JOHANNINE POETICS IN GEORGE HERBERT’S DEVOTIONAL LYRICS

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Because his Gospel uniquely elevated the divinity of Jesus Christ, Saint John the Evangelist was called the Eagle by early modern exegetes: “Behold the Eagle of the Gospell looking upon Christ in his Divine nature, and expressing that more than all the other Evangelists.” John typically is exalted over Matthew, Mark, and Luke for the variety and newness of his Gospel: only in John do we find accounts of the miracles at Cana, Christ’s dialogue with the Pharisee Nicodemus, Christ’s turning water into wine for the Samaritans, and the raising of Lazarus. In his Sermons on John (1611), Anthony Wotton exclaims: “Manie excellent things are recorded, by Saint Matthew, Saint Marke, and S. Luke, concerning the Sermons, and miracles of our Saviour: yet are there but fewe of these proper to any one of them. Only S. John affords us, as in so short a Treatise, great plenty of new, and unknowen variety, 10 Sermons, fourre miracles and that zealous prayer, full of love and comfort.” Not only does John, in his attention to Christ’s eternity and divinity, show a preeminence over the Synoptics, but John’s treatment of the philosophical (mostly Neoplatonic and gnostic) mysteries of Christ as logos warrants, for Wotton, John’s placement above the classical philosophers: “Could these admirable mysteries be of a Fisherman’s devising? What is there in Aristotle, Plato, Pythagoras, or any of the great learned Philosophers, so strange, or profound, as manie points, that are common in this Gospell, which of the heathen writers, ever spake so boldely?”

Continental theologians, too, shared this exaltation of John: In his prefatory remarks to his commentary on John, Martin Luther describes John 14–16 as comprising the “best and most comforting sermon preached by Christ while on this earth,” and remarks to his readers that “St. John should be praised above the other evangelists for recording and transmitting it to Christendom”; Philipp Melanchthon remarks that, regarding the Johannine Prayer for all Believers, “[t]here was never a more excellent, more holy, more fruitfull, and more affectionate voice ever heard in Heaven or Earth, then this Prayer”; and John Calvin devotes his first extensive gospel commentary to John in 1522, drawing
on the influential early Christian and medieval Johannine commentaries by Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas.\textsuperscript{4}

John’s influence was not restricted to the realm of scriptural exegesis and intertextual comparisons among the Synoptics. His Fourth Gospel and First Epistle fatefuly shaped the course of several Reformed debates, particularly due to the unique Johannine embellishments on Christological and ontological themes that are partially covered in Paul and the Synoptics. The sixth chapter of John’s Gospel, for example, the bread of life discourse, in which Christ uniquely remarks that “the flesh profiteth nothing” (John 6:63), touches off the foundational debates on the Eucharist between Ulrich Zwingli and Lutherans regarding the symbolic versus real presence of Christ’s body during the Lord’s Supper.\textsuperscript{5} John 6, in turn, shapes the Eucharistic theology of Thomas Cranmer, whose concern at the beginning of his influential \textit{Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament} (1550) is not the otherwise pivotal Matthew 26 (“This is my Body”), but John’s bread of life discourse and the enfolded account of the Ascension that appears in John 16. For Cranmer and so many sixteenth-century English divines, Christ’s remark, “I leaue the world, and goe to the Father” (John 16:28), suggests that the Son could not have been present corporeally on earth during the Lord’s Supper (an argument commonly marshaled against the Lutheran claim of Christ’s ubiquity).\textsuperscript{6} Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, liberal Reformers influenced by Zwingli and Cranmer consistently turned to the Fourth Gospel in order to legitimate the claim, developed most clearly in Augustine’s foundational \textit{Tractates on John}, of the symbolic nature of the host and the provocative Johannine suggestion that eating is believing.\textsuperscript{7}

John’s unique influence on Reformed apologetics again surfaces in the Trinitarian and anti-Trinitarian debates of the middle to latter part of the seventeenth century. The two fateful announcements at the outset of his Gospel—“In the beginning was the Word” (1:1) and “The Word was made flesh” (1:14)—provided English and continental Socinians such as Stephen Nye, John Biddle, and Johannes Crell polemical material for their arguments against the divinity of Christ, arguments which were controverted by the skillful lexical polemicizing of Trinitarians such as John Downname, Bartholomew Traheron, and John Trapp, all of whom drew on Johannine theology and patristic authorities to claim, for example, that “the Word was God” should not include an article (“a God”), hence underscoring Christ’s co-eternal nature.\textsuperscript{8} Not only John 1:1 and 1:14, but also John 6:62 and 8:58, texts traditionally used to suggest the eternal pre-existence of Christ,
became the subject of intense scrutiny in the Racovian Catechism, the Socinian statement of faith. Surveying the polemical debates on the Trinity in the middle of the seventeenth century, Paul C. H. Lim remarks that the “Gospel of John played a formative role in the Christological controversies of both the patristic and the Reformation periods.”9 Lim goes on to show John’s centrality to the Trinitarian/anti-Trinitarian debates of the seventeenth century, drawing on J. G. A. Pocock’s foundational work on the importance of the Johannine literature to emerging discourses of toleration. The Fourth Gospel, Lim concludes, was “the single biblical book which became the key epicenter of the polemical exchange and the various ways in which the notion of orthodoxy and its seemingly ever-porous membrane was contested and re-negotiated during this period.”10

In addition to the well-known debates regarding the Eucharist and Trinity, most early modern discoursing on the nature of agape or God’s descending love focuses on John’s uniquely ontological conception of love in his First Epistle: “God is love, and he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16). While the Synoptics, as well as Paul, had focused extensively on vertical love from God to man, only John directly identifies God with love as such. The importance of this single passage from John’s First Epistle is underscored again and again by Augustine, who remarks in his Homilies on John: “If nothing else were said in praise of love, in all the pages of this Epistle, nothing else whatever in any other page of Scripture, and this were the one and only thing we heard from the voice of God’s Spirit—‘For God is love’—we should ask for nothing more.”11

Distinctive, too, is John’s account of Christ’s Prayer for all Believers, in which Christ describes the unique and eternal nature of God’s love for his Son—“Thou louedst mee before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24)—one passage among several others which convinced Anders Nygren that John, more complexly than the Synoptics and Paul, provocatively conflated the agape and eros motifs (John 17 suggests, for Nygren, some assumed merit on the Son’s part that warrants God’s eternal love for him).12 Suffice it to say that John’s unique conception of agape raises the question of how God’s essence as love can be approached by humans whose creaturely love will always fall short of the essential love that is itself God, a topic featured not only in commentaries on Johannine theology by Heinrich Bullinger and Calvin, but also in more particularized treatises of love by several English theologians and homilists.13
Given the unbridled early modern enthusiasm for John in England and among continental theologians, as well as the centrality of uniquely Johannine texts to early modern/Reformed polemics, one expects to find the comparable influence of John in the devotional lyrics of poets such as George Herbert, John Donne, and Henry Vaughan, whose work is typically interested not only in the nature of Christ relative to God, but also in the mysteries of faith which were held to be located exceptionally in Johannine theology. While some critical work has drawn out Donne’s use of the Johannine logos theme in his sermons, Vaughan’s treatment of the figure of Nicodemus in “The Night,” and Herbert’s use of the importance of the Johannine true vine image in several of his typological lyrics, no critic has offered a thoroughgoing interpretation of Johannine themes in seventeenth-century religious poetry.14

This is a notable omission, given the frequent reference in devotional poetry to so many of the key Johannine texts on the Eucharist, the Trinity, and the agape motif mentioned above. Vaughan’s preparatory Eucharistic prayer in The Mount of Olives, for example, is directly inspired by the Johannine bread of life discourse; and John 6:50–55, as well as the Good Shepherd parable of John 10, provide the scriptural material for both “The Holy Communion” and “The Feast,” two of Vaughan’s well-regarded poems on the Eucharist theme.15 Richard Crashaw’s Epigrams 19 and 20 are also both inspired by John’s account of the feeding of the five thousand (described in John 6:35–39); and across the ocean, the Puritan poet Edward Taylor not only provides a careful exposition of John 6:53–55 in his Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper (polemically using the passage to justify restricting the Supper to only the most devout), but also devotes several lengthy poems, especially Meditations 8, 9, and 10, to the Johannine account of the ways in which the Ascension suggests the purely signifying function of the Eucharist.16

With respect to Johannine accounts of the Trinity, Donne devotes two sermons explicitly to the Johannine Farewell Discourse, focusing specifically on the role of the Johannine understanding of the Paraclete or Holy Spirit to provide both comfort and testimony of Jesus’s ways in a post-resurrectional context.17 And John Milton, in De Doctrina Christiana, explicates controversial Johannine texts—especially 1 John 5:7 and 10:30—in order to advance his seemingly anti-Trinitarian, specifically Arian conception of the Son’s relationship to the Father.18

Regarding the nature of agape or God’s love, John’s unique contributions inspire Vaughan’s “The Law and the Gospel,” which is centered...
on John 14:15—“If ye loue me, keepe my commandements”; and Vaughan’s fine meditation on the relationship between grief and divine love (“Jesus Weeping”) is inspired directly by John’s unique account of the death of Lazarus, the topic which motivates Donne’s sermon on Christ’s weeping at Lazarus’s feet. Notable devotional texts shaped by Johannine notions of *agape* include Thomas Traherne’s *Christian Ethicks*, which uses John’s epistolary remark, “God is Love,” to direct its entire discussion of divine love; and, as we will see momentarily, much of Herbert’s poetry relies on Johannine conceptions of love in order to poeticize the fraught relationship between human and divine love.

Since a comprehensive assessment of the Johannine influence on early modern devotional poetry is beyond the compass of an essay-length study, I would like to focus particularly on the importance of John’s theology to Herbert’s poetry. One explanation as to why Herbert’s embrace of the Fourth Gospel and First Epistle of John has not received sufficient attention is that most of the debates regarding the placement of Herbert’s lyrics amid denominational beliefs and controversies—whether Herbert’s poetry is Jesuit-meditative, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Conformist/Anglican, for example—assume that Pauline theology is the proper theological frame for understanding Herbert’s poetry. When the critical focus shifts from Pauline theology to Old Testament Wisdom literature, the Book of Psalms is typically mentioned as a primary source for the spiritual conflicts laid out in Herbert’s lyrics.

While it is undoubtedly true that Pauline theology and Wisdom literature inform a good deal of Herbert’s theology, I suggest not only that Johannine theology is equally as prominent in Herbert’s lyrics, but also that key poems of Herbert conform to a thoroughgoing Johannine poetics. Such a Johannine poetics assumes four distinctive features of John’s theology as presented in the Fourth Gospel and First Epistle: salvation is achieved more through revelation than objective atonement and expiatory sin (the cross is a means to love and glory, not forensic ransoming); Christ’s divinity is emphasized over his humanity (Christ is God’s co-eternal *Logos* and Word, divinely sent to bring sinners out of the darkness and into the light); the end-time has already partially arrived (John mingles a realized and future-oriented eschatology); and, stylistically, John relies on rhetorical modes of misunderstanding and irony not found to a comparable degree in the Synoptic writings.

Why has there been a neglect of Herbert’s use of Johannine material and literary style in his best lyrics? The answer partly lies in the critical perception that soteriological and forensic Pauline-Protestant notions of justification by faith are more central to Herbert’s poetry than the
metaphysical Johannine themes of the divinity of Christ, God’s hidden-ness, and the use of scriptural-based irony and misunderstanding. This preference for Paul over John no doubt stems from the heavy reliance on Calvinist and Lutheran theology by Herbert’s critics. Yet, despite Calvin’s lengthy commentary on John, and Luther’s less systematic but enthusiastic glosses on John, Calvin and Luther are good guides but not always the best routes to a comprehensive understanding of Johannine theology, since they at times break with traditional Johannine scholarship in focusing on soteriology instead of ontology and metaphysics. Despite the conventional patristic and medieval focus on the divinity of Christ in John, Luther enthusiastically embraced the fourth Evangelist because, along with Paul’s epistles, especially Romans and Galatians, John depicted for him “how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation.” Calvin, like Luther, privileged John over Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but because Paul’s account of salvation was often uppermost in Calvin’s mind, Calvin’s interpretation of John is at times shaped by his interpretation of Paul. While earlier commentators focus on the Logos theme and Christ’s divinity, Calvin often seems more interested in faith, the Incarnation and, as one commentator puts it, “what Christ does for humans rather than who he is.” In this context, Craig Farmer has recently suggested that, because Calvin was concerned with explicating the importance of self-knowledge and what early modernists for some time have described as affective individualism, he reversed standard portraits of the symbolism of key Johannine figures like the Samaritan woman. For example, as Farmer remarks, while the Samaritan woman was typically taken to be a diligent pupil of Christ’s, Calvin saw the Samaritan woman as “brash, saucy, and practically insolent in her conversation with Jesus.”

If there was a shift among some Reformed exegetes to read Pauline views of justification, atonement, and salvation generally into John’s Fourth Gospel and First Epistle, I would suggest that, at least in the poems glossed below, Herbert embraces a much more traditional, high Christological account of Johannine theology, one which, on balance, elevates Christ’s divinity over his humanity. Many of Herbert’s most well-known poems are less concerned with the nuances of justification by faith—the nature of election, who deserves grace, how grace is transmitted, the relationship between justifying grace and regeneration, and the nature of heritable sin—than they are the ontological relationship between Christ and God, the nature of God’s hiddenness relative to what he reveals, and the pedagogical process by which, through

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irony, misunderstanding, and illumination, God’s hearers come to understand his message. Given this emphasis on Christ’s divinity and realized or revealed eschatology, Herbert’s poetry often looks beyond the contemporary (Reformed) reinterpretation of John’s Gospel and First Epistle, and back to the Augustinian and patristic reception of the texts, as well as to the Johannine discourses themselves.

In the following pages I offer close readings of three well-known poems of Herbert—“The Bag,” “The Bunch of Grapes,” and “Love unknown”—in terms of a Johannine poetics focused on soteriology, Christology/trinitarianism, eschatology, and style. I hope to show that, in each poem, several, if not all, of the Johannine themes fundamentally inform both the theological content and poetic form of Herbert’s lyrics. I am especially interested in parallels between Johannine irony/misunderstanding and Herbert’s use of dramatic irony in some of his most dialogical poems. We shall see that critical debates regarding Herbert’s vacillating or alternating style—described by Helen Vendler as Herbert’s tendency to “reinvent” his speakers/poems, or by Stanley Fish as catechizing—miss the fundamentally Johannine orientation of Herbert’s rhetoric of productive misunderstanding. Toward the end of the essay, I offer some provisional explanations as to why John’s influence on Herbert has largely gone unnoticed by Herbert’s critics. In its small way, Herbert’s poetry contributes to a proper Johannine (rather than Pauline) renaissance in early modern England.

I. CHRIST’S DIVINITY IN HERBERT’S “THE BAG”

The clearest reference in “The Bag” to the Fourth Gospel appears midway in the speaker’s very compressed Passion narrative: “But as he was returning, there came one / That ran upon him with a spear” (25–27). The so-called Longinus piercing, which appears in New Testament theology only in John (and is prefigured slightly in the prophetic book of Zechariah), receives copious glossing beginning with the patristics and extending throughout the seventeenth century. The significance of the reference will be accounted for momentarily, as will the other unmistakable reference to John in the poem: Christ’s fashioning of himself as an open door through which the faithful can gain entry to glorification. But since the use of one or two scriptural references to John does not necessarily make a poem Johannine in orientation, I would like first to track back from the piercing reference in order to clarify the Johannine implications of the poem’s earlier recounting of the Incarnation.
After reminding himself and his readers not to despair, given God's concern for us despite tribulations, the speaker divulges a "strange storie" ("The Bag," 8) in response to his own question: "Hast thou not heard, that my Lord Jesus di'd?" ("The Bag," 7): "The God of power, as he did ride / In his majestick robes of glorie, / Resolv'd to light; and so one day / He did descend, undressing all the way" ("The Bag," 9–12). Herbert's initial focus on God's light brings us immediately to John, since no other Synoptic or apostolic explication of the divinity of Christ is as concerned as John with the manner in which Christ, identified at the outset with God, brings light to a darkened world: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darknesse, and the darknesse comprehended it not (John 1:4–5). John the Baptist is then referred to as the witness of Christ as the true light: "That was the true light, which lighteth euery man that commeth into the world" (John 1:9). In addition to these opening references to light, there are several more invocations of light in John 3 and 12, all of which suppose that Christ's arrival brings illumination in the form of revelation-as-knowledge, yet the recalcitrant auditors such as Nicodemus remain in ignorance: “Light is come into the world, and men loued darknesse rather then light, because their deedes were euill” (John 3:19). 28 Herbert’s “The Bag” plays on the theme in several ways: the phrase “Resolv’d to light” identifies God with light even as it suggests that he will bring light to the world upon which he descends. To be resolved to light presumes that God and light are one, soluble in one another; it also bespeaks God’s very decision—his resolution—to bring light downward. That God descends at night-time is evidenced by the relinquishing of his crown, once amidst the clouds, to the stars: “The starres his tire of light and rings obtain’d” ("The Bag," 13).

God’s transformation into Christ is so telescoped in the poem as to happen in an instant, or not to happen at all, the implication being that the two are one. Happy and smiling, God genially disrobes, assuring us that he has new clothes on earth, which refers to the scriptural (and Donnean) trope of God wearing our flesh in order to become human—and then lights upon “an inn,” only very quickly to be crucified and then resurrected: “Both then, and after, many a brunt / He did endure to cancell sinne: / And having giv’n the rest before, / Here he gave up his life to pay our score, / But as he was returning, there came one / That ran upon him with a spear” ("The Bag," 25–27). Consider the strangeness of this astonishing compression of the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection. In the
The span of seven lines, God bears brunts, cancels sin, and then, upon re-ascending, is (potentially) interrupted by the piercing of his side. The Passion, along with any elaboration of the humanly borne “brunt[s]” and tribulations that Christ suffers, is not the concern of this section; the concern is rather the Resurrection and its implications, which are conveyed by the pause introduced at line 25 with “But” (“But as he was returning” [“The Bag,” 25]). Herbert’s speaker tells us that all was proceeding unproblematically (the “all” referring to the crucifixion itself, glancingly mentioned here) until, on the cusp of reascension, Jesus’s side is pierced by one curious whether he had yet died. The consequence of that piercing provides the matter for the remaining two stanzas of the poem: by means of the ensuing wound, Christ will provide a pouch or bag in which to deliver messages from creatures to God. The message that he would convey to his listeners (the message of the poem itself) is that Christ will continue to provide such a door to God even for those who abuse him in the manner of an unregenerate Longinus (medieval commentators designated the centurion who pierces Christ “Longinus,” for the etymology suggests “holy lance”).

The very rapidity with which God descends and then reascends in the poem, as well as the privileging of the Resurrection over the cross and the ensuing revelation of the piercing’s significance, all suggest the poem’s fundamental Johannine orientation. The basic presupposition of John’s Christology is that Christ, because he has descended from God, is singularly prepared to impart knowledge to a darkened world and then to reascend. That Herbert emphasizes this descent and return theme is further conveyed by Christ’s repairing “unto an inn,” which meaningfully swerves from Matthew and Luke’s accounts of the birth of the historical Jesus (“The Bag,” 20). In Luke 2:7, for example, Mary brings her newborn child to the manger because there was no room at the inn: “And she brought forth her first borne sonne, and wrapped him in swadling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no roome for them in the Inne” (Luke 2:7). The site of the manger is where the neighboring, humble shepherds learn of the birth of Christ, and then spread the good news abroad. The protracted and detailed homely birth narrative in Luke intimates the kenotic emptying of God into the vulnerable humanity of the newborn Jesus. In John’s version, the nativity scene is expectedly passed over, since John has already established the pre-existence of the incarnate Christ, his analogous birth scene described in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, & the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The fact that Herbert, too, leaves
out the nativity scene doesn’t in itself render the poem Johannine (or Markan by default); but that Christ rests directly in an inn is another way in which the speaker elevates Christ, in the sense that, unlike the homeless wandering of Mary, Joseph, and the newborn Jesus, who were turned away from the inn, Herbert’s divine Christ will directly repair to the inn and begin his sojourn therefrom.

In its compression of the Incarnation and Resurrection, and its relative neglect of the cross, “The Bag” is richly Johannine in its preoccupation with the divinity of Christ and salvation as revelation, rather than expiation and atonement. Yet it is true that Herbert makes reference to the Atonement in several lines in stanza four: “He did endure to cancell sinne: / And having giv’n the rest before, / Here he gave up his life to pay our score” (“The Bag,” 22–24). Ransoming does transpire, but it is stated in such a matter-of-fact manner as to dilute its importance relative to both the majestic disrobing of God that precedes the Atonement, and the complexly symbolic piercing that occurs just after the Crucifixion. The fact of the Atonement is integral to the poem, but it is treated here, as it is in John, as less of an abasing act through which Christ, in his humanity, suffers, and more of an exalted event that issues forth God’s revelation of love and glory for his believers. To so “happily” descend comports with the fundamental Johannine notion, as represented throughout the Good Shepherd narrative, that Christ willingly “chooses death”: “No man taketh it from me, but I lay it downe of my selfe: I haue power to lay it downe, and I haue power to take it againe. This commande-ment haue I receiued of my father” (John 10:18). The hurriedness of the lines in Herbert’s poem, and their generic formulations—“cancell sinne” and payed “our score”—render Jesus much less human than one would expect from an otherwise moving account of the Passion.

On the Passion reference, as well as the wound created by the piercing (itself not described viscerally at all), Herbert’s critics seem to have projected anthropomorphic suffering onto Herbert’s Jesus that the poem does not warrant. In keeping with Robert Graves’s belief that the wound of Jesus has “distinct feminine characteristics,” Michael Schoenfeldt remarks that “The Bag” illustrates Herbert’s tendency to “comprehend the mystery of Christ’s descent into vulnerable flesh”: “The poem’s details—the action of ‘undressing,’ the placement in an ‘inne,’ the emphasis upon pregnability, the seductive promise that ‘the doore / Shall still be open’—all connote a sexual scenario which never fully surfaces, but which suffuses the process by which the almighty God of power becomes a vulnerable and compassionate...
Whether Herbert is conjuring a feminized Christ here or not, it does not follow that the deity is represented as vulnerable: as we have seen, the undressing is done “happily.” The locus of the inn, in its play on Luke’s homespun account, elevates rather than debases Christ, and neither the Passion nor the sword-wound is rendered viscerally or even corporeally, the poem not especially concerned to represent the “blatant violence” attributed to it by Schoenfeldt.30 Despite her acknowledgement that, in “The Bag,” Herbert’s Christ “assumes heroic proportions” rather than victimhood, Jeannie Sargent Judge also assumes that a suffering Christ is at the heart of the poem: “‘The Bag’ shows us a speaker whose emotional recovery of a suffering, accessible Jesus effects his spiritual recovery.”31 Yet such suffering is more the product of critical bias than it is an actual feature of the poem. “The Bag” presents neither a vulnerable nor a suffering Christ, but a glorified one, again in keeping with Johannine theology. Chana Bloch is correct to note the “upbeat” tone of “The Bag,” but she too neglects to consider that the confident “certainties” of such a poem do not stem from the comparable certainty of the Psalms, but rather from the joyful descent and return of the Johannine God as Christ.32 Is it not the case that the major conceit—the open wound of Christ serving as a “bag” in which to carry messages to God—is itself graphic and brutal (or violent)? Perhaps graphic, but Herbert is more interested in the Johannine symbolism of the wound than its corporeality and brutality. Herbert, as well as his contemporaries, closely follows Augustine’s influential interpretation of the Johannine account of Christ’s wound. The depiction in the Fourth Gospel is as follows:

But one of the souldiers with a speare pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it, bare record, and his record is true, and he knoweth that hee saith true, that yee might beleue. For these things were done, that the Scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken. And againe another Scripture saith, They shall looke on him whom they piersed. (John 19:34–37)

The soldiers had planned to break Jesus’s legs (which would typically expedite the death of the crucified), but abstained because Jesus seemed to have already died. One of the centurions pierces Jesus’s side in order to determine whether Jesus has actually expired. Commentators such as Augustine were not only preoccupied with the symbolism of the outpouring blood and water, but also the signification of the open wound itself. Augustine writes in a Tractate on the Passion:
The Evangelist used a wide awake word so that he did not say, ‘pierced his side’ or ‘wounded’ or anything else, but opened, so that there, in a manner of speaking, the door of life was thrown open from which the mystical rites of the Church flowed, without which one does not enter into the life which is true life. That blood was shed for the remission of sins; that water provides the proper mix for the health-giving cup; it offers both bath and drink. There was a foretelling of this in that Noe was ordered to make a door in the side of the ark where the animals that were not going to perish in the flood might enter, and in these [animals] the Church was prefigured. For this reason the first woman was made from the side of a sleeping man. . . . For indeed it signified a great good, before the great evil of collusive transgression. Here the second Adam, his head bowed, slept on the cross in order that from there might be found for him a wife—that one who flowed from the side of the One sleeping. O death from which the dead live again! What is cleaner than this blood? What is more healthful than this wound? Augustine’s emphasis on the result of the wounding rather than the piercing itself allows for his typological and intertextual glossing of the passage: from the opening flows the sacraments, vehicles of the blood (justification) and water (baptismal sanctification). The opening recalls the door provided by Noah, itself a prefiguration of the visible and invisible church. Celebrated as the harbinger of life through death—Eve from the opening of Adam, Christ’s espousal of the church—the wound lifts up, in Johannine spirit; its link to the mortification of the flesh is judged as secondary to its resurrectional vitality.

Early modern commentators embellished Augustine’s symbolic and typological interpretation. Lancelot Andrewes remarks: “Saith Saint Augustine . . . the Apostle was well advised, when he used the word opening; for, there issued out water and blood. . . . Marke it running out, and suffer it not to runne waste, but receive it. . . . Of the fulnesse whereof we all have received, in the Sacrament of our Baptisme. Of the later (the blood) . . . calleth the blood of the New Testament, we may receive this day.” Early seventeenth-century English writers and theologians with varying denominational allegiances converged on the opinion that the piercing represented the glory rather than debase-ment of Christ. In his popular and widely reprinted Practice of Piety, Anglican Bishop Lewis Bayly imagines a dialogue in which Christ informs an interlocutor that the piercing is significant because “by my Blood shedding, Justification and Sanctification were effected to saue thee: secondly, that my Spirit by the conscionable vse of the Water in Baptisme, and bloud of the Eucharist will effect in thee righteousnesse and holinesse by which thou shalt glorifie mee.” John Clarke,
an English schoolmaster, remarks similarly: "Out of whose pierced side, issued forth water and bloud, for the sanctifying, and justifying, of thine Elect. To whom, with thee, and the Holy Spirit, be all glory, service, thanksgiving, and dominion."36 In his treatise on the virgin Mary, Anthony Stafford urges Mary to ‘‘[F]ixe thine eyes upon / This glorious Throne, / And on the right hand, there behold thy Sonne. / Behold his hands, his feet, his pierced side, / That for us dide, / Whose very wounds in heaven are Deifide.”37 And in his lengthy commentary on John 19 and the Longinus piercing, Robert Rollock, Ramist Minister of Scotland, concludes: “[I]f thou feelest that Iustice of God, and the terrous of Hell before thee, the sight of the death of Iesus would be the most joyfull and comfortable sight that euer thou sawest, and all thy joy & glorie would be in that death of Christ.”38 Because of the glorified result of the death and superfluous wounding (commentators were quick to point out that the wounding actually helped to keep Christ’s body intact, as his legs were not broken), Christ experiences the actual wound with joy, rather than shame and abasement, as the Protestant polemicist Francis Trigge remarked in a 1603 sermon on the relationship between the piercing and justification: “He beholds the holy bloud to boile out of his fide, not onely valiantly, but joyfully.”39

Herbert follows Augustine and many early modern exegetes in focusing more on what we can describe as the final, rather than the efficient and material cause of the wound: the resultant opening allows Christ immediately to turn the wound to profit for his brethren (“And straight he turned”), as if the wound had been expected and embraced once sustained (“The Bag,” 30). The wound-as-bag will provide a safe conduit for both the penitent and unregenerate: “Or if hereafter any of my friends / Will use me in this kind, the door / Shall still be open” (“The Bag,” 37–39). In keeping with the Augustinian interpretation of the passage (although Augustine focuses typologically on Noah’s open door), Herbert has superimposed a later Johannine episode and motif, that of the Good Shepherd in John 10, onto the prototypical Longinus piercing: “Then said Iesus vnto them agaime, Uerily, verily I say vnto you, I am the doore of the sheepe. All that euer came before me, are theuees and robbers: but the sheepe did not heare them. I am the doore by me if any man enter in, he shall be saued, and shall goe in and out, and find pasture” (John 10:7–9). The point of the Johannine verses is the same as Herbert’s: to enter the proper way is to enter the door; unrepentant thieves and robbers “climeth vp some other way” (John 10:1), but anyone who enters properly through the door will receive benefits.

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Throughout Herbert’s poeticization of the image of the wound/bag, Christ’s divinity is lodged in the vehicle of his body: the contents of the bag will be safely delivered to God precisely because the bag is intimately connected to Christ’s heart, reflecting not as much a transmission of the communicant’s message through a pouch (as in Rosemond Tuve’s notion that the bag represents a mail or carrying pouch for requests to the Father), but a suturing of the message in the very flesh, specifically the heart, that God has temporarily assumed. The divinity here is in the details. Early modern commentators typically located the site of the wound in the “pericardion” or “pericardium,” variously described as a “cawl,” “pannicle,” or “casket” which surrounded and protected the heart. In describing the site of the wound as a “bag,” Herbert is not being especially inventive, since all of these terms evoke the protective, sack-like aspect of the pericardium; indeed, in his annotations on John, Edward Leigh approximates Herbert’s designation as “bag” in his own use of the term “purse” to describe the piercing of Jesus’s pericardium: “It is very likely that the very Pericardium was pierced, a filme or skin like unto a purse, wherein is contained clear water to coole the heate of the heart.” The important point is that, in Herbert’s poem, the messages that are placed in Christ’s wound are not so much carried to his heart (literally and figuratively) and thence to God, as if the route to God is through the separate medium of the flesh, as placed directly there and hence within the flesh that God has taken on. In locating the divinity of Christ in and through the wound, Herbert follows those commentators such as Aquinas, whose commentary on John points out that the prophetic books, Zechariah 12:2, for example, describe a metaphorical piercing of God’s side, itself a prefiguration of the piercing of Christ and testament to Christ’s Sonship: “If we join the statement of the Prophet to what the Evangelist says, it is clear that the crucified Christ is God, for what the Prophet says he says as God, and the Evangelist applies this to Christ.”

The identification of the pre-incarnated and post-resurrected Christ with God throughout “The Bag” implies the poem’s partially realized eschatology. As I noted earlier, the reference in the poem to Christ’s door—“the doore / Shall still be open” (“The Bag,” 38–39)—corresponds to John’s Good Shepherd pericope: “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7). As good shepherd, Jesus announces that those who enter the door properly (because they have been raised up) receive eternal life: “My sheepe heare my voyce, and I know them, and they follow me. And I giue vnto them eternall life, and they shall neuer perish, neither shall any man plucke them out of my hand. My father
which gave them me, is greater than all: and no man is able to plucke
them out of my fathers hand” (John 10:27–29). Although John will
elsewhere remark that eternal life awaits the faithful who have died,
the good shepherd allegory reveals eternal life to be a present reality
which will be fulfilled in the future. In Herbert’s poem, the secure
conveyance of the messages of the devotees to the “father’s hands and
sight” recalls the Johannine notion that the sheep who have entered the
door will find a place alongside God and the Son, secure in the father’s
“hands” (“The Bag,” 33). The temporal change marked by “hereafter
any of my friends” reveals that the secure salvation and life for those
faithful converts is a present rather than future state; those who abuse
Christ will still find the door open and will be able to enter when
they disabuse themselves of their recalcitrant sighs (“The Bag,” 37).
The poem integrates realized and futurist eschatology in keeping with
the eschatological message of the shepherd parable.

I suggest, finally, that the very structure and narrative of “The Bag”
is Johannine in nature. As so many commentators have pointed out, the
Fourth Gospel, to a much greater extent than the Synoptic narratives,
relies on irony, misunderstanding, and the heavy use of interrogatives.
“A Johannine misunderstanding is a statement, normally involving
ambiguity, metaphor, or double entendre, whose intended meaning
is not properly identified by the original audience of the statement,
which typically leads to a subsequent explication of its proper meaning
by the person making the statement (most frequently Jesus) or the
narrator.” Such misunderstandings analogize the discipleship failure
that one finds in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, yet they are distinctively
Johannine in their use of irony. Sent by God to illumine a darkened
world, Christ’s narratives work rhetorically to pique interest, which
often leads to some confusion, after which Christ (or the narrator)
clarifies his initial intent and the significance of the event or symbol
under consideration. For example, Christ remarks to Nicodemus that
only those who are reborn can understand his Word, which Nicodemus
obtusely takes to mean a literal rebirth, after which Christ gently
rebukes him and provides clarification (see John 3:4). Other examples
(at least twenty have been accounted by commentators) include the
belief by the woman of Samaria that Christ’s description of “living
water” refers to an actual spring or well (see John 4:10–15); the disbe-
lief among Jesus’s hearers that he can build a literal “temple” in three
days (Jesus refers to a spiritual temple) (John 2:20); and the disciples’
erroneous belief that, when Jesus refers to Lazarus as having “fallen
asleep,” he means literally asleep rather than dead (John 11:13). All
such uses of irony and misunderstanding, which typically focus on
death and resurrection, serve not only to soften the spiritual obduracy
of Jesus’s hearers, but also to engage and edify the reader through the
presentation of riddles that are eventually resolved.46 Importantly, only
from a post-resurrectional point of view (whether directly from Jesus or
the narrator) are the true meanings divulged; such misunderstandings
serve as both efficacious vehicles and results of revelation.47

The speaker of Herbert’s “The Bag” sets out not merely to allay
himself and his readers that tribulations are ultimately the “triumph”
of God’s art, but to demonstrate that such an overcoming is the case
(“The Bag,” 4–5). To the basic question, “Hast thou not heard, that
my Lord Jesus di’d?,” the speaker realizes that he will need to provide
a narratively rich answer (“The Bag,” 7). However, to arrive properly
at such illumination requires the telling of a mysterious and “strange
storie,” the true signification of which will be clarified by the poem’s
close. The pivotal image and sign is the piercing of Christ’s side which,
rather than intuitively suggesting the abasement of Christ’s body,
signifies the lifting up of Christ; and it does so through the provision
of an opening by which penitents might communicate with God, and
through which Christ provides justifying and sanctifying grace. Once
explicated properly, the wound helps to explain exactly why the speaker
and the poem’s readers should leave off the despair that is too quickly
explained away early in the poem. Christ, through the vehicle of the
wounding and its signification, provides the efficacious knowledge
of why his communicants should not despair for either his death or
for their own tribulations. And I emphasize the phrase efficacious
knowledge because it connotes that the simple understanding of and
belief in the imparted knowledge of Christ’s intimate relationship with
God and sinners is sufficient assurance that they either have been
saved (the faithful) or will be saved (those whose sighs represent their
spiritual lassitude).

That this is an understanding that requires a strange story, the
proper explication of which is required in order to arrive at the rather
counterintuitive Johannine association of the wound with Christ’s
divinity, rather than corporeality, is what no doubt gives “The Bag” the
provisional, open-ended quality one finds in so many of Herbert’s lyrics.
Initially, we think we are reading, as Vendler remarks, a “denatured
fairy tale,” only then to be confronted with the unspeakable piercing of
Christ’s side, which turns out to be the very means by which our fears
are allayed and Christ’s divinity is assured.48 But if the poem unsettles
us, changes course or, in Vendler’s terms, “re-invents” itself afresh,
such revisionism and irony conduce to stable meaning, a process of clarification through irony that is precisely what Herbert would have inherited from the Johannine imagery and atmosphere on which he bases his poem.49

Perhaps the overlap between Johannine and Herbertian irony can be made clearer if we distinguish between stable and unstable irony. Stable irony, always intended in nature, is finite in the sense that it does not frustrate our desire to find meaning: “Once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions.”50 Unstable irony, on the other hand, continually eludes fixed meaning or propositional knowledge: “[T]he truth asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through the irony.”51

The stabilities of Johannine irony, as R. Alan Culpepper remarks, derive from the basic presupposition of Johannine theology, especially as related in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel. As the Word made flesh, and the only one who has ever seen God, Christ occupies an Olympian position (John’s Prologue is itself influenced by Greek and Hellenistic sources): his mission is to address those who dwell in error, to correct the misjudgments of his brethren, those victims of irony, to teach them to “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24).52 Such a mission relies on stable irony because, by the end of discrete pericopes throughout the Fourth Gospel, discipleship misunderstanding is clarified or corrected rather than suspended in paradox or instability. It is precisely this culmination of meaning by way of misunderstanding that one finds in “The Bag,” in which the meaning of the piercing becomes more, not less stable as the speaker and reader come to greater knowledge of its significance as the poem unfolds.

II. CHRIST AS TRUE VINE: “THE BUNCH OF GRAPES” AND “THE AGONIE”

I have been arguing that, at least in “The Bag,” Herbert is interested more in the mysterious, even antipassible, divinity of Christ, in keeping with Johannine theology, than he is the humanity of the savior. Yet some commentators have maintained that what makes John distinctive and irreducible is that his Gospel is as interested in elevating Christ as God-man as it is in depicting Jesus’s low-born humanity (Jesus’s weeping at the feet of Lazarus is typically mentioned as evidence of Jesus’s humanity, a topic on which John Donne devotes a Lenten sermon in 1622).53 It is this very ambiguity that renders
Johannine Christology central to the Trinitarian-Socinian debates during the latter part of the seventeenth century. As Lim remarks, “One of the reasons the Gospel of John became a veritable minefield for both antitrinitarian and Trinitarian exegesis was that this Gospel, more than any other New Testament book, affirmed—often within the same pericope, if not the same verse(s), the Son’s subordinate and economic status and his equal status vis-à-vis the Father.” Here I continue to follow those early modern and modern commentators who, acknowledging the presence of the human Christ in the Fourth Gospel, point out that, even in his most creaturely manifestation, Jesus is not shamed or rendered vulnerable to the extent that he is in the Passion narratives of the Synoptics. The distinction bears directly on our Johannine interpretation of Herbert: Herbert, too, is preoccupied with the humanity of Jesus as much as he is Christ’s divinity, yet I hope to show in the following pages that, even when put in the poetic contexts of abasement (rendered as the Man of Sorrows in the iconographic winepress, for example), Herbert’s Christ emerges principally as a God of joy, love, and glory.

The typology of Herbert’s “The Bunch of Grapes” has received much critical attention. The standard reading is that Herbert’s speaker, who has lost possession of joy, meditates on the Pauline notion that Israel’s sojourn to the Promised Land presaged the New Testament wandering from sin to atonement and Christ’s embrace. The Old Testament hieroglyph, the cluster of grapes, refers to the grapes that the elders of the tribes of Israel secured from Canaan as proof of the fertility and bounty of that land. Yet because the elders perceived that Canaan was populated with giants and established tribes, they deemed the land uninhabitable for themselves; against God’s instruction to Abraham to enter into the New Jerusalem, they retreat, after which God punishes them by forcing them to wander in the desert for forty years.

Herbert’s speaker recognizes that his movement from joy to sin and backsliding recapitulates the godliness but ultimate disobedience of the Israelites: “For as the Jews of old by Gods command / Travell’d, and saw no town; / So now each Christian hath his journeys spann’d” (“The Bunch of Grapes,” 8–10). Yet he also realizes that, in acquiring the giant cluster of grapes at Eshcol, the elders experienced at least a foretaste of things to come should they remain constant in their devotion. If his life does recapitulate the Israelites’, then should he not experience such momentary joy alongside his sorrows?: “But where’s the cluster? where’s the taste / Of mine inheritance? Lord, if I must borrow, / Let me as well take up their joy, as sorrow.”
(“The Bunch of Grapes,” 19–20). However, the speaker realizes quickly that, as the fulfillment of the vine, Christ has already produced the saving wine that is sourced from the foundational vine and grape: “But can he want the grape, who hath the wine? / I have their fruit and more” (22–23). One reference here is to Christ’s self-designation as the true vine in John 15: “I am the true vine, and my Father is ye husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit, he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are cleane through the word which I haue spoken vnto you” (15:1–3). The image of Christ as true vine is exegeted frequently during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, typically understood to be a reference to the formation of the true church (the gathered fruit signifying the earnest members thereof), but it was also frequently understood to reflect the sanctification and regeneration of converts, fruit glossed as good works resultant from the gracious powers of Christ as vine. The Johannine vine parable is particularly relevant to Herbert’s poem for what it concludes about joy. After establishing that the bearing of fruit leads to the glorification of the Father, Jesus’s focus shifts quietly to the love and joy that the parable expresses:

As the Father hath loued me, so haue I loued you: continue ye in my loue. If ye keepe my Commandements, ye shal abide in my loue, euene as I haue kept my Fathers Commandements, and abide in his loue. These things haue I spoken vnto you, that my ioy might remaine in you, and that your ioy might be full. This is my Commandement, that ye loue one another, as I haue loued you. Greater loue hath no man then this, that a man lay downe his life for his friends. (15:9–13)

The vine parable informs Christ’s hearers that, should they obey his one command to abide in his love, his brethren can be assured of the fullness of joy; it is precisely the coming and going of joy of which the speaker of Herbert’s poem complains, and which motivates his analogy/disanalogy with the Israelites as a means to reinstate the joy that he has lost. In the further context of the poem, the parable of the vine teaches the speaker that he must above all love Christ, love presented in the poem as adoration—“But much more him I must adore”—if he is to recollect the joy that he once had possessed (26). The parable extends beyond the simple reference to typological fulfillment of the vine in Christ; it explains the poem’s thrust to explain why the speaker’s equanimity has been lost, and the means by which it can be regained.

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But “The Bunch of Grapes” does not rest on its own Johannine exegesis, as the final image of the winepress is drawn from a range of Old Testament sources and ensuing iconographical tradition: “Who of the Law’s sour juice sweet wine did make, / Ev’n God himself, being pressed for my sake” (28). Herbert’s multivalent use of the grape and wine imagery allows him to superimpose the more widespread winepress image onto the Johannine one of Christ as the true vine. Serving as a typological palimpsest, the Johannine ambience seeps through the superimposed image of the winepress. The winepress image is typically employed to depict the sorrows of a suffering Christ, and often puts into relief the blood and graphic wounds of Christ. But in keeping with the privileging of the divinity of Christ, Herbert bleaches the image of its graphic violence by first putting God instead of Jesus on the press, and then simply conjuring the image rather than embellishing it. The force of “Ev’n” has a paradoxical value: on the one hand, it exclaims the astonishing and exceptional fact that “God himself” is “pressed” for the speaker’s sins; on the other hand, it protects Christ (God himself) from the illustrative debasement and suffering typically associated with the image and Christ’s agony at Golgotha.

In terms of the structure and style of the poem, I agree with Stanley Fish’s notion that the poem offers patterns and modes of understanding, only to then falsify or at least gently correct such misconstruals: “We too enjoy apparent (interpretive) successes and achieve supposedly full understandings, only to find again and again that the successes are temporary and the understandings partial.” Yet such construals and misconstruals, the poem’s very “restlessness,” to use a phrase introduced in a related context by Louis Martz, stem not from Herbert’s poetization of catechistical theory or meditative practice but more fundamentally from Herbert’s desire to have a single Johannine theme—the divinity of Christ—emerge from a host of references and symbols that might otherwise have the reader question that very Christological exaltation.

What of the other, more graphic, recounting of the winepress motif in Herbert’s “The Agonie”? Here, too, a Johannine interpretation puts the use of the image in its proper theological and iconographical context. Opening as an Augustinian meditation on the virtues of self-scrutiny, “The Agonie” compresses the winepress and piercing image within two stanzas. If one needs to be reminded of sin, cautions Herbert, one should repair to Mount Olivet and apprehend “[a] man so wrung with pains, that all his hair, / His skinne, his garments bloudie be. / Sinne is that presse and vice, which forceth pain / To
hunt his cruel food through ev'ry vein” (“The Agonie,” 9–12). Here finally, through the winepress image, Herbert provides an unquestionably graphic and moving depiction of Christ’s suffering on the cross, recalling a tradition of representing the humility of the cross that finds its locus classicus in Bernard of Clairvaux’s *On the Song of Songs*. But as soon as the image is presented, it is conflated with the love that Christ’s blood and sacrifice signifies. Rather than read a forensic meaning into the significance of the winepress image—as expiatory sacrifice and atonement—Herbert notes that, alongside the image of the piercing of Christ’s side, the blood produced from both is nothing other than the love, that “liquor sweet and most divine,” which “God feels as bloud; but I, as wine” (“The Agonie,” 17–18). The intimate relationship between the Passion and love is a recurring Johannine theme, expressed clearly, for example, in chapter 3 of the Fourth Gospel: “For God so loved ye world, that he gave his only begotten Sonne: that whosoeuer beleeueth in him, should not perish, but haue everlasting life” (3:16); and, as might be expected, the same sense is conveyed in the continuation of the parable of the true vine, in which Christ remarks, “Greater love hath no man then this, that a man lay downe his life for his friends” (15:13). “The Agonie” begins with the graphic image of the winepress and agony of Christ’s human body (as it appears in the Old Testament, Luke, and elsewhere), but gradually shifts to both a Johannine image (the piercing) and a Johannine temper: Christ’s mortifying sacrifice is an act (event) principally of divine love that exalts the body under stress, as if the poem provides its own Johannine antidote to the portrait of an overly suffering Jesus.

III. JOHANNINE MISUNDERSTANDING AND “LOVE UNKNOWN”

“Love unknown” opens with the speaker’s earnest plea for help. While sighing and fainting he proffers a gift to his lord—“a dish of fruit” (6)—only to find that God’s servant rejects the fruit, seizing on his heart instead: “seiz’d on my heart alone, / And threw it in a font, whereon did fall / A stream of bloud, which issu’d from the side / Of a great rock” (12–15). The image of the gashed rock is taken from Isaiah: “And they thirsted not when he led them through the deserts; he caused the waters to flow out of the rocke for them: he claue the rocke also, and the waters gushed out” (Isa. 48:21). Importantly, the Isaian eschatological rock is the one Old Testament image that presages the uniquely Johannine image of the Longinus piercing of Christ’s side that we have discussed at length above. Subsequent lines of “Love
unknown” bring out the baptismal significance of the Johannine fulfillment of the Isaian image: “There it was dipt and dy’d, / And washt, and wrung: the very wringing yet / Enforceth tears. Your heart was foul, I fear” (16–18). If read solely in the context of the Isaian reference, the lines raise something of a puzzle: while the blood is clearly the justificatory (if not sacramental) blood into which the heart is “dipt” and “dy’d,” the “wash[ing]” and “wringing” that follow, in conjunction with the speaker’s “tears,” evoke an image of water alongside the blood. We recall that in John’s fulfillment of the image of the piercing, blood and water pour forth from Jesus’s side, a joint effusion that exercised the creative exegeses of John’s early and later commentators, most asserting that while the blood signified the Supper and justification, the water signified baptism and sanctification: “That the Sacraments of the new Law flowed out of Christ’s side: now none issued thence, but the Sacrament of water, which is Baptisme, and the Sacrament of bloud in the Supper.” Although Herbert appropriates the Isaian imagery to begin his narrative, the fulfilling significance of that imagery is taken from John’s expression of the image in John 19:34–35.

The speaker quickly reveals that he has not entirely understood the significance of the cleansing of his heart, in particular, that he should not be assured of his spiritual standing, and that backsliding is a constitutional possibility. In response to his misunderstanding of the significance of the small miracle that he has just experienced, and his overly assured belief that his “heart was well, / And clean and fair” (“Love unknown,” 22–23), the speaker is presented with another cautionary image: “A boyling caldron, round about whose verge / Was in great letters set AFFLICTION. / The greatnesse shew’d the owner” (“Love unknown,” 27–28). Still naive as to his spiritual progress, he presumptuously offers his newly cleansed heart as a sacrifice, only to have it thrown into the scalding pan because it remains too callous: “My heart, that brought it (do you understand?) / The offerers heart. Your heart was hard I fear” (“Love unknown,” 36–37). Much of the remainder of the poem fixes steadily on the manner in which the speaker’s heart remains, despite his seemingly best efforts at renewal, hardened, callous, and dull, for he tends to pray lazily: “Though my lips went, my heart did stay behinde” (“Love unknown,” 59).

The identification of the hardened heart with spiritual recalcitrance is an important Isaian theme, but here again, it serves as a type for the theme’s much fuller Johannine treatment that helps to shape the fulfillment theology of Herbert’s poem. Describing Jesus’s relationship to his disciples toward the end of his public ministry, John remarks
that, even after having witnessed several miracles, his hearers still do not believe him (see John 12:37). John believes that this tragedy of unbelief comes as no surprise since Isaiah had already recorded the comparable unbelief of the Israelites. At this point John directly quotes Isaiah on the hardened hearts of Moses’s followers: “Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said againe, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardned their heart, that they should not see with their eyes, nor vnderstand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heale them” (John 12:39–40). Importantly, given Herbert’s figuration of the hardened heart throughout “Love unknown,” John substitutes “hardened heart” for Isaiah’s reference to making the Israelites’ heart “fat”: “Make the heart of this people fat, and make their eares heauy, and shut their eyes: lest they see with their eyes, and heare with their eares, and vnderstand with their heart, and conuert and be healed” (Isa. 6:10). John also grants more agency to God as the source of the hardening and blinding than Isaiah, wherein the hardening and blinding are described passively through the use of indirect commands.

John’s message in John 12:39–41 is that Christian unbelief, foretold in Isaiah, is expected and natural: Christ’s hearers simply cannot rely on their own senses and devotional aspirations in order to bind themselves to God, despite the signs and wonders that Christ has already displayed to them. “We must first understand,” Calvin remarks, “that it was not Christ’s fault that the Jews did not believe in Him. He abundantly testified who he was. . . . John goes further and says that faith is not begotten of an ordinary human faculty but is a unique and rare gift of God.”63 It is precisely this uncommonness and difficulty of maintaining belief that is at question in Herbert’s “Love unknown.” Despite the miraculous workings of the spirit and sacrament on the speaker’s behalf, he remains naive as to the significance of his witnessing; that ignorance is represented in the persistent failure of the various processes of suppling that are offered in the poem.

As in “The Bag,” “Love unknown” also suggests, through its prophetic and Johannine imagery, a partially realized eschatology. The Isaian figure of the furnace of affliction, recalled in lines 26–29 of Herbert’s poem, conveys the message of refining and purifying which is cross-referenced in several prophetic and apocalyptic books, most notably Jeremiah, Zechariah, and Daniel. In Daniel, for example, the theme of afflictive purifying and refining is sounded in Michael’s deliverance during the end times: “Many shalbe purified, and made white and tried: but the wicked shall doe wickedly: and none of the wicked shall vnderstand, but the wise shall vnderstand (Dan. 12:10).
The narrative trajectory in Herbert’s poem that moves from the image of the fountain to the furnace is paralleled in Zechariah 13, which opens with a reference to the fountain offered to the Temple of David that would provide spiritual washings for the faithful—“In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin, and for uncleanness” (Zec. 13:1)—and closes with a reference to refinement through burning that is applied to the remaining third of the faithful: “And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, & will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my Name, and I will hear them” (Zec. 13:9). The Zechariah passages on the scattered sheep are themselves the typological sources for the theme of the burning and refining of the third portion of the earth that runs throughout Revelation 8. If this seems to take us far from John’s Gospel proper, recall that John provides the principle New Testament pericope that fulfills the Isaian notion of suppling and refining through affliction that is central to Herbert’s “Love unknown,” a poem whose imagery harks back to the Prophets via John and then, in the scriptural connotations of the flaming furnace, gestures toward Revelation.

This is not to say that “Love unknown” is an apocalyptic poem, but it does mean that the poem has eschatological resonances, not all of which are future-oriented. The speaker of the poem needs to realize that the fulfillment of the symbolic function of the furnace of affliction, to refine and supple his heart, has already been undertaken on his behalf: “Truly, “Friend, / For ought I heare, your Master shows to you / More favour then you wot of” (“Love unknown,” 63–64). The speaker’s plight is not that he is a hardened sinner, but that he is unaware of the fact that the renewing, suppling, and quickening has already transpired, all such actions placed in the past tense in the poem. Christ’s redemptive death does not simply have forensic effects; it has sanctifying effects that have already taken place on the speaker’s behalf, his renewal a present, rather than future, accomplishment. Certainly the speaker hasn’t achieved anything like the everlasting life that Jesus promises to the faithful in the Fourth Gospel. But the process toward that attainment has already begun, the implication being that a foretaste of such eternal life has been made available to the speaker (given that the eschatological refining on his behalf has already been undertaken) in his creaturely present, rather than simply post-resurrectional future.

Finally, the very title, “Love unknown,” captures the Johannine structure of misunderstanding that is recapitulated in the dialogical
structure of the poem. The darkness of the speaker as to the work-
nings of Christ's love is reiterated again and again by the interlocutor
who never directly identifies himself as Christ. The speaker's servant
or “friend” provides several explanations of the speaker's ignorance,
as well as miraculous symbolic accounts of regeneration, yet the
speaker cannot extract the symbolic meaning from what he perceives
as literally disturbing afflictions. Christ as “friend” of the apostles is
unique to Johannine theology, particularly John 15:14–15: “Ye are
my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call
you not servants, for the servant knoweth not what his lord doth,
but I haue called you friends: for all things that I haue heard of my
Father, I haue made known vnto you.” Christ as friend elsewhere
clarifies seeming riddles for Herbert's speakers, as in “Jordan (II)”:  
“But while I bustled, I might heare a friend / whisper, How wide is
all this long pretence!” (“Jordan (II),” 15–16).64 The friend in “Love
unknown” helps the speaker to realize that the fountain, cauldron, and
bed of thorns are connected in the speaker's mind with his inability to
“rest” precisely because he cannot put together their typological and
symbolic significance. The poem reads as a veritable series of riddles
posed to the speaker, the resolutions of which are only explained
at the poem's direct address at the end: “Mark the end. / The Font
did onely, what was old, renew: / The Caldron suppld, what was
grown too hard: / The Thorns did quicken; what was grown too dull”
(“Love unknown,” 65–67). The title of Herbert's poem alerts us to the
fact that that the approach and content of the poem will be, through
the routes of irony and misunderstanding, the speaker's gradual illu-
mination regarding the proper knowledge of the way of God through
the divinely incarnated Word. Here again, what looks like Herbert's
idiosyncratic tendency to “re-invent” his poem, or to provide catechis-
tical or Socratic lessons for his reader, results more directly from his
use of Johannine theology, this time superimposed on Isaian sources.65

Johannine themes and imagery in Herbert's poetry appear addi-
tionally in “Love-joy,” “Peace,” “Paradise,” “The Call,” and “A True
Hymn,” among other lyrics. But rather than provide close readings
of such additional lyrics and their Johannine sources, I would like to
return to our opening discussion regarding the traditional assumption
that Herbert's poetry is fundamentally influenced by Pauline theology
and related forensic conceptions of justification, sanctification, and the
complex relationship between law and gospel. The above readings of
“The Bag,” “The Bunch of Grapes,” and “Love unknown” suggest that
Herbert's poetry is often revelatory, rather than simply paradoxical in

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nature: it seeks to illuminate knowledge of God’s mysteries and Christ’s redemptive actions, and does so through the route of stable irony, in which meaning/knowledge increases as a particular poem’s theological crux or spiritual conflict works toward resolution.66 This does not mean that all such crises are neatly resolved in a given poem, but it does assume that selected poems do not purposefully (catechetically, for example) frustrate meaning or move toward paradox and instability.

It is this revelatory aspect that, among other qualities, renders the poems discussed above more Johannine than Pauline in orientation: in both John and Herbert a revelatory poetics actually presupposes the use of the stable ironies that I have described above. Paul’s fondness for paradox is well known, evidenced in the difficulty of finding congruity (as Luther struggled to do) between Romans 2:13 (“the doers of the Law shalbe justified”) and Romans 3:28 (“a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the Law”). Given such paradoxicality (and Paul’s concern to exfoliate the intricacies of the faith, grace, and law relationship), a Pauline poetics would expectedly rely on unstable irony, as in so many of John Donne’s Holy Sonnets, which meditate directly on Pauline paradoxes, as well as the fundamentally ironic nature of God becoming man: “‘Twas much that man was made like God before, / But, that God should be made like man, much more.”67 In Herbert’s most revelatory poems, the primary concern is not to meditate on the irreducible nature of faith, or even the paradox of God made flesh; rather, the concern is to underline the fundamentally divine nature of Christ, someone who, because he solely descends from above and has experienced the beatific vision, is in a privileged position to remedy misjudgment and vouchsafe a permissible form of redemptive knowledge to the poems’ speakers and readers. I hope to have shown that, in his use of John’s Gospel and First Epistle both for their content and style, Herbert offers in some of his most compelling lyrics not only a Johannine worldview, but also a thoroughgoing Johannine poetics.

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NOTES
1 John Arrowsmith, Theanthropos, or, God-Man (London, 1660), 3. On John’s superiority to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, see also Anthony Wotton, Sermons upon a part of the first chap. of the Gospell of S. Iohn (London, 1609). Wotton remarks, “Who is not astonished with admiration of those wonderfull mysteries, concerning our Savior Christs eternal divinitie, which this sonne of thunder as it were ratleth out? Therefore did the antient writers compare him to an Eagle, as one that mounted up above the
pitch of the other three Evangelists, even to the height of the Godhead, and that unsearchable mystery of the most glorious, and blessed Trinitie” (17).

2 Wotton, 18.

2 Wotton, 23.


9 Lim, 271.

10 Lim, 273.


19 Barbara Lewalski influentially argued that the poems of *The Temple* recapitulate a Protestant-Pauline paradigm of salvation in their focus on election, calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. See *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), 13–24 and 285–86. Stanley Fish draws partly on Paul’s epistles in his discussion of catechism in Herbert. See *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978), 62–63. Christopher Hodgkins’s revisionist belief that Herbert’s middle way follows “Calvin’s Calvinism,” and is centered on *sola scriptura*, draws partly on Calvin’s interpretation of Paul’s Letter to the Romans (*Authority, Church, and Society in George Herbert: Return to the Middle Way* [Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1993], 13).

20 The most recent account of the influence of the Psalms and Canticles on Herbert’s spiritual conflicts (via Calvinist exegeses) can be found in Daniel W. Doerksen, *Picturing Religious Experience: George Herbert, Calvin, and the Scriptures* (Delaware: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2011).

21 Pitkin, 180.

22 Pitkin, 192.


Donne devotes an entire 1621 sermon on John 1:8 and the nature of Christ as true light. See *Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 3, esp. 353–54.


Schoenfeldt, 249.


Lewis Bayly, *The practise of pietie directing a Christian how to walke that he may please God* (London, 1613), 1014.

Edward Leigh, *Annotations Upon All the New Testament* (London, 1650), 168, emphasis added. On the association between the pericardium and the site of the piercing, see William Perkins, *The Golden Chaine* (London, 1600). Perkins describes the pericardium as a casket or “coate”. “For seeing that water and blood gushed forth together, it is very like, the casket or coate which inuesteth the heart called Pericardion, was pierced” (31). Comparable descriptions of the “pericardion” appear in manuals on health and the humours, for example, in Levinus Lemnius’s *Touchstone of Complexions* (London, 1576), where the pericardium is described as a “pannice or coffyn” (113), and William Vaughan’s *The Soul’s Exercise* (London, 1641), where the pericardium is described as a “skinne about his heart” (214). The use of “cawl” to describe the pericardion itself derives from Hosea 13:8, as noted in the *OED*: “I . . . will rent the kall of their heart” (s.v. “kall,” n., 4).


John makes a distinction between present “eternal life” and the *eschaton* that follows the resurrection of the dead. As R. Alan Culpepper remarks, “Believers who ‘see the Son’ and participate in the community’s sacred meal have eternal life (now), and Jesus will raise them up on the last day” (“Realized Eschatology in the Experience of the Johannine Community,” in *Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, ed. Craig Koester and Reimund Bieringer [Tuebingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008], 255). On


45 Andreas J. Kostenberger, A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 143.

46 See Kostenberger, 143.

47 See Kostenberger, 142.

48 Vendler, The Poetry of George Herbert, 175.


52 See Culpepper, “Reading Johannine Irony,” 194.


54 Lim, 274.


56 See, for example, Summers, George Herbert: His Religion and Art, 126–28. Rosemond Tuve provides a thorough account of the emblematic and iconographical tradition behind the grape image in A Reading of George Herbert (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1952), 112–37.

57 On the relationship between the “true vine” and regeneration, see, for example, Henry Burton, The Christians bulwarke, against Satans battery (London, 1632). Burton remarks, “As the branch cannot bear fruit of it selfe, except it abide in the vine: no more can ye, except ye abide in mee: or without me yee can doe nothing. Therefore while a man is out of Christ, vntill by faith he be ingrafted into Christ, the true Vine, from whom hee receueth the liuely sappe of a new life, hee can doe nothing; nothing that is good, nothing that is acceptable to God; no worke of new obedience or sanctification” (31).

58 Fish, 125.


64 The Johannine theme of Christological friendship is explicitly stated in “The Church-Porch,” where Herbert draws on the legacy of John as beloved disciple and friend of Christ: “But love is lost, the way of friendship’s gone, / Though David had his Jonathan, Christ his John” (275–76).

65 Vendler’s brief discussion of “Love unknown” can be found in “The Re-invented Poem,” 184.
