

George Herbert's Altar and Art

George Herbert wished to glorify God with his poetry, as he apparently did with the other aspects of his life. He prays in the dedication to *The Temple*, "Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee;/ Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came,/ And must return. Accept of them and me,/ And make us strive, who shall sing best thy name."¹ While the Muses of classical days sung of heroes, their angers, great battles, and other worldly matters, Herbert's declared intent is to offer a sacrifice of praise to God while "Rhym[ing his reader] to good, and mak[ing] a bait of pleasure,"² both through explicit instruction such as that of "The Church Porch" and through examples of devotion like his poem "The Altar," a finely crafted artistic offering both expressing and fulfilling his avowed intention.

"The Altar" is the first poem in the main body of *The Church*, and Herbert successfully uses the shape to supplement his devotional and poetic ends:

¹This is page 5 in *The Works of George Herbert*, Ed. by F. E. Hutchinson, Clarendon Press, 1941. Text from Herbert's works will come from this edition unless otherwise noted.

²"The Church Porch," pg. 6, *Ibid.*

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant reares,
Made of a heart, and cemented with teares:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workmans tool hath touch'd the same.

A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name:

That, if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.

O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine.³

Line one declares that the altar is “broken.” This, along with line 2a, echoes Psalm 51:17: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” The word “broken” thus depicts humility on Herbert’s part; the fact that he penned the whole work, and the personal address of both “The Dedication” and “The Church Porch,” make the identification of the narrator with Herbert reasonable. With “broken” he also declares the imperfection of his poetry because of the limits of his fallen nature— the mind initially records “A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant [is]” before the scanning eye completes the line. The ending of a sentence between lines eight and nine, the very middle of the poem, also breaks “The Altar” in structural fact.

The “Lord” immediately follows the “broken ALTAR” of the first line. Since line 2a declares Herbert’s heart is the altar, this demonstrates that “The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart” (Psalm

³“The Altar,” Ibid., pg. 26

34:18). It also places God at the very center of the line; three words proceed and follow “Lord,” and it begins the central beat of the pentameter line. He is the one the poem must please to have genuine value, and the One the poem is being offered to. At the same time, the placement of the “Lord” in the line makes it clear that He is Himself the offering, for on the altar of an Anglican church, although the thirty-nine articles offer latitude to Zwiglians, the “real presence” of Christ in the elements during the Communion sacrament is celebrated. Christ’s “SACRIFICE” is also placed atop the “ALTAR” in lines fifteen and sixteen, and the grammar connects those two lines as well. This is the foundation of the poem, the cardinal support of its form, so the centrality of Christ the Lord’s crucifixion for the whole work is apparent— as Christ symbolically lies atop the altar in the closing lines, so He lies atop the altar of the whole poem. As value comes to the things of life as they are done for the glory of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:58), so value exists only in church ritual that centers on Christ and His sacrifice, the essence of the gospel and Christian preaching (1 Corinthians 1:17-2:2). Herbert acts as “[t]he Countrey Parson[, who] is in Gods stead to his Parish,”⁴ and offers the individual poem, the entirety of *The Temple*, and his heart and self to God as Jesus offered Himself.

“Thy servant,” the continuation of line one, involves a double reference to Christ and Herbert. Jesus is the Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 52:13-53:12) who offered Himself a sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 9:12). “Lord” can refer to God the Father and “thy servant” to Christ, in which case Herbert is pointing God to the propitiation made by His Son, who is literally at the Lord’s “right hand” (cf. Acts 2:33) in the line. From the central “Lord” the line divides to Christ “thy servant” and His being broken

⁴*A Priest to the Temple, or, The Countrey Parson*; Ibid., pg. 254, Chapter XX.

for atonement on the “ALTAR.” Herbert also wishes to point his parishioners to these things in preaching, and in the Communion ritual he “rears” or raises the Real Presence of Christ before the people before its distribution— Herbert is also the “servant” of the line, rearing the sacrificial altar as both poet and priest, and as a good servant, he surrounds the “Lord” with his “ALTAR,” his offering, and attends upon his Lord’s right hand. In addition, as God “doth go before” (Deuteronomy 31:8) His servants to safely lead the way, so Herbert as the “servant” is near the “rear[.]” and trusts in the protection of the “Lord” who appears a beat before him in the line. The placement of “servant” also implies that Herbert prays to God through the mediation of the “Lord” Jesus who provides direct access to the Father through the “broken ALTAR” of his atonement (1 Timothy 4:5-6).

Line one concludes as the servant “rears” the Altar. This carries a number of different meanings. As “ALTAR” and “thy servant” parallel each other, so do “broken” and “rears.” To “rear” is “to set on end; to make to stand up” (OED #1, p. 284),⁵ or “[t]o lift up or upwards as a whole” (OED #10a, p. 285) and Christ was “broken” when the cross He died upon was stood upon its end in the ground and He was nailed to it, “lifted up that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:14-15, cf. 8:28, 12:32,34). In Herbert’s day, to “rear” also meant “to raise from the dead” (OED #3a, p. 284), or “to cause to rise” (OED #4, p. 284)— “raise” grew to replace “rear” in the Bible translations between the Wycliff and the King James Version— so the term encompasses the method of the believer’s justification through the death of Christ and His rising from the

⁵OED stands for the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and definition and page numbers come from the second edition.

dead (Romans 4:25). “To rear” is also “to rise up (towards a vertical position or into the air)” (OED #15a p. 285), thus applicable to Christ’s ascension. The altar where the Lord was “reared” was approved of by God, who consequently “reared” Him again the third day, after which he was “reared” to His Father’s right hand.

“Reares” refers to Herbert’s building up of the “broken” altar as well. Herbert is a “father to his flock”⁶ or Church (1 Corinthians 4:15) which is Christ’s offered body (Colossians 1:18-25) made up of spiritual children who are both Herbert’s and Christ’s (Galatians 4:19, 1 John 2:13); Herbert “reares” his parishioners as a father does his children, and, as the body of Christ, offers them on the altar. He also literally reared up the Church and parish buildings where he ministered; he was the “instrument for reedifying of the Church [where he served], that had layen ruined almost twenty yeares. The reparation whereof, having been uneffectually attempted by publick collections, was in the end by his own and some few others private free-will-offerings succesfully effected.”⁷ Herbert, as an author, also “reares” the Church as a poetic series commencing in “The Altar.” The brokenness of the altar of line one can be a negative thing; it has fallen into neglect and needs repair (cf. 1 Kings 18:30) In accordance with the definition of “to rear” as “to arouse, animate, [or] stimulate” (OED #6, p. 284), line one pictures Herbert stirred to reparatory action and service at the sight of a fallen, “broken ALTAR.” The poetic altar is also imperfect, because Herbert, who “reares” it in the sense of “rear” as “to build up, create, bring into existence” (OED #7a, p. 284), is a mere mortal. Furthermore, the preference in the literary community for the “false hair...

⁶*A Priest to the Temple, or, The Country Parson*, Chapter XVI, pg. 250, Ibid.

⁷from “The Printers to the Reader,” p. 4, *The Works of George Herbert*, Ed. by F. E. Hutchinson, Clarendon Press, 1941.

enchanted groves... sudden arbours... [and] purling streams” of secular verse, brings truly “good structure... [which] plainly say[s], *My God, My King*, ”⁸ sacred poetry, into neglect.

At the same time, the altar of the poem positively emphasizes Herbert as a suppliant in “broken” humility offering the poem, which is pictorially shaped without discontinuities or blemishes. The parallel location, rhyme, and spelling of “reares” and the “teares” of line two emphasizes this. Ultimate responsibility for the poem is also given to Christ as the Servant, who “reares” (OED #7b, p. 284) all things in the sense that He created them and “by Him all things consist” (Colossians 1:17). Only because of His creative work and redemption could Herbert become a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17) and find it in his heart to offer “The Altar” to God (cf. 2 Samuel 7:27, Jeremiah 31:31-34). Herbert, having been “quicken[ed] [] together with Christ... [and] rais[ed] [] up together, and made [to] sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:5-6), has been reared himself, for he now “ha[s], hold[s], or sustain[s] (some part) in an elevated or lofty position” (OED #10b, p. 285). Because of this, he “reares” in the sense of “to turn or direct (esp. the eyes) upwards” (OED #12, p. 285) in prayer and “reares” his poems, since “to rear” can mean “to begin to sing” (OED #8b, p. 285).

Line two of “The Altar” begins, “Made of a heart.” The three occurrences of “heart” in the poem (1.2,5,10)⁹ cut across its shape, showing that Herbert’s heart has indeed been broken to humble submission by God’s power (1.8). The capitalized “HEART” of line 5 demonstrates this as well. Just as the “Lord” of line one is in the place where the sacrifice on an altar

⁸“Jordan (I), p. 56, Ibid.

⁹A reference like this refers to line numbers in *The Altar*.

would actually be, picturing Christ's offering of Himself, so the "HEART," the central word of the top line of a new section of the poem, is in the place of sacrifice, showing Herbert's offering of his heart to God. The fact that "HEART" lies directly underneath "ALTAR, Lord," and the similarities in sound in "altar" and "heart" reinforce this. The three locations of "heart" also support the statement that the altar is "made" of a heart, since the word covers most of the longitudinal parallels of the shape. It is possible that the idea of the virgin Mary, who was a "maid of a heart" and who gave birth to Jesus, who was thus "made of a woman" (Galatians 4:4), is implied. "Maid" signified "virgin" in Herbert's time (OED #2a, p. 207). The proximity of the Servant being reared (l.1) would seem to add force to this notion, along with the existence of the Romish idea of the "sacred heart of Mary." In this case the purity of the altar is emphasized. However, the plain meaning of "made of a heart" is that Herbert erects the altar of the poem out of a simple desire to please God. If his heart is the altar, then he has a "broken" (l.1) heart, both positively connoting meekness, and negatively lamenting that his sinful heart (Jeremiah 17:9) cannot make a perfect or whole altar or sacrifice. He declares that his poem is offered in humility and is thus acceptable to God, despite its imperfections.

The numerous meanings of "heart" illuminate various aspects of Herbert's general design in art of glorifying God. The definition of "heart" as "the centre of vital functions: the seat of life, the vital part or principle; hence in some phrases = life" (OED #2, p. 60), has relevance— considering the Servant of line one as Christ, that His altar is "made of a heart" describes His death, when He felt that "reproach hath broken my heart" (Psalm 69:20). This offering provided a way for Herbert to gain eternal life and offer service by "Quitting both his deserts and all the opportunities that

he had for worldly preferment[.] [For] he betook himself to the Sanctuarie and Temple of God, choosing rather to serve at Gods Altar, then to seek the honour of State-employments.”¹⁰ In his capacity as God’s priest and servant, Herbert wished to serve with all his “heart.” He sought to glorify God with his “MIND, in the widest sense, including the functions of feeling, volition, and intellect” (OED #5a, p. 61); the crafting of his poems clearly involved much thought and intellectual exercise. The heart represents “[t]he seat of the emotions generally; the emotional nature, as distinguished from the intellectual nature placed in the head” (OED #9a, p. 61). Thus, the emotions and the intellect were to participate in his artistic creation. The heart is also “[i]ntent, will, purpose, inclination, desire... [t]he seat of love or affection... [k]indly feeling; cordiality; heartiness... [s]usceptibility to the higher emotions; sensibility or tenderness for others; feeling... [t]he source of ardour, enthusiasm, or energy... [t]he seat of mental or intellectual faculties... understanding, intellect, mind, and... memory... [t]he moral sense, conscience” (OED #7, 10a, b, c, 11b, 12, 13, p. 61). Jesus commanded us to “love the Lord [our] God with all [our] heart, and with all [our] soul, and with all [our] mind, and with all [our] strength” (Mark 12:30), and Herbert seeks to make this commandment the foundation of his poetry. The heart is “[t]he seat of one’s inmost thoughts and secret feelings; one’s inmost being; the depths of the soul; the soul, the spirit” (OED #6a, p. 61)— Herbert offers God everything. This did not imply, however, prayer and poetry composed with the spontaneity valued by the Romantic; in the poetic Church of the Parson, “two great and admirable Rules [apply];... The first whereof is, [‘]Let all things be done decently, and in

¹⁰“The Printers to the Reader,” pg. 3, in *The Works of George Herbert, Ed. by F. E. Hutchinson*

order[.]’] The second, [‘]Let all things be done to edification,[’]”¹¹ Ritual and planning in poetry, including poetic prayer, is desirable. Herbert believed it is “reasonable service [in prayer]... when we use our reason, and apply our powers to the service of him, that gives them.”¹²

Because “cemented with tears” lies directly below “Lord, thy servant reares,” they are parallel line segments. Since the Lord, though His Servant, holds all things together in the world (Colossians 1:17), Herbert desires Him to hold together his poetry as well. He designates God as the real creator of his verses; they are “made of a heart,” but only His power can cut the stones: “A HEART alone/ Is such a stone,/ As nothing but/ Thy pow’r doth cut” (l.4-8). In the Old Testament, God commanded Israel that “[a]n altar of earth thou shalt make unto Me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings... in all places where I record My name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee. And if thou wilt make Me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it” (Exodus 20:24-25). The stones of such an altar would necessarily be “broken” and would not neatly fit together. Herbert gives God the ultimate creative power in his verse, which is “as Thy hand did frame” (l.3), but identifies with Him, working with His grace— only God can cut the stone of his heart, but it is his own repentant tears that hold the altar together.

“Reares” and “teares” are parallel, and the poem “reares” or “builds” in “tiers”— the reares/teares couplet forms an outer tier, along with the base in lines 15-16, followed by an inner tier of lines 3-4 and 13-14 and the supporting pillar of the intervening lines. The double significance of the Servant as Christ and Herbert extends to this line as well; line 2a shows

¹¹*A Priest to the Temple, or The Country Parson*, pg. 246, Chapter XIII, Ibid.

¹²Ibid., pg. 232, Chapter VI

forth Christ's love and determination to suffer for the sins of the world, and 2b depicts His Passion. His sacrifice and "tears" can "cement" the altar— His work on the cross marks the transition from the passing types of the Old Covenant to the eternal verities of the New, an event sacramentally commemorated on the Anglican altar of Herbert's Church. The "cement" that makes the Church Altar possible is the "tear[ing]" or piercing that Christ suffered in His hands, feet, and side. The sacrifice and the altar are both imperfect and perfect; it is "broken" (l.1) yet perfectly shaped— the altar of Herbert's crafting has "tears" or imperfections and rips, but the "tears" of Christ provide a perfect and complete offering, shown acceptable to God in His "rear[ing]" Him from the dead.

Herbert asserts God's hand is involved even in the "tears," the "parts," the holes and imperfections of the altar in the following line: "Whose parts are as Thy hand did frame" (l.3). He again emphasizes interplay between the Divine and human, as does the whole poem from the beginning to the concluding "mine/thine" rhyme. God sets the "frame," but leaves room for the action of man's will; Herbert builds his poetic altar as God has gifted him, just as He empowered Bezaleel and Aholiab to design the Old Testament tabernacle and altar (Exodus 31:1-11). To "frame" is "[t]o shape, direct (one's thoughts, actions, powers, etc.) to a certain purpose. Also, with a person... to shape the action, faculties, or inclinations of; to dispose... to train, discipline" (OED #5c, p. 142). In Leviticus, the disposal of the parts of the various sacrificial animals is closely prescribed or "framed," but it remained to the priests to actually make offerings. Line three also relates, since Herbert in a sense offers himself upon the altar, to God's creative action; to "frame" is "... to fashion, form" (OED #5, p. 142). God "curiously wrought" Herbert from his "mother's womb" (Psalm

139:13-16) and thus his “parts are as [His] hand did frame.” God also framed the parts of His Servant (Luke 1:35) when He was conceived in Mary’s womb. Herbert also believed that the “parts” of the Anglican communion ritual, which involved his Church’s altar, were “framed” by God, that is, based upon Biblical precept, as the regulations for the pre and post-temple Old Testament sacrificial altars were. To “frame” is also “[T]o supply the needs of...” (OED #1, p. 141); Herbert wished to trust the Lord to supply his needs.

“No workmans tool hath touch’d the same” (l.4) emphasizes the hallowedness of the altar, alongside God’s sovereignty in its fashioning. Its “parts are as [His] hand did frame,” yet Herbert’s “tears” are involved in the production; God brings trials in some of the parts or chapters of life to soften hard hearts, and the altar of Herbert’s heart is consequently fashioned by God (l.3-4)—no human workman could take a hard heart (l.9-12, cf. Jeremiah 17:9) and transform it into an altar. Apart from the Lord’s drawing “there is none that seeketh after God” (Romans 3:11); salvation and good poetry must consequently involve God’s initiative and working. Apart from enabling grace the altar will be broken down, for no workman will wish to repair it. Christologically, line 4 signifies that His perfect work was “cemented with tears” of itself; no human work, no additional altars or sacrifices are needed. In terms of the altar of Herbert’s design, the lack of “workmans tool” can mean that God ordained all aspects of the “frame,” but Herbert still puts his “heart” and “tears” into its construction. Nor does “no workmans tool” exclude the tools of a priest, who is sanctified beyond a simply lay workman and thus more suited to the construction of an altar. Of course, since the poem is printed upon a page, no workman’s tool has literally had any part in its composition.

Line five is “A HEART alone,” which is indeed the case; the “HEART” shares the line with no other nouns. As the “heart” of line 2 is directly below the “ALTAR” of line one, here as well the “HEART” holds up the altar; the much wider top four lines are balanced mainly upon the capitalized heart of line five. This makes literal sense as well, since the heart is “a stone” (l.6). A stony heart is a bad possession, but here the altar “[m]ade of a heart” is constructed of such stones (l.11). Furthermore, Christians are to be “lively stones... an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” who is Himself “a chief corner stone” (1 Peter 2:4-6). His “Name” is, indeed, the cornerstone of the central segment (l. 12). Herbert, unlike the majority of sculptors of shaped verse, actually uses the altar design to enhance the harmonies of the poem; in addition to the added positional significances of words, much of the effect of his positive and negative play with the connotations of “stone” would lose its value with the dissolution of the shape.

Lines five and seven have three words, while six and eight have four, and the symmetry adds emphasis to the power of the lines. The “stone” that concludes line six provides an appropriate heaviness emphasized by the punctuation. The “HEART” is central to its line, as is the “nothing” of line seven, but in contrast to the “alone” (l.5), the enjambment with “but” (l. 7) creates an expectation of a key that can indeed unlock the hard heart—and line eight, which could stand alone as a strong exclamation, provides the solution: “Thy pow’r doth cut.” The shape, the period, and the fact that line eight and nine end with divisive words, “cut” and “part,” all emphasize the division of the poem between the two lines. The two lines mark a thematic transition as well, for lines one through eight are statements, while nine through sixteen are resulting consequences.

More specifically, l.1-4 state facts of Herbert's situation, l.5-8 state the need for God's intervention, 9-14 argue that the actions of l.1-4 are justified in consequence of l.5-8, and in l.15-16 Herbert offers the altar and ask for God's intervention on his behalf.

“Wherefore,” since only the Lord can affect the heart or provide real value to life or art, Herbert states “each part/ Of my hard heart/ Meets...” (l.9-11) in the altar. Only God's service has eternal value. Each “part” or “section” of Herbert's heart comes together, but in God each “hole” or “rent,” is healed— each “part.../ Meets.” “Part” also commonly¹³ signified “a personal quality or attribute, natural or acquired, esp. of an intellectual kind [] as a constituent element of one's mind or character, [] as allotted to one by Providence... abilities, capacities, talents...” (OED #12, p. 259). Herbert puts “each part” (l.9) of himself into his poetic altar in this sense. “Part” also signifies “part of speech (Gram.)” (OED #19a, p. 260)— in this sense, as in all poetry, in the shaped “The Altar” “each part.../ Meets in this frame,/ To praise thy Name.”

Each part of Herbert's heart meets in the poem's “frame.” A “frame” is “an established order, plan, scheme, system” (OED #4a, p. 140), like a shaped (OED III, p. 140) poem; indeed, it is “a form or arrangement of words...” (OED #4b, p. 140). The word represents “[n]atural or habitual disposition, temper, [or] turn of thought...” (OED #6a, p. 140)— Herbert states his heart's “frame” or natural inclination is towards God's service, although it is also “hard”; the parts of his “hard heart... praise [God's] Name” (l.10,12). Both good and bad connotations are invoked, as they are with “stone.”

¹³*A George Herbert Companion*, Robert H. Ray, ISBN 0-8240-4849-0, p. 118

“The Altar” continues with, “That if I chance to hold my peace,/ These stones to praise thee may not cease” (l.13-14), echoing the Triumphal Entry in Luke 19:40: “And He answered and said unto them, ‘I tell you that, if these [people] should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.’” “Hold” undergirds the pillar structure of lines 5-12, and thus participates in holding up the poem; more importantly, however, it lies beneath “Name,” demonstrating Herbert’s desire to cling to God and his submission to the Divine will. Also, since Christ is the Christian’s peace (Ephesians 2:14), in the communion sacrament Herbert in fact “holds his peace.” In Heaven, Herbert will also “hold his peace,” walking hand in hand with Christ— and there his transformed, newly sin-free heart (Hebrews 8:10-12) will praise God eternally— then that stone “to praise thee may not cease” (l.14). The sense in l.13-14 that “The Altar” and *The Temple*, once composed, will continue to offer God glory even if Herbert, through sin, chance to fall silent, exists as well. Herbert uses the pagan classical notion that poetry lives on and provides the poet lasting fame with a twist— the permanence of the written record is not for his honor, but “to praise Thee.” Only if it glorifies God and assists His creatures would he have the poems in existence; several weeks before his death, Herbert sent to Nicholas Ferrar, along with a manuscript of *The Temple*, a note stating “if he think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not let him burn it.”¹⁴ God will receive glory in any case— if the crowd did not praise Jesus as He entered Jerusalem, the stones would have cried out. Here the stones, under constraint, to “praise [God] may not cease” (l.14).

¹⁴Cited from L. C. Knights essay “George Herbert: Resolution and Conflict,” in *George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets*, Ed. by Mario A. Di Cesare, ISBN 0-393-04398-3, p. 242-243

In lines fifteen and sixteen, praise turns to prayer: “O let thy blessed SACRIFICE by mine,/ And sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine.” Herbert prays both for washing by the blood of Christ and requests to follow and repeat his Lord’s work in l.15, in accordance with his role as a priest ministering in Jesus’ stead. He would be a good priest who sacrifices himself to serve his master. He can follow Christ thus if God accepts his petition of l.16, and taking the “I” shaped altar, Herbert’s heart, and making it His. Line sixteen applies both to “The Altar” and the entire series of *The Temple*. Furthermore, since “sanctifie” means “separate,” l.16 can represent, assuming Herbert has been justified (l.15), an additional prayer for death (l.13), when, freed from sin in the heart, he can be God’s without reservation. The following poem, “The Sacrifice,” in contrast with the constant blurring of the human and Divine in “The Altar,” emphasizes the uniqueness of Christ’s work, and consequently Herbert’s inability to duplicate it, as Christ repeats “Was ever grief like mine?” and concludes “Never was grief like mine.” His prayer that God accept the altar of his heart and self is answered, however, in the final poem of *The Church*, “Love (III),” where, wooed into Heaven by Love, Herbert “did sit and eat.” Line 16b complements l.1a, the first describing the result of a heart “ALTAR” prepared in the manner of the second. Herbert’s goals in art are thus clearly seen; he endeavors to sing God’s praise with good poetry, and encourages himself and others to, with a broken and contrite heart, lay all on the altar for their Lord.