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### Article:

The specter of a Calvinist George Herbert loomed ever larger during the 1980s, and some critics clearly fear that, should such a view prevail, the poetic landscape will go grayer from the pale Genevan's breath. It is at first difficult to know whether to include Terry G. Sherwood among the fearful. On the one hand, in this clearly and carefully argued book, Sherwood assumes Herbert to be a kind of Calvinist—the kind who went beyond mere intellectual assurance of election to seek "experimental" confirmation of election in a direct, personal love relationship with God (pp. 37 ff.). On the other hand, Sherwood argues that this influence of Calvinism on Herbert "has encouraged the view that he believed in a debilitated self radically dependent on God. Yet much in Herbert's prayerful art moderates this influence. Herbert's notion of the self ... expresses his convictions that it is inseparable from its artistic powers. The dialogue with God infers importance on the human partner, whose struggle to find the right words necessarily contributes to that dialogue" (p. 5). Thus Sherwood would return us to the understanding of this divine-human love that was foundational to the older, "Anglo-Catholic" Herbert criticism of Rosemond Tuve and Louis L. Martz—love as *caritas*, not agape. Sherwood's choice of terms virtually determines his understanding of Herbert's individual lyrics and entire poetic vision.

*Caritas*, in the tradition stemming principally from Augustine and Bernard, denotes "a mutual love between man and God" (p. 34)—"mutual" meaning that this love is motivated by a perceived value or merit in the other. Thus God loves man because man, though fallen, still deserves love, while man loves God because man naturally desires—often in quasi-erotic terms—the joy and good that God embodies. In contrast, agape, in the Pauline, Lutheran, and Calvinist traditions, denotes "the unmerited, freely given divine love expressed through Christ" (p. 33)—unmerited and free because it originates entirely with God, who is moved by no worthiness or attractiveness in fallen man. Thus, while divine-human love is "mutual" in the limited sense of being deeply felt on both sides, God's love for man is utterly "unmotivated," while man's love for God depends completely on God's regenerating grace and is expressed primarily as gratitude.

Sherwood takes pains to locate Herbert within the *caritas* rather than the agape tradition because he hopes to rescue him from the dire consequences of Calvinism as expounded by Stanley Fish in *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley, 1972): the necessary obliteration of the distinct self. As Sherwood observes, "for Fish, an all-powerful God leaves no initiative to his sinful creature. . . Instead, man must let go, 'humbling the `self' in order to merge with God" (p. 146). Given Fish's dark language of absorption--as if the corollary of the divine "I AM" were "YOU AREN'T"—it is easy to see how Sherwood and others would reject "Calvinism" as an adequate explanatory matrix for Herbert's poetry, which is, after all, fundamentally concerned with recreating a self, not annihilating it.

However, Sherwood, while rightly rejecting Fish's nihilistic reading of Herbert, erroneously accepts the ontological assumption underlying it: that God and man share—or compete for—the same continuum of being. Thus any exchange which pits God's being against man's becomes a kind of zero-sum game: God is omnipotent to man's utter loss—as Fish would have it—or man preserves some fraction of god-like being by independently

initiating love for God—as Sherwood would have it (p. 146). No doubt, says Sherwood, all spiritual "commerce" ends with God possessing a far greater share of the ontological wealth (p. 153); yet man guards his own small but appropriate share as well. He must; his very existence seems to depend on it. Thus, while Sherwood argues that Herbert sees God as cheerfully encouraging and rewarding man's independent initiatives, a tone of defensiveness still emerges in Sherwood's concluding chapter, "The Presence of the Self": "Made in God's image and likeness, the human creature *nevertheless* remains a being distinct from his Creator. . . . For Herbert, the conformed soul preserves its separate identity, *whatever* its sinful weakness. . . . Herbert is underlining the distinctness of the human person, *however* dependent upon Christ's strength for salvation" (pp. 149-50, my emphases). One is made to feel that Herbert sees danger in granting God too much.

Unfortunately, Sherwood overlooks the crucial fact that the Reformation roundly rejected any ontological continuity between God and man, and indeed any philosophy that tended to blur the absolute distinction between Creator and creature. Calvin explicitly denies that man's nature as God's "image" and "offspring" involves any infusion of God's substance or essence into the human vessel; rather, he says, the "divine image" refers to man's viceregal place and function in the order of creation. "To tear apart the essence of the Creator so that everyone may possess a part of it is utter folly," he continues. Man's creation "is not inpouring, but the beginning of essence *out of nothing*."<sup>1</sup> From Calvin's viewpoint, Sherwood's well-intentioned defense of Herbert's "separate self" against divine encroachment would seem wrongheaded; Calvin never questions the separateness of the self, because divine and human selves are of radically different kinds.

In Calvinist redemption, Christ, far from obliterating the self, actually repairs its natural faculties and recreates its spiritual faculties.<sup>2</sup> The redeemed individual becomes more distinct. For this reason the speaker of Herbert's "The Holdfast," "amaz'd" at the apparent nihilism of the teaching that "nought is ours, not to confess / That we have nought," hears a "friend" comfortingly explain "that all things [are] *more* ours by being his [God's]. / What Adam had, and forfeited for all, / Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall."<sup>3</sup> The "friend" could be Calvin himself: "all things" include the powers of willing obedience, trust, and confession mentioned in the previous stanzas, powers utterly lost by Adam and fully restored to the self by Christ's redeeming conquest. Ironically, the poem's speaker, with his dogged assertion of his innate, unaided spiritual initiative, approximates Sherwood's argument, which this poem seems especially designed to overthrow. Nor is "The Holdfast" an isolated case in "The Church"; poem after poem laments the soul's natural inability to choose the goodness that it desires, or celebrates the divine grace which restores that ability—by "looking us out of pain." by "quickning" with a word, by calling "Child," by saying "You shall be he." Herbert's devotion to agape, love that "makes his guest," provided not only the thematic substance but also the motive force for his poetic achievement.

Then what, finally, of Herbert's "prayerful art"? Might not the mere existence of these lyrics—which initiate dialogue with God, in a highly wrought form—provide at least partial evidence for Sherwood's thesis by asserting the making self? Barbara Leah Harman has argued similarly in *Costly Monuments* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982). The vital ontological distinctions between *caritas* and agape should correct just such a misunderstanding. No doubt, if every individual's acts—walking, speaking, poetic worship—are seen to occur somehow in spite of God's ontological hegemony, then Herbert's love lyrics to God do become, necessarily, declarations of independence. If, however, every individual's acts are seen to occur because of God's creative, sovereign power— if Herbert can again "relish versing" precisely because God has regenerated him—then the lyrics are truly the "returns of love." It is in the new nature of the "freed will" to give back the love that it has received; as the reformers would say, God is always previous.

I applaud Sherwood's commitment to elucidating Herbert's poetry in its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theological contexts, and I admire his lucid prose. Although he does few close readings of whole poems, many of his technical insights into Herbert's poetic craft are highly illuminating. There is much to learn here about the

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, 1960), bk. 1, chap. 15, sec. 5; my emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. 1, chap. 1, Sec. 9, and bk. 2, chap. 2, secs. 18-21.

<sup>3</sup> *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), p. 143, lines 9-10, 12-14; my emphasis.

virtual absence of erotic imagery in *The Temple* (pp. 45-50), about the hierolyphic "architecture" of Herbert's poems (which adapt the emblem tradition by "building the visual emblem out of the words themselves" [p. 99]), about the poet's strategy of gradually "baiting" the reader with delight (pp. 100 ff.), and about the "killing and quickening" cycle of the spiritual life (pp. 121 ff.). However, as evidence of Herbert's insistence on a "separate self," such illuminations are beside the point. Herbert loved and created for God because, he believed, God had first loved and recreated him.