies and meanings, was of decisive importance both for Herbert’s recognition of the need for such self-purging in the first place, as well as for his decision to break with the *W* sequence of *The Church* after this poem in particular. The indeterminacy of voice and agency in the first stanza, which we have seen to be coordinated between antagonistic social groups and values, is the opening maneuver in this attempted reconciling. It embodies Herbert’s ambivalent social and religious position. Yet the ambivalence of the poem is one in which the danger of both self-division and complacent mutuality is no less starkly evidenced and is implicitly acknowledged through a reconstruction of the buyer and seller’s posture in the attempt to negotiate terms for obedience. The underlying threat, it should be clear, is presented as not merely commercial but as at the same time encompassing the Puritan’s trust in and claim for the efficacy of direct, nonsacramental worship of God—a trust that, in this instance, transmutes into a form of bartering that has travestied covenant theology altogether. Such a forceful and transgressive undersong, of course, might bring into question the idea or credibility of the poem’s conciliatory work and suggest a determined failure from the outset; but importantly, and as I will now consider by way of conclusion, this failure is not straightforwardly one-sided.

IV

In the closing stanzas of “Obedience” some questions I posed concerning the opening of the poem appear to be at least partly answered:

He that will pass his land,
As I have mine, may set his hand
And heart unto this deed, when he hath read;
And make the purchase spread
To both our goods, if he to it will stand.

⁶³ Malcolmson, *Heart-Work*, 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

How happy were my part,
 If some kind man would thrust his heart
 Into these lines, till in heavens court of rolls
 They were by winged souls
 Entered for both, far above their desert!

(36-45)

"He that will pass his land, / As I have mine" is the voice of the nobly dispossessed rather than the newly ennobled. The line approves of stoic resignation in the midst of anxiety over historical change and decline. It is not therefore to be assumed, however, that the intervening stanzas are straightforwardly univocal.⁶⁵ I have suggested that this is a poem in which a social competition for the individual voice is foregrounded at the outset. With this in mind, it is instructive to consider the juxtaposition between the above stanzas and that which directly precedes them:

Wherefore I all forego:
 To one word only I say, No:
 Where in the Deed there was an intimation
 Of a gift or a donation,
 Lord, let it now by way of purchase go.

(31-35)

F. E. Hutchinson annotated these lines with a note from Thomas de Littleton's *Treatise on Tenures* on the "purchase-sale": "Purchase is called the possession of lands or tenements that a man hath by his deed or by his agreement."⁶⁶ Strier has offered strict limits for the implications of such a note. The "purchase" referred to above, he contends, is an acknowledgment of Christ's sacrifice, the "strange love" of the previous stanza, which might not be "withstood" and is the cost of man's reconciling with God.⁶⁷ Lull agrees, though with some curious inversions: "By stanza 7, the speaker of *Obedience* has realized that he has no 'Lordship' to convey through 'this poore paper.'"⁶⁸ However, "he still has a tenant's claim to his own heart, the kind of squatter's right that tends to dispossess the rightful lord through customary disregard of the letter of the law."⁶⁹ Lull has the speaker of "Obedience" begin as a lord

⁶⁵ For further perspectives on the multiplicity of speakers in Herbert's lyric verse, see Mary Ellen Rickey, *Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1966), 142; Wilcox, *English Poems*, 404; and Vendler, *Poetry of George Herbert*, 186.

⁶⁶ Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 514.

⁶⁷ Strier, *Love Known*, 94.

⁶⁸ Lull, *Poem in Time*, 125.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

but emerge, courtesy of a transformational moment of recognition, as a copyholder, with customary rights of possession.

The important difference between this approach and my own is straightforward. Where Lull sees Herbert drawing “analogies between English land law and the theological issues that concerned him,” I argue that English class relations and the social distribution of landownership are in themselves theological issues for Herbert and, where they are invoked, are constitutive of (and not mere vehicles for) the issues worked through in individual lyrics.⁷⁰ Thus while the Christological detourment of “purchase” in stanza 7 is conventional and clearly at play on one level, on another, courtesy of the statement’s modesty and indeterminacy, there is an implicit refusal or inability to resolve the opening tension of the poem. The possessive and appropriative impulse of “the buyer and the seller” reemerges and is preserved as we approach the concluding movement. Furthermore, its juxtaposition with the aristocratic posturing of the sixth stanza is especially significant insofar as this produces a clear fractural point within the form of the poem itself, as the speaker now turns from God to address his readership.

This irregular end-address has provided yet another source of confusion in “Obedience,” with Strier citing a lack of “theological clarity.”⁷¹ However, the move foregrounds what I think is a formal innovation in Herbert’s strategies of contingency, which throughout *The Temple* mark the predominant feature of the devotional stance. The poet’s vocation can be claimed only and at all times with the active principle that “*It is he who made us and not we ourselves*” (Psalm 100:3), and the quality of poetry is directly tied to the quality of faith:

There is a rare outlandish root,
Which when I could not get, I thought it here:
That apprehension cur’d so well my foot,
That I can walk to heav’n well neare.
 (“Faith,” 9–12)

In “Obedience,” the formal expression and purpose of this contingency undergo further permutation. Just as earlier lyrics are obliged to posit their failure, in its closing movement “Obedience” seeks to overcome the objectification of the other as a condition of its success.⁷² The final

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁷¹ Strier, *Love Known*, 96.

⁷² Compare “Good Friday”: “Sin being gone, O fill the place, / And keep possession with thy grace; / Lest sin take courage and return, / And all the writings blot or burn” (29–32); also “The Temper (I)”: “How should I praise thee, Lord? How should my rhymes /

two stanzas are left open-ended: *obedience* as an accomplished state of living within God's will is incorporated and deferred:

How happy were my part,
 If some kind man would thrust his heart
 Into these lines; till in heavens court of rolls
 They were by winged souls
 Entered for both, far above their desert!
 ("Obedience," 41–45)

The underlying principle of these lines looks very much like an Augustinian understanding of *caritas*—the motion toward the enjoyment of God, self, and other, *for the sake of God*.⁷³ Of course, if by focusing upon the importance of Luther's doctrine of faith alone for Herbert's poetry we at the same time cancel Augustine, such a move is difficult to explain. And it is especially difficult to explain in a poem whose primary theological context, as I suggest, is a Reformation concept of obedience. However, as John Burnaby showed some time ago, distinguishing Augustinian from Lutheran perspectives on the idea of a fundamental antagonism between *agape* and *caritas* is somewhat misguided and relies upon a misreading of Augustine in particular.⁷⁴ More recently, Katrin Ettenhuber has also shown that the devotional and polemical currency of Augustine's principle of *caritas* was particularly strong in English religious discourse during the 1620s.⁷⁵

Yet there are still further reasons, in this instance, why a poem that avails itself of a Reformation tradition of *sola fide*, along with concomitant notions of obedience, should not be so compromised by an invoca-

Gladly engrave thy love in steel, / If what my soul doth feel sometimes, / My soul might ever feel" (1–4). Throughout *The Temple*, poetry is presented as a mode of writing that must explicitly posit its failure.

⁷³ The same principle, I think, informs the concept of "extension" invoked in "Employment (I)." This of course is an intersubjective model of Christian experience and obligation, implied again in "The Holy Scriptures (II)": "Thy words do find me out, and parallels bring, / And in another make me understood" (11–12). For another extensive and useful discussion of Herbert's Augustinianism, see Asals, *Equivocal Predication*, 57–76.

⁷⁴ This of course came in response to the better-known work of Anders Nygren. For Burnaby's rebuttal of Nygren's reading of Augustine, see his *Amor Dei, A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine*, The Hulsean Lectures for 1938, 2nd ed. (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1991), 109. For Nygren's view on Augustine's "caritas synthesis," and Luther's theological corrective, see his *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1982), 709–39. Nygren's work has informed much thinking about Herbert's poetry, especially that of Strier.

⁷⁵ Ettenhuber, *Donne's Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 16–22 and 226–32.

tion of *caritas* as received wisdom might have us think.⁷⁶ In “Obedience” the latter principle is undoubtedly used to overcome the boundaries of the subject, to inform a movement of collapse between “I” and “thou,” which features as one side of the faith required for a human fulfillment of obedience. In this essay, however, I have shown that as well as carrying definite social meaning in the shape of a contest between “buyers and sellers” on the one hand and “Lordship” on the other, both sides of the I-thou relation can also be understood as self-referential in “Obedience.” In this case, the I-thou relation expresses a degree of religious and ideological self-division that Herbert experienced and which, ultimately, he may have felt had come to compromise his devotional life and development. Notably, something of an imperative for a resolution of these issues occurs two poems earlier in *The Church* sequence:

But sinne hath fool' d him. Now he is
A lump of flesh, without a foot or wing
To raise him to the glimpse of blisse:
A sick toss'd vessel, dashing on each thing;
Nay, his own shelf:
My God, I mean my self.

(“Miserie,” 73–78)

In “Miserie,” the position of righteous judgment afforded to speakers of poems such as “Vantitie” and “Man,” as well as its implicit conception of self-worth, is ultimately rejected. The close of “Miserie” can as such be viewed as another local and informing context for the collapse of the I-thou distinction that is attempted in “Obedience.” Both poems, essentially, respond to a demand for the introspection of the Christian neighbor, which is the only proper means by which the Christian subject may be universalized. We considered Luther’s exhortation to such universalizing at the beginning of this article, which requires that the individual be determined solely by truthful obedience before God. The limits of the closing invitation of “Obedience,” bearing this in mind, become cru-

⁷⁶ It is worth noting here the efforts of contemporary Lutheran scholars to underscore the dynamism and nonsystemic character and development of Luther’s theology in contrast to overly systematized approaches. See Mary Graeber, “Luther on the Self,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 22 (2002): 115–32. “Luther’s radical opposition of self and neighbour shifts from an ‘either/or’ arrangement to something of a ‘both/and,’ as he looks for interdependent flourishing in a growing affirmation of temporal social existence” (116). See also Scott Hendrix, introduction to *An Essay on the Development of Luther’s Thought on Justice, Law, and Society*, by Edward Cranz (1959; repr. Mifflintown, PA: Siegler Press, 1998), i–xix.

cially significant: "He that will pass his land, / As I have mine, may set his hand / and heart unto this deed, when he hath read" (36–38). The speaker's gesture reaches only as far as one who will forego his claim to "Lordship," and such a one, clearly, for whom to renounce this claim entails a devout embrace of downward social mobility.

In other words, we may have a situation in which the need to overcome the objectification of the other has been experienced as central to Christian obedience, faith, and love; but the fruition of this experience, in "Obedience," is inadequate. My reading of the poem sees contesting social claims for the individual voice preserved rather than stripped.⁷⁷ The kind of perpetual voiding or self-emptying that would constitute the only meaningful loss of the I-thou distinction, as well as the true structural potential for a love of God, is denied. Critically, the poem succumbs to its formal limitations: "Obedience" splits the lyric form at both ends in its effort to produce an intersubjective curvature within the substance of the poem. It attempts to overcome a forbidden detachment from neighbor that is inherent to lyric form and which, as the results show, will not be surmounted easily.

To conclude, this attempt may also be viewed as flawed in inception, insofar as it fails to take account of the real preponderance of social relations and language over private conscience and intention. Herbert's recognition of these multiple failures, I suggest, is reflected in his decision, when revising and extending his work in the *B* manuscript, to break with the earlier sequence of the *W* manuscript after this poem in particular. "Conscience," which Gottlieb rightly reads as confronting "a threatening private and public enemy," and as effectively silencing Herbert's

⁷⁷ The theological issue here concerns the relation and nature of the ontic structure of the self to the *imago Dei* and the *coram deo*. Especially instructive on Luther's approach to such questions is Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, vol. 1, *Foundations*, trans. William H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979). Thielicke acknowledges that a process of transformation is integral to Luther's view of faith, but at the same time he questions the extent to which the reformer considered the ontic self as a legitimate object of theological attention. Compare also Mary Graeber, who argues that "The 'real thing' to which we are 'summoned' in Luther's theology is, of course, the confrontation, *coram deo*, with God's wrath and God's redemptive, recreating love. And this ultimately important, relationally constructed, rebirth must, in no way, be eclipsed by penultimate considerations related to the ontological development of a temporal self" ("Luther on the Self," 119). From these perspectives, Herbert focuses on the ontic structures of the person in a poem whose theological attention should adhere to the *coram deo* perspective exclusively. Alternatively, "Obedience" perhaps attempts to move dialectically between and beyond two competing instances of *coram hominibus*, to a defining *coram deo* (Matt Jenson points out that these are the constant concern of Luther's lectures [*Gravity of Sin*, 49]). As noted above, however, it is my view that in "Obedience" this move ends in explicit failure.

Puritan tendencies, would in this sense provide a belated response to a crisis point for which the younger poet had no answer—or no answer, at least, that was deeply resolved.⁷⁸ For, of course, the *W* manuscript does offer a response to the problems of “Obedience,” but it is above all aesthetic. In the wake of what I have argued is a crisis of devotional sincerity and speech, a crisis occasioned by a feat of formal ingenuity that had aimed at self-overcoming and -reconciling—in the wake of such a crisis, Herbert writes “Invention” and advocates a straightening of the lines: “There is in Love a sweetnesse readie penn’d; / copy out that: there needs no alteration” (17–18). The changed sequence of *B*, with “Conscience” displacing “Invention,” practically doubles the distance between “Obedience” and “Love,” but also covers this ground with greater salvific and sacramental surety. It prioritizes a religious resolution, now acknowledged as the source of earlier aesthetic trouble.⁷⁹

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⁷⁸ Gottlieb, “Public or Private Poem?,” 114.

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