“With My Utmost Art”: The Inspiration of George Herbert’s Poetry and the Limits of Austin Farrer’s Vision

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This essay argues that poetry can participate in God’s ongoing self-revelation in the world, against Austin Farrer’s view that the conveyance of supernatural truths is restricted to prophecy and the original apostolic witness. The author turns to Farrer’s own descriptions of inspiration and revelation in The Glass of Vision to support this claim, as well as advocating with Ingolf Dalferth for a trans-historical understanding of the Spirit’s work of revelation. Finally, through a close reading of key poems in George Herbert’s The Temple, the essay offers an account of how the Spirit might move through the medium of poetry, leading poet and reader to deeper knowledge and love of God in Christ.

In 1948, philosopher and theologian Austin Farrer delivered Oxford’s Bampton Lectures, a series of eight talks titled The Glass of Vision. In them, Farrer offers an account of “the form of divine truth in the human mind,” particularly how that truth finds expression in metaphysics, scripture, and poetry.¹ For Farrer, these disciplines are interrelated; by his own account, the “three things rubbing against one another in my mind seem to kindle one another, and so I am moved to ask how this happens.”² Through bringing these three things into contact with each other, Farrer develops an account of revelation and inspiration that responds to several pressures of its contemporary theological context. As Farrer demonstrates in his first lecture, he is

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equally unsatisfied by recent accounts of revelation that collapse the traditional distinction between reason and revelation, on the one hand, and a personalist account that does not recognize God's ability to inspire human thought without the subject's awareness of God, on the other. Through the lectures, Farrer argues instead for distinguishing between God's natural and supernatural actions, both of which can operate in the human mind with or without subjective awareness.

Although Farrer is concerned with maintaining the distinction between reason and revelation and between inspired and non-inspired writing, his willingness to bring poetry, philosophy, and scripture into contact with each other has proven to be the most generative aspect of *The Glass of Vision*, spurring conversation and scholarship that continues to explore the intersection of poetry and scripture. For Farrer, poetry is both similar and distinct from prophecy and apostolic writing. Farrer summarized this distinction in a well-known formula: “the poet is a maker, the prophet is a mouthpiece.” In this scheme, prophecy is the literary arena in which the Word of God intrudes into human writing, and the New Testament is an outworking of the incarnation of the Word of God as human being in the person of Jesus Christ. Both sets of writings are bound to the details of history, while poetry is free to invent without regard for facts, which for Farrer is one reason poetry cannot participate in God’s act of self-revelation. Yet what of poetry that is explicitly Christian? And what of God’s continued revelation through the church which is the body of Christ and led by his Spirit?

In response to the critiques of Ingolf Dalferth and to the poetry of George Herbert, this paper argues that Farrer unfairly limits poetry’s ability to participate in the revelation of God and to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. Though scripture is unique in its relationship to the historical Jesus and occupies a privileged place of authority in Christianity, because Christ and the Holy Spirit are alive and at work in the world and the church, poetry is capable of participating in this ongoing life and work. The manner in which poetry reveals supernatural truth, as demonstrated in George Herbert’s *The Temple*, is similar but not identical to that of prophecy and scripture. Rather, poetry’s ability to invent freely, to use irony, to play with language and symbol, and to narrate the inner life and growth of the human heart offers a unique

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opportunity for the Spirit to reveal God in Christ and to move the hearts and minds of readers.

Farrer’s Boundary between Poetry and Prophecy

We will begin by turning to Lecture VII of *The Glass of Vision*, “Prophecy and Poetry,” as an entry into how Farrer understands both poetry and prophecy, as well as how he views their similarities and marks the fundamental difference between them. Farrer begins by noting that both poetry and prophecy are experienced by those who write them in similar ways, namely as “a process of images which live as it were by their own life and impose themselves with authority.”

Farrer describes this imposition of images as a controlling “ought” which directs poet and prophet alike, leading them away from some images and toward others and requiring an obedience to some external force. In a further similarity, prophecy and poetry are both, for Farrer, composed in a similar process. Rather than receiving a supernatural message and then subsequently choosing the poetic means to render it persuasive, the prophet receives the divine message through the act of composing poetry: “Poetry, for the prophet, is a technique of divination, in the poetic process he gets his message.”

Farrer argues that only a deep experience of ecstatic inspiration, in which words and images flow through the prophet and onto the page, could allow prophets like Jeremiah to presume to speak for God. This experience of inspiration unavoidably raises the comparison to how poetry is composed, and in fact Farrer supposes the actual process to be indistinguishable.

Though the poetic process is the method of composition for both poetry and prophecy, Farrer makes a sharp distinction between these modes of discourse, namely between the external forces that determine the “ought” of their writing. For poetry, “the ‘ought’ is the quality of human existence clamouring for expression.” Poetry, Farrer argues, works on two levels: the surface meaning of the words in themselves and the human experience that is called forth in the saying of them. The speaking or hearing of these words allows us to have a “vaguer apprehension” of some truth of existence; in some sense we enter into an experience of whatever reality the poetry means to

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evoke in us. Speaking and thinking about what exactly that experience is (that is, discourse on the “meaning” of the poetry) is prose, not poetry, and we become observers, one step removed from what we experience in the poetry. Thus, the words and images of poetry are constrained by their ability to convey or make present some aspect of human experience, and “the post-Renaissance poet is responsive to qualities or patterns of human existence.”

Yet the truth that poetry conveys is both freer and more limited than prophecy. Farrer notes that the poet is unconstrained by historical fact and “can imagine and devise the freest of fictions,” provided these fictions effectively call forth the range of human existence that the poet intends. At the same time, poetry is limited by its subjectivity; Farrer argues that poetry encapsulates the way life is experienced by a “sensitive and capacious mind,” but it is incapable of escaping the perspective of a human being and rising to an eternal or divine one: “Theological symbols may be found in it, but all they show us at the most is how men think or feel about their destiny in the crises of it: what they say about their relation to God, and not what that relation really is, nor even how what they say compares with the theological truth.”

Farrer points to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as a prime example of this: though God speaks in the poem, readers have consistently found Satan to be the more compelling and captivating character. The theology found in poetry is, for Farrer, inescapably bound to the limits and perspectives of the human mind.

Prophets, on the other hand, are subject to greater constraints than poets, yet their prophecy is also capable of conveying theological truth unavailable to poetry. Prophets cannot invent and craft whatever images best convey the human experience they seek to evoke, for they are subject to nothing less than the will of God. Prophets must compose exactly what God is seeking to have said; they must answer to a real and active Other whose nature, will, and communications they must faithfully convey. Furthermore, prophetic words are “designed to evoke not an exquisite and contemplative realisation of human existence, but particular practical responses to God.”

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words, spoken through the prophet, to accomplish a specific purpose in the lives of those for whom they were intended. Thus, prophets are constrained under the pressure of adequately conveying divine words in order to elicit a particular response. Yet precisely because God is so active through prophets, their writing also steps beyond the limits of human perception, where “private hopes, fears, and recalcitrances . . . are forced back, trampled, annihilated by the Word of God.”

For Farrer, the Word of God that is spoken in prophecy cannot be explained or interpreted by looking to life as humans typically experience it; prophecy interprets itself, and invites interpretation, as a supernatural truth intruding into the ordinary world.

In Farrer’s estimation, poetry and prophecy are both composed out of a similar urgency and sense of obligation, but are nevertheless distinct realities: “The difference between the two controlling pressures is enormous, and it has such important consequences, that when we have taken them into account we may no longer wish to retain prophecy as a species of poetry.” Yet Farrer also admits that biblically there are not only examples of poetry as well as prophecy, but also hybrids of the two: “The Old Testament will supply us with mixed cases, halfway between the ‘making’ of the psalm Eructavit [Psalm 45] and the prophecy of Jeremiah, for example, the book of Job: but it is the pure case we can most profitably study.” Farrer never returns to this intriguing concession in The Glass of Vision, so we can only speculate on how Job might work as both poetry and prophecy. One obvious option is to note that as in Paradise Lost, great speeches are made by many characters, including God, but that the God who intrudes upon Job’s speech at the end of the poem is unmistakably the God of Israel, and his words are accepted by Jews and Christians as revealing the mysterious and otherwise unknowable nature of God. As argued below, The Temple operates along a similar arc, and can be interpreted as a Christian, though not biblical, hybrid of poetry and prophecy.

**Farrer’s Theology of Revelation**

Before turning to Herbert, we will next consider Farrer’s understanding of revelation, and particularly how it is interpreted and

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expanded by Ingolf Dalferth. There are three elements of Farrer’s theory of revelation that we will highlight: revelation occurs in images; it is the product of an imaginative, poetic process; and God’s supreme self-revelation in the person and life of Jesus consists of both Jesus’ self-presentation as incarnate Word and the apostolic affirmation and interpretation of this presentation. By revelation, Farrer is referring to knowledge of God’s nature and self that is beyond discovery by humanity’s natural powers of reason and observation.

First, revelation occurs not through propositions, but through images, by which Farrer means figurative language. Both the Jesus of the Gospels and the writings of early Christians used Judaic images like kingdom of God and Son of Man to describe supernatural reality. Jesus’ language about himself and his imagistic actions, such as calling the twelve disciples and enacting the sacred meal of the Last Supper, interacted with the events of his life in such a way as to transform the preexisting images and to create new meanings out of them. When applied to Jesus, words like “messiah” and “Son of Man” were radically transformed at the same time that they revealed the truth about Jesus. These images are the primary source for understanding divine truth as captured in scripture, and the later, systematic working out of their theological implications is a secondary matter. For Farrer, the actual process of receiving revealed supernatural truth occurs on the level of images.

Second, as already described above, Farrer argues that inspired writing occurs as the result of a creative process similar to composing poetry; most of this argument occurs in Lecture VII in regard to Old Testament prophecy such as Jeremiah. In his discussion of the New Testament in Lecture III, he focuses mainly on the confluence and reworking of images in the minds of the apostles in response to their experience of Jesus, but he does offer some speculation on the nature of how these inspired images led to the inspired writings of the New Testament. Farrer does not want to limit scripture to being a “uniquely informative” set of writings, nor does he want to rely on a simplistic idea of word-for-word inspiration. Instead, he argues that though “the decisive shaping of the images took place elsewhere”—presumably in response to the events of Jesus’ life and of Pentecost—nevertheless “the images are still alive and moving in the writers’ minds, not fixed or diagrammatic,” and the writing of the New Testament still

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Qualifies as “inspired thinking.” Though Farrer does not state it in such terms, one might argue that in fact, some of the implications and meaning of these transformed images remained inescapably latent until subjected to the process of being written about. In this sense, the actual act of communicating images in language was an inspired process that allowed deeper meaning to rise to the surface.

What Farrer does state is that, regardless of whether the apostolic process of writing itself was inspired in the way Old Testament prophecy was, the “apostolic comment” on Jesus’ self-revelation is an integral part of the full revelation and a work of the inspiration of the Spirit. Farrer sees the “work of revelation . . . [as] the work of the mystical Christ, who embraces both Head and members.” The full revealing of God occurred in the person of Jesus Christ, but this revelation is worked out and interpreted by the apostles in their living and being in Christ: “As the ministerial action of Christ is extended in the Apostolic Mission, so the expressed thought of Christ is extended in the Apostolic teaching.” Thus, the apostolic witness and writings are a continuation of God’s ultimate revelation and integral to understanding it.

An Expanded Theology of Inspiration

In his essay “The Stuff of Revelation,” Ingolf Dalferth argues that Farrer’s concerns with revelation in scripture are primarily theological and not those of a literary critic, despite what previous literary critics have supposed in their treatment of his hermeneutics. In order to arrive at a compelling account of revelation, Dalferth describes Farrer’s theology of revelation and attempts to correct for what he sees as a “fundamental epistemological circle at the centre of Farrer’s hermeneutics.” Dalferth sees much to appreciate in Farrer’s account of the role of apostolic imagination in the revelation of Christ. “Revelation,” Dalferth writes, “is the coincidence of divine incarnation and apostolic inspiration.” The apostolic interpretation of Jesus’ person, nature, and saving work is a direct response to the fact of the incarnation

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18 Farrer, The Glass of Vision, 42.
and a result of the working of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the apostles’ affirmation of the truth of Jesus’ own self-presentation, their very ability to recognize and confess Jesus as Christ, springs out of the indwelling Spirit. For Farrer, “the apostolic comment on Jesus’ life and death is not just an external interpretation of these events which we may or may not accept but an internal continuation of them: it is part and parcel of revelation itself.”21 The apostolic comment contained in scripture is inspired, then, because it both reveals the nature of God in Jesus Christ and results from the apostles’ ability to feel the truth of this revelation.

Yet in Farrer’s system, Dalferth argues, one knows scripture is inspired because scripture tells one so through its inspired images; scripture’s only support for its claims is to point to its claims about itself, creating the epistemological problem noted above. Dalferth solves this issue by arguing that, rather than the images of the gospel being the means that the revelation is communicated to present-day readers, the Spirit must also inspire us to accept the truth of the apostolic witness, just as the apostles were inspired to believe in Jesus’ self-witness. Thus, we are participants in God’s revelation as much as the apostles’ were: rather than being confined to a specific period of history, “God’s self-revelation occurs wherever the Spirit inspires persons to accept the truth of the incarnation.”22 The proclamation of the gospel, the communication of the images about Jesus, is the occasion and the precondition for revelation to occur, but the ability to receive the revelation as truth depends on the Spirit.

For Dalferth, the criterion for characterizing Christians’ images and language as “inspired” shifts from “a specific quality of the images as such [to] a fact about their actual use, that is, their role in the process of God’s faith-constituting revelation.”23 Since God’s self-revelation occurs across space and time, wherever someone is led to affirm the truth of God’s nature in Jesus, inspired proclamation can also occur at any time; if one’s images and interpretation of the gospel are the occasion for revelation, then they are inspired. Dalferth does not deny a special role to the apostles or to scripture; though all believers are inspired, the apostles “arrived at faith by discerning the truth of Jesus’ life while we, inspired by the same Spirit, arrive at faith

by discerning the truth of the gospel.”24 Likewise, the New Testament “is neither ‘uniquely inspired’ nor ‘uniquely informative’ but uniquely normative for the Christian community.”25

This shift from inspired content to inspired use has implications for the distinction between poetry and prophecy as well. If poetry, regardless of the external pressures that inform its composition, absorbs the images communicated by the gospel and re-presents them in such a way as to be an occasion for faith, then according to Dalferth’s standards it is inspired. The poetic freedom to invent images and stories, which Farrer sees as proof of its inability to reveal God’s self, is thus in fact capable of participating in God’s ongoing self-revelation to the world, provided the faith proclaimed accords with the apostolic witness. In these terms, prophecy might well remain a subset of poetry, one subject to the historical and theological restraints that Farrer describes. If poetry is capable of participating in revelation, however, it will not do so in the same manner as prophecy or the apostolic witness in scripture. Inspired poetry will operate in a unique manner, similar but not identical to how the Spirit moves through scripture.

*Inspired Poetry: Language Games and Symbols*

We now turn to George Herbert’s *The Temple* as an example of the possibilities of poetry to be revelatory of God’s self-disclosure. As argued below, close readings of key poems reveal writing that works in ways analogous to Farrer’s and Dalferth’s theories about revelation and inspiration.

Many of Herbert’s poems illustrate in their very words the necessity of the act of what Farrer might call “apprehension” for revelation. If inspiration occurs through the poetic act of composition, as Farrer believes is operative in prophecy, then Herbert’s poems often illustrate the capacity of writing and speaking language to convey unexpected, providential truth about God. In “Paradise,” the speaker praises God for the hidden wisdom behind the “sharpness” and “cuttings” of divine judgment that humans experience. Ultimately, God’s corrections and chastening lead to growth and new life, which the speaker illustrates with the metaphor of pruning fruit trees. Yet the assertion that God’s wisdom indeed works for the ultimate good


of the speaker is enacted by the words of the poem itself. The lines of each stanza illustrate the pruning action the speaker describes, with the words providentially revealing themselves to contain hidden layers of meaning and potential, as in the fourth stanza:

When thou dost greater judgements SPARE,
And with thy knife but prune and PARE,
Ev'n fruitful trees more fruitful ARE.²⁶

A similar language game occurs in “Heaven,” the penultimate poem of The Temple’s main section. The poem unfolds as a series of questions and responses between the speaker and a responder styled as “Echo.” The speaker wants to discuss the “delights on high” to which the poem’s title alludes. Each of his questions is answered by an echo of the final word, with each answer adding to the joyful message of eternal life that is the Christian promise:

Then tell me, what is that supreme delight?
   Echo. Light.
Light to the mind: what shall the will enjoy?
   Echo. Joy.
But are there cares and business with the pleasure?
   Echo. Leisure.
Light, joy, and leisure; but shall they persever?
   Echo. Ever.²⁷

On the surface, the logic of these poems can appear to rely on gimmicks and Herbert’s own self-indulgent ingenuity. Yet, Herbert’s poetic genius aside, the poems’ use of language constitutes an “image” as much as the metaphors communicated by the words, and this image communicates supernatural truth outside the natural abilities of humans. In the case of “Paradise,” the language reveals the paradox of growth through diminishment: just as humans experience growth of life and virtue through the experience of hardship and loss, the words of the poem reveal deeper meaning and grow in significance as they are shortened. By doing so, they testify to the truth the speaker

declares, namely that God’s pruning action is providential and restorative. The language of “Heaven” is an image of the destined promise of eternal life; through the course of the poem, the responses change from seeming coincidence to a mounting sense of inevitability and fate. The fact that, over and over again, the questions themselves contain the answer they seek lends a sense of credibility to the promises of eternal joy and light. Both poems also demonstrate that actually writing or speaking the words is necessary for the revelation of divine providence to occur. In this way they are a necessary part of the revelation of supernatural truth; they, like the apostolic witness, serve as the “becoming explicit of what is implicit in incarnation.”

Herbert’s poems demonstrate another element of Farrer’s theory of revelation, the fact that it occurs through images, not propositions. In Herbert, more explicit confessions of Christian doctrine are found in the text of the poems, but The Temple also includes images that are transformed and interpreted by their connection with Christ, as well as shape poems that become unified, visual images out of language. Among the most famous of these is “Easter-Wings.”

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poor:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

The text of the poem describes the fall of humankind into sin and death and praises Jesus for his rising from the dead, in which rising the speaker may graciously share. The text of the poem mimics the flow of the story of death and resurrection, with the lines shortening and lengthening to reflect creation, fall, and restoration. The last lines of each stanza allude to the image of flight, with the speaker comparing the necessary falling of birds’ wings in order to gain lift to the

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necessary afflictions of life in order to be sanctified. The process of writing about salvation results in an image that further illuminates it: wings. Only when the speaker reaches the end of each stanza can he recognize the image produced and incorporate the language of flight into his meditation on the resurrection. The image itself contains its own revelation of theological truth.

Similarly, “The Altar,” the first poem of the main section of The Temple, arranges its words into the image of an altar.

A broken Altar, Lord, thy servant rears,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman’s tool hath touched 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 sanctify this Altar to be thine.30

The shape of this poem, like “Easter-Wings,” also reveals a deep supernatural truth, but unlike the other shape poem, the speaker does not seem to recognize its presence. The poem describes the speaker’s determination to erect a monument out of his own broken heart, an altar where the speaker may please God by praising him; furthermore, this altar is to be the site, as in a physical altar, of union with God in Christ: “Oh let thy blessed Sacrifice be mine, / And sanctify this Altar to be thine.” Accordingly, the poem is written in the image of an altar, suggesting that the speaker can successfully create a linguistic object that achieves his goals. Yet the shape of the poem can also be read as the first singular pronoun “I,” or as the symbol of the

Latin name of Jesus, *Iesu*.\(^{31}\) If both readings are combined, the poem’s shape reveals the absolute union of the speaker (“I”) with Jesus (“Iesu”); the one character unites the two identities.\(^{32}\) God has fulfilled the speaker’s request for union in the asking of it, and the speaker’s seeming obliviousness to this adds a layer of irony to the poem. This irony also suggests that poetry is capable of subtly allowing for the intrusion of God’s perspective and truth, even while it simultaneously accomplishes what Farrer sees as poetry’s ability to communicate life as it is experienced by the human person. The motif of irony recurs throughout *The Temple*, as the speaker again and again unwittingly introduces the divine perspective into his complaints and struggles with God. Shape poems can thus provide a deepened revelation of supernatural truth separate from but constituted by the words of the poetry, and can also be an occasion for a subtle hybrid of Farrer’s understanding of poetry and prophecy.

**Inspired Poetry: Transformative Images**

There are images within the text of poems of *The Temple* too, and these images are often directly applied to Christ. The interplay of these images with the person and action of Christ results in a deepened and indeed new understanding of Jesus, which works analogously to how Farrer describes the inspiration of the “apostolic mind”: “The God-given images lived, not statically, but with an inexpressible creative force. The several distinct images grew together into fresh unities, opened out in new detail, attracted to themselves and assimilated further image-material. . . . The stuff of inspiration is living images.”\(^{33}\)

Throughout *The Temple*, the speaker uses existing images for Christ, as well as unexpected ones, to create a new web of “image-material” that offers a fresh vision of Jesus.

For instance, in “Love-Joy,” the speaker describes a vision of a stained glass window of a grapevine with the letters “J and C / Annealed on every bunch.”\(^{34}\) When asked for his interpretation, the speaker suggests that it is “the body and the letters both / Of Joy and

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\(^{31}\) I owe this insight to Professor Pamela Macfie, The University of the South, Sewanee.

\(^{32}\) See Herbert’s poem “Jesu” (*The Complete English Poems*, 104), where Herbert allows the first letter of the name “Jesu” to alternate between “J” and “I.”


Charity.” His answer is correct, the interlocutor states, for the image “figures JESUS CHRIST.” The image of the vine as Jesus is drawn from John 15, where Jesus himself declares, “I am the true vine” (John 15:1, KJV), and Christian tradition found unlimited instances of the wine of the eucharist prefigured in the Old Testament. The association of this image with Jesus is not a new one, but it is overlaid—annealed, even—with the speaker’s initial interpretation. The image of a grapevine is naturally associated with joy because it provides the means to make wine; likewise, throughout the Old Testament, Israel is compared to a vine which God cares for, and the loving care required to produce grapes is again an apt symbol for charity. By presenting the two interpretations of the image in a way that suddenly identifies them with each other, the speaker provides a new, or at least renewed, understanding of Christ’s embodiment of joy and charity. None of the images at play in this poem are new inventions, yet the way that they are presented and combined results in a “fresh unity” that illuminates the nature of Jesus Christ.

The Temple also contains poems that do incorporate new images into the story of Jesus, perhaps the most powerful of which is “The Bag.” The poem presents itself as providing an antidote to despair; the solution to the speaker’s despair is enigmatically presented at the beginning of the poem: “Hast thou not heard, that my Lord JESUS died?” Later stanzas provide an account of the crucifixion, telling a story not found in scripture: Jesus is wounded by the spear in his side, and immediately turns and says

If ye have any thing to send or write,
(I have no bag, but here is room)
Unto my father’s hands and sight
(Believe me) it shall safely come.
That I shall mind, what you impart;
Look, you may put it very near my heart.

The bag to which the title alludes is Jesus’ own wounded body; the spear-wound that Christ receives is immediately and imaginatively repurposed as a mailbag to carry correspondence between humans and

35 See Psalm 80:8–9, Hosea 9:10, Isaiah 5:2, Mark 12.
God the Father. The image could be provided with theological gloss; Christ’s death opened the way to God the Father, and it is through his wounds that we are able to be reconciled with God. Yet such explanations do not fully sum up the truth revealed by the image, and the image works on a level beyond merely didactic teaching of doctrine. It permanently alters the way one views the wounds of Christ and his saving work on the cross; furthermore, the story makes Jesus into a character in a story, with recognizable attributes, chief among them creativity and gracious forgiveness. The image’s interplay with the events of Jesus’ life results in a new revelation of who Jesus is.

Inspired Poetry: Story and Silence

When one reads through the entirety of the collection, another element of inspired poetry in *The Temple* becomes clear: in a manner similar to Job, Farrer’s exemplary hybrid of poetry and prophecy, *The Temple* offers two clear voices in dialogue with each other, the speaker and God. Over the course of the collection, the poems gradually give more room to the voice of a genuine Other, who interrupts the speaker and is recognizably the God of Christianity. Often, the dialogue is dramatized using italicized writing for the voice of the Other, usually Christ; in fact, poems like “Dialogue” explicitly present a conversation between the speaker and his “Sweetest Savior.” The stanzas alternate voices, and unlike Milton’s Almighty God, the voice of Christ is the more compelling, so much so that the speaker himself is moved:

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\begin{align*}
That as I did freely part \\
With my glory and desert, \\
Left all joys to feel all smart—
\end{align*}
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Ah! no more: thou break’st my heart.37

There are many more poems with explicit dialogue between the speaker and some Other, who is sometimes obviously Christ and sometimes only suggestively so. One measure of the collection’s gradual shift from anthropocentric to theocentric perspective is the difference between one of the first poems in the collection, “The Sacrifice,” and

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the last, “Love (III).” “The Sacrifice” is an extended poem based on the medieval tradition of Good Friday reproaches, in which the speaker, Jesus, confronts the listener with his own innocence, the deep irony and injustice of his passion and death, and the high cost of the listener’s redemption.\footnote{George Herbert, “The Sacrifice,” in \textit{The Complete English Poems}, 23.} One could easily argue that this poem works according to Farrer’s view of prophecy; the only speaker in the poem is Jesus. The poem demonstrates a command of rhetoric and irony that are designed to overwhelm and elicit an emotional, and perhaps behavioral, response from the reader. Yet the poem has failed to impress many of Herbert’s literary critics, whose response is best summarized by Helen Vendler’s observation that rather than the poem eliciting an authentic emotional response, it is obvious that “Herbert’s enjoyment of his own intellectuality reigns.”\footnote{Helen Vendler, \textit{The Poetry of George Herbert} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 137. For a more sympathetic reading, see Rosemond Tuve, “On Herbert’s ‘Sacrifice,’” \textit{The Kenyon Review} 12.1 (1950): 51–75.} As in \textit{Paradise Lost}, the Christ of “The Sacrifice” fails to convince.

Yet the poem that follows “The Sacrifice,” “The Thanksgiving,” suggests that this self-aggrandizing ingenuity is precisely the attitude Herbert intended “The Sacrifice” to convey. The speaker is evidently so overwhelmed by the sufferings of Christ that he is desperate to find a way to repay the sacrifice. In a line layered with meanings, he promises Christ, “I will revenge me on thy love.”\footnote{George Herbert, “The Thanksgiving,” in \textit{The Complete English Poems}, 32.} Rather than rejoicing at the redemption wrought by Christ, the speaker is led to anger and despair. In one sense, this simply illustrates how far the speaker must go before he is truly reconciled with God, but it also suggests that “The Sacrifice” is ineffective as both poetry and prophecy: it fails to offer a compelling experience of reality or to inspire a response of faith and conversion. The poems that follow “The Sacrifice” seem designed to confirm this failure is intentional.

When contrasted with the poem that concludes \textit{The Temple}, the limitations of “The Sacrifice” become even clearer. Though the poem contains two voices instead of one, whose words are not set off with italics, and though the dialogue between the speaker and Love contains no rhetorical flourishes but rather spare, simple sentences, “Love (III)” is Herbert’s most famous and beloved poem.
Inspiration in Herbert and Farrer

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.41

Here again is a transforming image of Christ, Love incarnate, a gracious host who begs off the speaker’s protestations of unworthiness and insists that he, an honored guest, must sit and eat. As in Job, the divine voice that answers the speaker quells his complaints and confusion and reveals a vision of God that renders him speechless. The God who speaks in the poem not only wins over the speaker, who stands in for Herbert, but has won over countless readers of The Temple as well.

“Love (III)” is the final instance in The Temple of the speaker’s falling silent in response to an (often fraught) exchange with the intruding voice of an Other. The Temple’s repeated reduction of speech and poetry to silence, the exposure of the limits of speech and language, is ironically the best evidence that poetry can allow for the presence of the word of God. Two separate descriptions of this aspect of Herbert’s poems help explain. Stanley Fish argues that Herbert’s poetry is “self-destructive”; for Fish, Herbert continually attempts to remove himself entirely from his poems in order that God alone may

be praised. Yet as “The Sacrifice” demonstrates, the more that the poet attempts to speak for God, the more the poet’s own voice is present. Fish’s description of how Herbert solves this dilemma is appealing for obvious reasons:

Herbert’s answer is to make the experience of his poems the discovery of their true authorship. That is, the insight to which a particular poem brings us is often inseparable from the realization that its source is not Herbert, but God. . . Rather than affirming (and therefore denying) that God’s word is all, the poem becomes, quite literally, God’s word.42

By giving up on the poetic project, by falling silent, Herbert’s speaker is able to remove himself from the poetry and thereby to allow God to complete it.

Rowan Williams’s essay on Herbert in his collection Anglican Identities describes this movement not as self-destruction but as “self-dispossession,” situating Herbert’s speaker and his preoccupation with the validity of his salvation in the context of the Calvinist theology of the day. When the speaker, through his poetry, exhausts every possible argument against himself and thus falls silent, God’s voice can intrude and utterly overcome the speaker’s protests. Herbert’s “careful ‘indulging’ of self-doubt . . . invite[s] a presence or voice of unanswerable authority; so as to make the poetry transparent to the authority of divine action.”43 For Williams, the tendency of Herbert’s poems to reach a psychological and linguistic breaking point, as well as their dramatization of this moment within the poem’s language, illustrates the “abandonment of self-conscious skill in a giving-place to God” that must characterize Christian poetry. Fish’s and Williams’s analyses demonstrate that poetry most fully reveals God’s words and will when it collides with the limits that Farrer ascribed to it; in the breaking and silencing of language, the human voice subsides and the divine intrudes.

Finally, another of Williams’s points helps respond to Farrer’s concern about poetry’s ahistoricity. As already noted, Farrer points

to poetry’s freedom from the details of historical events, its ability to create freely, as one reason it cannot respond to God’s self-revelation, which must occur at a particular point in time and space (in other words, in history). Yet for Williams, Herbert’s poems are a “history,” both narrating and displaying in their language the “triumph of grace.”44 The story the poems tell, the speaker’s conversion by God’s grace, is not a history of events in the wider world, but the history of an inner life. By not only relating this history in the poems, but also making the moment of conversion present within their language, The Temple conveys the will and actions of God to its readers in a compelling way, thereby becoming the occasion for the Spirit to continue inspiring faith in the message of the gospel.

Conclusion

This paper has referenced only a small number of Herbert’s poems; the characteristics of inspired poetry described above are demonstrated in poems throughout The Temple. A complete account of The Temple would undoubtedly reveal further ways that its poems allow for God’s presence. Similarly, Dalferth’s expanded theology of revelation, as applied to poetry, also deserves testing with other Christian poetry. Herbert’s approach to poetry is so distinct that the above account of inspired poetry may be unique to him, at least in its execution, but that does not preclude other poems from their own particular, inspired expression of divine truth.

44 Williams, Anglican Identities, 72.