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Language and the Spirit: Prophetic Reading with the Poetry of George Herbert

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Language and the Spirit

Most people of faith believe, at least implicitly, that words can do spiritual work. We recite creeds, rehearse liturgies, pray prayers, read scripture and other spiritual books, and converse deeply about spiritual things, hoping to be renewed within. Even the most negative of negative theologians acts out this belief in language by *writing* theology. Poets do so all the more through poetry, including those as hesitant about language as George Herbert, who considered his poetry "*Less than the least / Of all God's mercies.*"[1] We may not believe that language can be a bridge for us directly to heaven or convey meaning in any essential way, but if we are created through language, whether in terms of coming to understand the world through words or in some more profound sense ("And God *said* . . ."), then through slow, steady, faithful, and prayerful practice with language we may well be re-created.

In this essay I hope to suggest some fresh ways of thinking about language as a spiritual practice. First, I will consider the relationship between language and the spirit as regards poetry and prophecy. Then, I will suggest some ideas about reading as a prophetic practice. Finally, I will try to put prophetic reading into practice with the poetry of George Herbert. Along the way, I will make special

[1] George Herbert, *George Herbert: The Country Parson, The Temple*, ed. John Wall (New York: Paulist, 1981), 309. Philip Sheldrake writes, "For George Herbert, the nature of God is ultimately beyond the power of human words to express" (*Love Took My Hand: The Spirituality of George Herbert* [Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 2000], 83). Similarly, Hillary Kelleher shows that, although Herbert was "perhaps the most overtly language-oriented of the [seventeenth-century] devotional poets," his work nonetheless demonstrates many attributes of negative theology (48). For Kelleher, Herbert's positive affirmations are part of an initial assent toward the nameless ("'Light Thy Darknes Is': George Herbert and Negative Theology," *George Herbert Journal* 28:1-2 [2004]: 47-64). What remains obvious, though, is that, even as Herbert clearly understood the limits of language, he also just as clearly believed in its abilities to take part in forming people in their journey toward God.

reference to Herbert's theology and poetics, because he was a poet whose primary interest was the things of the spirit.

Poetry and prophecy are the most poignant forms of language for spiritual work. They often coincide and sometimes collapse into each other. What one nineteenth-century commentator suggests is an idea that is common enough: "The relation of the prophet to the poet is intimate. Both are seers. They gaze upon the ideal and their office is to set it forth. The prophet is by nature a poet. The true poet is always prophetic." The terms *vales* in Latin and *nabi* in Hebrew each refer to both poetry and prophecy.[2] Both modes of creative language can take part in the work of our spiritual renewal. The ability of language to do this kind of work, however, is not a static quality inherent in language but rather a dynamic quality of language in action. Language on its own does not lead to spiritual renewal. Whereas prophecies lying on the page unread cannot bring about inner change, prophetic speech or prophetic acts may. Prophecy, however, is problematic these days, especially if we want to speak of inspiration.

In the popular imagination prophecy conjures up images of someone like Moses standing before the people, robes flowing, staff in hand, declaring with the authority of divine inspiration: "Thus saith the Lord . . ." The words that follow, it is understood, come verbatim from the mouth of God to the prophet and fully express the will of God.[3] With this as the idea of prophecy, it is easy to understand why many people disregard the prophetic altogether, why others relegate it to the past, and why still others, those who believe in prophecy for today, are considered on a par with snake handlers and such. What undergirds this "Thus saith" model of prophecy is the naive belief that language can convey truth like a wheelbarrow hauls goods.

Those who study language know better than this. We know that all language is partial. In sharp contrast to the popular understanding, many in academic circles have come to view prophecy strictly as a rhetorical mode, that is, as speaking truth to power.[4] But there are problems with this as well. If there is nothing truly prophetic in the way that we work with language, if our work is

[2] Joseph Pullman, "The Poet and the Prophet," in *The Study: Helps for Preachers from English, American, and Continental Sources* (London: R. D. Dickinson, 1874), 489.

[3] This notion can be seen in the public interest in such "prophecies" as those of Pat Robinson, Nostradamus, and the Mayan calendar, which are viewed variously as sources of entertainment, objects of ridicule, or things in which to believe. The figure of Moses in popular culture, whether played by Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) or Val Kilmer in *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), may also contribute to the idea.

[4] For instance, Walter Brueggemann and Cornel West are two prominent scholars who use the term in its rhetorical sense. To be sure, however, regardless of how they write about prophecy, it is possible to interpret their prophetic practice as something that involves more than rhetoric as rhetoric is typically understood—which is precisely what I do with some of Brueggemann's work on prophecy later in this essay.

totally uninspired, having only to do with the reasoning or emoting parts of the brain and nothing to do with the breath of the spirit, then it will also have little to do with spiritual renewal. These popular and academic understandings of prophecy are both too narrow. There is something missing between them, an understanding of the prophetic that allows for the limits of language without writing off the spirit.

Can we speak of prophetic inspiration without losing all sense of spirit, breath, and God without having to mean that what is spoken has breathed forth directly from the mouth of God? Can we describe prophetic inspiration in ways that are useful for those who work with language—say, for poets and those who read poems—who understand the limits of language but nonetheless, because they long for the heart of God, want to work with language *in the spirit*?

What we need is a generous understanding of prophecy. Robert R. Wilson defines prophets broadly as "intermediaries between the human and divine worlds."[5] Building on this understanding, I suggest that poet-prophets are those who work at the intersections between language and the heart of God. Those of us who are called to work with language are called to do so at these intersections. We are called to work in the spirit. We are called to use language in ways that flow out of a life in the spirit. This calling is possible to live out because God pours God's self out into the wind for us, so to speak (Acts 2:17). As Mary Frohlich writes in response to Wilson, in our time "the prophetic insight is that the divine world is not 'somewhere else'" but right here.[6] In God we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). The kingdom of God is among us, even within us (Luke 17:21). Though language cannot convey truth or spirit directly, our faith-traditions testify that God's heart is nonetheless open and available for all who would listen carefully, who would breathe deeply of the spirit. At the very least, language that flows from a heart open to the spirit and a mind aware of the present moment is prophetic on some level.

The twelfth-century rabbi Maimonides thought there were a dozen or so levels of prophecy. The highest level involves seeing God face-to-face. The middle levels involve a range of ecstatic dreams and visions. The lowest levels, which most interest me here, merely involve inspired actions and words.[7] Similarly, the

[5] Robert R. Wilson, "Early Israelite Prophecy," *Interpretation* 32 (1978): 3.

[6] Mary Frohlich, "Under the Sign of Jonah: Studying Spirituality in a Time of Ecosystemic Crisis," *Spiritus* 9 (2009): 27. Though the prophetic insight that Frohlich points to is certainly important for us to today, it is not a new insight by any means: "the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21). All quotations of scripture are from the NASB.

[7] Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 2.395-407.

seventeenth-century priest Jean-Pierre de Caussade believed that "God still speaks today." The way that he describes this, however, looks nothing like the figure of prophecy in the popular imagination. The "voice of true prophecy," he explains, mostly involves attending to "imperceptible impulses" in "the present moment in which the soul, light as a feather, fluid as water, . . . responds to every movement of grace like a floating balloon." For de Caussade, "Intuition and inspiration are then the intimations of God's will," and "everything that happens to you—your suffering, your actions, your impulses are the mysteries under which God reveals himself to you." For de Caussade, the normal way in which prophecy works is when we attend to the presence of the spirit in the ordinary flow of our lives.[8]

With these lowly, ordinary levels of prophecy in mind, I want to put forward an understanding of the prophetic as something indeed inspired by the spirit but much less dramatic and much more ordinary than the popular stereotype. If the prophetic task is mostly just listening to "intimations" and "imperceptible impulses," then it is certainly not a matter of "getting the message right" but of being present to the spirit in each moment and speaking from that place. We do not have to *prophesy* or utter *prophecies* per se, but nonetheless our work with words can be prophetic or inspired.

Prophets in the Bible speak of the word of God not as something written in stone but as something that lives in people. One of the writers of Proverbs counsels:

> Do not let kindness and truth leave you;
> Bind them around your neck,
> Write them on the tablet of your heart. (Prov. 3:3)

Saint Paul expands on the same image:

> You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Cor. 3:2-3)

[8] Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, trans. Kitty Muggeridge (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 1, 87, 16, 22, 58, 18. De Caussade suggests that the will of God is manifest to each person in each moment. One who lives in the present moment, acting or not acting in response to the demands of the moment with a clear mind and an open heart, will tend to do the will of God, even if unconscious of what that will is. He writes: "It is no longer a question of supplication or silence, reticence or eloquence, reading or writing, ideas or apathy, sickness or health, life or death. All that matters is what the will of God ordains each moment" (77).

Though the word of God sometimes moves *through* language, it is only ever *written down*, as it were, onto beating human hearts.[9] It is continually written in the present by the ink of the spirit. In this sense prophecies that are already engraved in stone are no longer prophecies for the present reader but partial records of past prophecies, traces of what was written on the hearts of others in other times and places. In our prophetic use of language, we work with the spirit in writing on hearts here and now, but this does not mean disregarding the old prophecies. On the contrary, again and again our spiritual traditions have shown that the *inspired reading* of old prophecies may lead to new prophecies. What is written on the heart is often inscribed there by the spirit working through a person's prayerful—and even playful—practice with language.

Moreover, even as the word of God writes itself on human hearts, the Gospel writers testify that the word of God *became* human. In the Christian tradition, the intersection of language and spirit in prophetic work always has something to do with "the Word [that] became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). In some way, all prophetic-poetic language derives from, points to, and reenacts the intersection of God and humanity in Christ.

Some of the most moving instances of creative prophetic language in the Christian tradition come from poets like George Herbert who immersed themselves in the poetry and prophecy of the scriptures. Herbert understood the relationship between language and spirit. As Robert Cording writes, Herbert's poetry "records the search for a life in the spirit."[10] As Philip Sheldrake explains, for Herbert "the Word of God that has the power to transform lives is *present and accessible in and through* the written words" of scripture.[11] Consequently,

[9] Though the phrase "the word of God" is often taken as nothing more than a synonym for "the Bible," Sandra M. Schneiders is right to insist that the phrase is actually a metaphor for something much more, something that "overflows the boundaries of our reflection and language": "the referent of 'word of God' is divine revelation, God's accepted self-gift to human beings" (*The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991], 34). She suggests that "we cannot say that the Bible is, purely and simply, revelation. It is more correct to say that the Bible is (potentially) revelatory[,] . . . that it becomes the actual locus of human-divine encounter *in the act of interpretation*" (39, emphasis added).

[10] Robert Cording, "The Art of Devotion: Some Notes on Poetry and Prayer," *Image: Art, Faith, Mystery* 49 (2006): 83-84.

[11] Sheldrake, *The Spirituality of George Herbert*, 22. Emphasis added. Sheldrake also explains that, "when Herbert speaks of the 'knowledge' of Scripture, what he means bears a striking resemblance to medieval monastic understandings of *lectio divina*, or the meditative-contemplative reading of Scripture. In this understanding, there is almost a sacramental quality to Scripture" (21-22).

Herbert's poetry has much to offer those interested in the intersections of language and spirit. In what follows I will unfold some ideas about reading as a prophetic practice. Then I will try to put it into practice with the poetry of George Herbert.

Prophetic Reading

Those who produce poetic or prophetic texts are usually thought of as the ones doing the poetic and prophetic work. But as readers we can best understand—or indeed only understand—the spiritual work of poets and prophets when we participate, when we read in such a way as to take part in the making of prophetic meaning. Philosophers of language have shown that meaning takes place not simply in the words on the page but *between* readers and the words on the page. In Louise M. Rosenblatt's transactional theory of language, a poem is "an event in the life of the reader, as embodied in a process resulting from the confluence of reader and text. . . . Reader, like author, [should] be acknowledged a creator, with his [or her] own skills, disciplines, and responsibilities."[12] Similarly, in J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, "people use words *to get things done*: to marry, to promise, to bet, to apologize, to persuade, to contract, and the like . . . such uses of language are *performative*."[13] What poets and prophets wish to *do* through language is to facilitate spiritual renewal, but for this to happen readers must engage the texts creatively in such a way as to participate in that work. As the poet Jay Wright puts it, readers "are asked to accept the poem's challenge and to listen to, walk along, sing along and be with the poem . . . 'to become' with the voices . . . to reach for wisdom . . . to create the act of becoming aware, attentive, active and transformed."[14]

Prophetic reading means creatively reading and rereading texts, reading our own contexts into them, and reading them into our own contexts. It means *lectio divina* as a critical approach and literary criticism as prayer. It is "a dialogue with the text"[15] involving "a broad and deep consideration of the possible consequences arising from the reader's prayerful engagement" with it.[16] Just as Saint

[12] Louise M. Rosenblatt, "Poem as Event," *College English* 26:2 (1964): 123-28.

[13] This description of Austin's "speech act theory" comes from Joseph Harris's *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 3, which takes its title from Austin's famous lectures compiled in *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).

[14] Charles H. Rowell, "'The Unraveling of the Egg': An Interview with Jay Wright," *Callaloo* 19 (1983): 5-8.

[15] Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, Mo.: Triumph Books, 1996), 3.

[16] Francis X. McAloon, "Reading for Transformation through the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins," *Spiritus* 8:2 (2008): 184.

Paul (1 Cor. 14:32) pictures prophecy as a process of dialogue and discernment—each person comes with a word, several share, several others discern—so likewise, reading prophetically, we must listen to the voices of the text echoing through time and language, listen to the voices of our own time and place crying out all around us, listen to our own inner voice, and, in all of this, listen for the sound of God's heartbeat.

To understand the prophetic practice of a poet like George Herbert, we need to read his work carefully and meditatively as a part of our own spiritual practice, aiming not to pin down the poems with accurate hermeneutical descriptions, but rather to take part in the prophetic work to seek the intersection of language and spirit—in short, to look for something *spiritually* useful. After all, dying of tuberculosis, Herbert supposedly gave his poems to Nicholas Ferrar and asked him to publish them only if he thought they might be of spiritual use to others.[17]

Scholars of religion have called for preachers, theologians, and other interpreters of scripture to read in such a way. Walter Brueggemann urges that the primary task of preaching is to practice "artistic speech . . . in the prophetic construal of the Bible." "The task and possibility of preaching," he explains, "is to open out the good news of the gospel with alternative modes of speech—speech that is dramatic, artistic, capable of inviting persons to join in another conversation." He calls for "poetic/prophetic" interpretations and presentations of scripture that go beyond the typical reductions. Though such readings risk being understood "as fantasy and falsehood," Brueggemann insists that "the poet/-prophet does not flinch from 'fiction'," because the "alternative envisioned in such speech . . . opens the way for transformation and the gift of newness."[18]

Similarly, John Wall argues that, when interpreting scripture, it is more important to come to something spiritually useful than to find something linguistically true: "What is important is *the doing with texts*, not what can be abstracted from them." Creative reading opens for readers the possibility of taking part in spiritual renewal, which is the original purpose of the prophetic texts being read. Wall suggests that "through the proliferation of meanings and interpretations the possibility of a new thing can emerge, and the new song itself can begin to be heard not behind but *through* the play of words." Wall acknowledges that the philosophy of language as "free play" could lead some theologians to despair over language. But he chooses instead to celebrate this insight into the nature of language as an invitation to join in God's work of renewal through

[17] Izaak Walton, "The Life of Mr. George Herbert" [1670], in *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert and Robert Sanderson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 275.

[18] Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 3, 5, 7.

playing with language, to "offer the use of language . . . for the furthering of the opening of the world to God's transformations."[19]

Using language to open the world to God's transformations describes the practice of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Using language with a sense of play, they continually reread and rewrote the work of those who came before them. Regina Schwartz explains:

> The prophets rehearse creation again and again, in a chorus of differences—now the God who created the heavens and earth measures everything and punishes the sinner, now the God who created the heavens and earth strengthens the weary, now creation is invoked in a prayer of thanksgiving uttered by Jonah in the belly of a whale.

From prophet to prophet—with later prophets retelling earlier stories and reworking earlier themes—it is "innovative interpretation" rather than "a drive to interpret authoritatively" "which becomes the ground of continuity." In other words, the prophets remained true to what they read by continuing in the spiritual work of those writers who wrote it. Using these prophets as her model, Schwartz calls for more interpretations of scripture to be written, "accounts of accounts," "re-creations rather than a recovery of a definitive truth." She wants readers to continue to "rewrite" the biblical texts "in a new key."[20]

The writers of the New Testament also reread the work of those who came before them. In particular, as N. T. Wright shows, Saint Paul undertook the task of "rethinking," "reworking," and "reimagining" aspects of Jewish theology in light of Jesus, which "necessarily involved him in fresh readings of scripture." Wright suggests that we in turn should seek to read the New Testament in fresh ways. The richness and density of scripture "cannot be appreciated by the kind of minimalist exegesis which tries to apply the laws of mathematics and engineering to the study of ancient texts. Exuberant writing calls for exuberant exegesis." Moreover, our "fresh and compelling readings" are to be inspired by "the mysterious, unpredictable and usually hidden work of the Holy Spirit."[21]

In much of his poetry Herbert also rereads and rewrites scripture in "fresh and compelling" ways. To begin with, biblical idioms and phrases saturate his work. In particular, "echoes of the Psalter reverberate throughout his poetry."[22] Many

[19] John Wall, "Deconstruction and the Universe of Theological Discourse," *St. Luke's Journal of Theology* 28:4 (1985): 262-64. First emphasis added; second emphasis original.

[20] Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 173, 174, 164, 178.

[21] N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 130, 128, 46, 17.

[22] Sheldrake, *The Spirituality of George Herbert*, 18-21. Sheldrake writes that "almost every aspect of Herbert's poetry can be traced directly or indirectly to the Bible" (18).

of his poems are reflections on scripture, meditations on biblical characters, and retellings of Bible stories. One poem renders "The 23rd Psalm" in poetic meter: "The God of love my shepherd is . . ."[23] Perhaps most significantly, though less directly, Herbert rewrote scripture through working in the prophetic patterns of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, patterns that he had internalized through years of reading. To be sure, since Herbert was anxious about his poetry in general, he was particularly anxious, as Bruce A. Johnson tells us, about "the dangers of presumptuously rewriting the Word which has been revealed and recorded once and for all time." But, at the same time, he felt "compelled by divine calling to create [such] poetry." In the end, this sense of calling outweighed his reservations.[24] So he reread and rewrote scripture into language appropriate for his own context.

Some of Herbert's sense of calling surely stemmed from his understanding of how prophecy works. In *The Country Parson* Herbert explains that prophecy is "a letter sealed and sent." To the reader ("the receiver and opener") it is "full of power." Without a reader it is "but paper."[25] As Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise says, for Herbert "the spectacular element in prophecy is not linked to the truth it contains, but rather to its reception."[26] Without a reader to participate in the prophetic work, prophecy means nothing and does nothing. Herbert participated with the Hebrew prophets through reading, rereading, and rewriting their poetry. Implicit in this is an invitation to his own readers to participate with him in the same creative, spiritual work through actively and prophetically reading his poetry. As Robert Kilgore argues, Herbert "sought to create interpretive work for readers to do," "trust[ing] readers to . . . apply [his] poem[s] to their own lives."[27]

Reading prophetically, we apply the truths of the text to the present moment and the truths of the present moment to the text. When the wisdom and faults of the text push on the reader, and the wisdom and faults of the reader push on

[23] Herbert, *The Temple*, 298-99. See also: "The Sacrifice" (139-148), "Christmas (I)" and "Christmas (II)" (198-199), "Colossians 3:3" (203), "The Pearl. Matthew 13" (207), "Ephesians 4:30" (259), and "Mary Magdalene" (299), among others.

[24] Bruce A. Johnson, "'To Love the Strife': George Herbert's Struggle for His Poetry," *Renascence* 46:2 (1994): 105.

[25] Herbert, *The Temple*, 108.

[26] Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise, "Priests and Yet Prophets?: The Identity of the Poetic Voice in the Shorter Religious Lyric of Robert Southwell and George Herbert," in *Les voix de Dieu: littérature et prophétie en Angleterre et en France à l'âge baroque*, ed. Line Cottegnies et al. (Paris: Presses Sorbonne nouvelle, 2008), 116.

[27] Robert Kilgore, "Rereading Ourselves in 'Redemption'," *George Herbert Journal* 26: 1-2 (2002/2003): 3-4.

the text, and the spirit breathes into the interpretive process, what results are not definitive readings nor fanciful, subjective ones—but readings birthed through deep, authentic dialogue. These are the kinds of readings that Brueggemann, Wall, Schwartz, Wright, and Herbert practice and call for. These are the kinds of readings that offer something useful in the way of spiritual growth. Reading in this way, we may use language to participate in truth beyond language.

Because prophetic readers engage in the same work as prophetic writers, sometimes interpretation is poetry again. But creative prophetic readings do not need to diverge widely from the original text. The minimum required is to add the present moment to the text or to add the text to the present moment. This necessarily changes both the text and the reader. As John Muckelbauer urges, "invention is the *telos* of an encounter with a text—invention of both concepts and subjects."[28] In other words, through the process of reading, new meanings and new persons may emerge.

Readings that are creative and spiritually useful may well respect and carry out the original purpose of prophetic texts more truthfully than readings that are accurate but useless. If there is ever a tension between some abstract truth supposedly in a text and the concrete spiritual use that might be made of that text through the spirit here and now, then the prophetic work calls us to lean toward the concrete use. I do not mean for creative readings to supplant historically and textually accurate ones. On the contrary, the most useful creative readings are often deeply grounded in thorough historical research and careful textual criticism. What I mean is simply that in the end prophecy should take priority over archeology. Leaning toward anything instead of truth should sound unnerving, since truth joins hands with mercy, justice, and love, but the kind of truth that some seek to hammer out of (or hammer into) certain texts is finally something less than truth. Truth that can be captured by language is in fact not truth. Truth in the sense that Jesus speaks of himself as "truth" (John 14:6) is relational and uncontainable. We may still make true statements, but we cannot equate those statements with the truth toward which they point. So, on the whole, it is usually more beneficial for readers of prophecy and poetry to say *such and such is one of the useful things we can read this text as saying* than to say *such and such is what it says*.

When philosophers of language announced "the death of the author" and "the birth of the reader," readers were faced with serious questions of authority.[29] Who determines what a text means—the author, the reader, the text itself?

[28] John Muckelbauer, "On Reading Differently: Through Foucault's Resistance," *College English* 63:1 (2000): 71-94.

[29] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen* 5+6 (Fall-Winter 1967), item 3.

Some cheered on the reader, others fretted with the author, and still others refused to accept these philosophers' claims altogether. Most academics have since come to the view that authority plays out between text and reader. The call to prophetic reading may raise the issue of authority again, but the question is different than before. When we talk about using language for spiritual renewal, about the intersections between language and the heart of God, what matters most is not *what the text means* but rather *how the spirit may move through it*. Ultimately, the work of the spirit belongs to the spirit. The spirit has the authority. Without negating the responsibility that text and reader share in making and conveying meaning, the question concerning readers shifts from one of authority to one of inspiration. Prophetic reading does involve the birth of the reader, but not as part of a struggle for control over meaning. This birth has more to do with the reader being born *as a reader in the spirit*. As Jesus tells Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). This is how we are called to read.

Even so, some may rightly ask what the limits of creative reading are. At what point are we no longer held accountable by the text? At what point do we find our interpretations simply matching and falsely validating our fantasies? These questions cannot be answered outright for all situations. Prophetic reading is in fact chancy. There is indeed always a chance of missing the letter *and* the spirit of the text, but without reading and rereading in the spirit, we will certainly miss both. This follows from what Robert Scholes calls the "basic premise of modern literary study: that never in this life will we see the text face-to-face, but always as through a glass darkly, so that we can only read and reread, to the best of our ability."[30] In the end the fact that interpretations can be wrong—morally wrong as well as inaccurate—suggests all the more that we need more interpretations.

The responsibility for creative and prophetic interpretation falls first to scholars of texts, including scholars of literature, scripture, history, and popular culture. But it does not end with scholars. Speaking of reading scripture for a congregation, Walter Brueggemann offers that "the church on Sunday morning, or whenever it engages in its odd speech, may be the last place in our society for imaginative speech that permits people to enter into new worlds of faith and to participate in joyous, obedient life."[31] I would add that any place where prophetic texts are read can also be a place for imaginative, prophetic speech. So the task of prophetic reading falls to scholars, preachers, teachers, parents, and spiritual seekers. In turn, as Rickey Cotton has argued, these readers must model,

[30] Robert Scholes, *The Crafty Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 239.

[31] Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 3.

teach, and create spaces for such reading for others so that, finally, all who wish to read poetic and prophetic texts can learn to do so in the spirit.[32]

We may sometimes "get it wrong" in our attempts to read prophetically, whether by not attending closely enough to the "imperceptible impulses" of the spirit in the present moment, by not attending carefully enough to the details of the text, or by falling short for some other reason. We may come to some readings that are not helpful, or even some that are hurtful. But, as James Davison Hunter reminds us, if "failure is inevitable," then "forgiveness is ever available, and the work of the Holy Spirit to transform and sanctify our efforts is always inscrutably at work."[33] In other words, there is sufficient grace for error *and for inspiration*. Moreover, on the whole, the will of God is quite simple. The prophet Micah sums it up nicely with his rhetorical question: "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8, NASB). Likewise, Jesus says about the same thing: "You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and [love] your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Granted, applying the will of God in specific situations may be irreducibly complex, but that has more to do with policy than poetry. What is important here is that when we are close to the heart of God and close to the heart of this world, what is on God's heart for the world will be on our hearts as well. When we read from such a place, we will read compassionately, creatively, prophetically.

In what follows, as an example of the kind of reading I am talking about, I will aim to put prophetic reading into practice with the poetry of George Herbert.

Reading the Poetry of George Herbert

If prophetic language is language that speaks something of the heart of God in the present moment, then different texts and different ways of reading will speak prophetically to different people at different moments in time. Sometimes we need expressions of joy. At other times we need expressions of sorrow. Sometimes we need words that speak to us as individuals. Other times we need words that speak to the community. Prophetic texts speak to particular moments, but they can also be read into moments other than the ones for which they were written. Consider, for instance, Psalm 51: "Be gracious to me, O God, according

[32] Rickey A. Cotton, "Transactional Theory of Reading and Biblical Hermeneutics: Information, Application, and Dialogue," Conference for the Society of Pentecostal Studies, November 7-9, 1991, Southeastern College of the Assemblies of God, Lakeland, Florida.

[33] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 183-84.

to Your lovingkindness; According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions." On one hand, this psalm is a personal prayer of repentance that speaks to a specific situation: "A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." On the other hand, this psalm has also come to speak for many. It is addressed "to the choir director," and it has been read liturgically for thousands of years.[34] Both poems and ways of reading may be prophetic to the degree that they speak something of the heart of God in the present moment.

Though we need poems and readings that deal with the whole range of human emotions and experience, poems and readings that deal with suffering and community are particularly significant in our time. The present moment is full of the suffering of many. History and technology have unfolded in ways that allow us an understanding of the profoundly communal nature of so much suffering. Not only do we have the sad wisdom left to us by the Second World War, for instance, but any given morning, while sipping coffee, we can turn on a computer to read accounts of horrible suffering all over the world, suicide bombs on Monday, an earthquake on Tuesday, an oil spill on Wednesday, and multinational corporations oppressing the poor the rest of the week. Walter Brueggemann writes that one of the primary tasks for poet-prophets is to find and speak "*symbols* that are adequate to confront the horror and massiveness of the experience that evokes numbness and requires denial" and to "*bring to public expression those very fears and terrors.*"[35] Suffering and community are central concerns for poet-prophets because God cares deeply about suffering and community. Prophets of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament attest to this. For instance, Jeremiah writes metaphorically about the pain of the Jewish people, and the writer of the Gospel of Matthew rereads Jeremiah in the context of the Massacre of the Innocents:

> Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be comforted, because they were no more." (Matt. 2:17-18)

[34] In fact, Psalm 51 is one of the most commonly used liturgical psalms, in the East and West. Saint Benedict, for instance, ordered it recited daily and gave special instructions that the psalm prescribed before it be read in a "slightly protracted" manner "so that everyone can be present for Psalm 50" (using the Septuagint's numbering for the same psalm). *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. Timothy Fry (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 24.

[35] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 45. Emphasis original.

These prophets speak for and with the women whose children have been murdered—just as those women mourn for and with their children and themselves. The purpose of expressing darkness is always transformation through hope. The honest expression of pain allows people to move toward authentic hope. In the end, night turns to day and mourning turns to dancing (Psalm 30:11). But first, darkness and suffering must be faced truthfully.

George Herbert knew about suffering from personal experience. He suffered immensely from frequent illnesses, having "a body apt to a consumption, and to fevers, and other infirmities."[36] He also experienced career disappointments, lamented the deaths of close family members, and came to an early death of his own.[37] Moreover, Herbert understood something about community through his work as a rural parish priest. In *The Country Parson* he explains that in prayer the priest "presents himself, yet not as himself alone, but as presenting with himself the whole Congregation, whose sins he then bears, and brings with his own to the heavenly altar."[38] Sheldrake goes so far as to say that "in Herbert's spirituality, all prayer"—though "also deeply personal"—"is to be understood as common prayer, the prayer of the Church."[39] In both his awareness of suffering and his emphasis on the communal, Herbert has much to offer us for the prophetic task. In what follows, I will look at four poems from *The Temple* to consider the range of ways in which Herbert deals with suffering. Then I will look at one of those poems again to consider the way in which he speaks to community. Particularly, in considering the final poem, my hope is to put creative prophetic reading into practice.

In the poem "JESU," Herbert moves quickly from suffering to consolation.[40] The speaker of the poem tells the reader that the letters J, E, S, and U have been "deeply carved" into his heart. When his heart broke to pieces "th' other week," the letters were scattered. As he gathers them, he first finds the piece of his heart that has the letter "J" carved into it. Then he comes upon the letters "E S" together. Lastly, he picks up the piece with the letter "U."

> When I had got these parcels, instantly
> I sat me down to spell them, and perceived
> That to my broken heart he was *I ease you*,
> And to my whole is *J E S U*.

[36] Walton, "George Herbert," 275.

[37] Amy Charles, *A Life of George Herbert* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 173.

[38] Herbert, *The Temple*, 60.

[39] Sheldrake, *The Spirituality of George Herbert*, 90. In making this point, Sheldrake quotes Herbert's lines that read: "Leave thy six and seven; / Pray with the most: for where most pray, is heaven" (Herbert, *The Temple*, 135).

[40] Herbert, *The Temple*, 233.

In this clever pun Jesus eases the poet's broken heart. This poem follows a pattern found in those psalms that move quickly from darkness to light. Psalm 23 moves from "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" to "I fear no evil, for You are with me." Psalm 121 asks, "From where shall my help come?" and answers right away, "My help comes from the Lord." Moving quickly from suffering to consolation may give strength to those who are about to suffer, offer comfort to those who are presently suffering, and bring joy to those who have passed through suffering. Indeed, such poems are particularly useful for telling the story of sorrow after it has already been turned to joy.

In another short poem, "Easter Wings," Herbert again works through suffering and consolation.[41] But this time he does so more than once. The first stanza of the poem begins with the poem's longest line "in wealth and store" but shrinks line by line down through decay to poverty. At the lowest point of the poem, in the middle of the stanza, where the lines are the shortest and the speaker is "Most poor," the poem suddenly turns around. The lines expand in length, and the speaker ascends through "Thee" into "flight."

> 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
> Oh let me rise
> As larks, harmoniously,
> And sing this day thy victories:
> Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

The second stanza repeats this basic movement, withering through "sickness and shame" and "sin" until through "Thee" the speaker rises again to "flight." In both stanzas the poem moves quickly from light to darkness and back to light. The insight here is that the spiritual life works in recursive patterns. This is a poem of experi-ence. Herbert speaks from the vantage point of having been through despair and renewal several times. It is as if he were saying, "I have been through this before. I know how it goes. Light comes in the morning."

In "The Altar" Herbert deals with suffering in a different way.[42] The poem begins with brokenness, but rather than moving from brokenness to wholeness, the poet stays with the theme of brokenness through the end of the poem. He makes prophetic use of brokenness. The poet writes:

[41] Herbert, *The Temple*, 157.

[42] Herbert, *The Temple*, 139.

A broken A L T A R, Lord, thy servant rears,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
. . . . . .
O let thy blessed S A C R I F I C E be mine,
And sanctify this A L T A R to be thine.

This poem begins with tears and a broken heart and ends not by erasing the pain or mending the brokenness but by dedicating the pieces to God. The heart is made into an altar for worship, and the pain made part of the sacrifice. Even when the poem speaks of praise, peace, and sanctification, it does so in the context of the brokenness. The insight here is that sometimes God may make use of pain instead of taking it away.

In "Longing" Herbert engages darkness in an even more sustained way.[43] One of his most sorrowful poems, "Longing" opens with the image of a devastated body—eyes, knees, bones, throat, and heart, all worn or broken. Herbert endlessly groans, sighs, and cries out to God ("To thee my cries, / To thee my groans, / To thee my sighs, my tears ascend"). His pain is physical ("With sick and famished eyes, / With doubling knees and weary bones . . . My throat . . ."), psychological ("My thoughts turn round, / And make me giddy"), and spiritual ("my soul is hoarse"). He suffers sorrows, shames, flames, and a consuming petition:

Look on my sorrows round!
Mark well my furnace! O what flames,
What heats abound!
What griefs, what shames!
Consider, Lord; Lord, bow thine ear,
And hear!

But God refuses to answer. Herbert sees his own faithfulness ("Lord, I fall / Yet call"), he sees his relationship to God ("My love, my sweetness"), and he sees God's graciousness ("Thy board is full, yet humble guests / Find nests"), but he does not see God answer his prayers. This contradiction intensifies his pain ("*Shall he that made the ear / Not hear?*"). Unlike in some of Herbert's other poems, this expression of suffering does not set the stage for joy or redemption. Instead, the pain and contradictions remain unresolved to the end of the poem. Wailing and pointing his finger at God, Herbert embraces the truth of the darkness surrounding him. The final lines include both love and death: "my troubled breast which cries, / Which dies." Though redemption may follow death, the poem promises no such thing. In such a full expression of suffering, Herbert essentially cries out *Eli Eli lama sabachthani*.

[43] Herbert, *The Temple*, 273-75.

Writing in this way, Herbert follows the prophetic pattern of "lingering" with darkness, found throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.[44] We see it in the Book of Job in the three days of silence and many chapters of anguished dialogue that take place before God shows up. We see it in Jeremiah in chapter after chapter of weeping. And we see it in the Gospels in the agony of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, in his passion on the cross at Golgotha, and in the fear and despair of his disciples in the several days of hiding between the crucifixion and the resurrection. Though these texts do end hopefully, they first offer a sustained engagement with darkness, suffering, and sorrow. But prophetic poems about suffering do not always promise that suffering will be redemptive. Instead, what they do is enact truth, which authentic hope cannot do without. Such poems may be particularly useful for times of present suffering, for times when we need to address darkness most deeply.

These different poems, in which Herbert deals with suffering in a range of ways, may speak prophetically in different situations. Moreover, these poems can also be read creatively and prophetically into moments beyond those for which they were written. Such creative reading is what we may have to do when we come to the question of community in Herbert's poetry. Herbert deals with community more subtly than he deals with suffering. At first glance, in fact, community may not seem to be a significant theme in many of his poems. Of course, this should not surprise us since the poems are offered as poems of personal devotion. Herbert is said to have described them as "a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt between God and my Soul."[45] The poems speak about the relationship between God and the individual. In "Longing," for instance, the word "I" appears four times, "me" twelve times, and "my" nineteen times.[46] To be sure, we need poems that speak to individual readers, but we also need poems that speak to community. Thankfully, though Herbert's poems may be primarily about God and the individual soul, they nonetheless do have much to offer in speaking to community. In fact, they have been read and sung communally for hundreds of years.[47]

[44] Cornel West says of African-American spirituals, "We often leap to the religious consolation of the spirituals without lingering for long on sadness and melancholia" (*The Cornel West Reader* [New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999], 464).

[45] Walton, "George Herbert," 275.

[46] Herbert, *The Temple*, 273-75.

[47] The long history of Herbert's poems being set to music and included in hymnals continues even today (Paulette S. Goll, "Recent Hymnal and Musical Adaptations of George Herbert," *George Herbert Journal* 26:1-2 [2002/2003]: 94). Of course, it makes sense that poems collected under the title "The Church" would have something to offer communities of faith.

Poems often say more than they initially appear to express, more even than the poet may realize. Just as Herbert reworked patterns and themes from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament in ways called for by his time, we can reread Herbert's poetry in light of our need for texts that address communal suffering. In fact, we must read from where we are. And we face different things than Herbert faced, for instance, in terms of modern warfare, global economics, and oil.[48] Specifically, I want to reread the poem "Longing" to look for traces of multiple voices. Pressing on the margins of the poem, we can uncover shifts and slips and images of multiples in which we can find the voices of community.[49] The meanings that we find through looking at his images and metaphors in light of our own time will be, simultaneously, both Herbert's and ours.[50] As we read in this way, Herbert can speak prophetically for our time, and we can participate in that prophetic work.

To begin with, we will look at the most subtle suggestions in "Longing" of voices other than Herbert's. These can be found in the rhetorical situation of the poem, in its metrical form, and in the state of mind of the poet.

Rhetorical situation: The poem's rhetorical situation gives us at least two voices, Herbert and the reader. Though this may seem insignificant, since the same thing applies to all poems, Herbert has been shown to craft his poems with special attention to his audience, carefully leading readers line by line through an experience, often into and out of some complexity in order to allow them to

[48] Sheldrake suggests a dialogue between contemporary readers and Herbert: "There needs to be a two-way conversation between the contemporary reader and a text from another age. In this conversation the wisdom of the text is free to challenge us, even in its strangeness, and yet we are also free to address questions to the text that arise from our own concerns and values. We may actually find meaning in the text that was unavailable to an earlier generation—and indeed may not have occurred to the original author" (*The Spirituality of George Herbert*, 111).

[49] Helen Vendler notes that many of "Herbert's poems . . . suffer abrupt changes of direction . . . which usually mark an alteration in perspective" (*The Poetry of George Herbert* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975], 3).

[50] Rosemond Tuve has shown, in her important early study of Herbert's work, that Herbert often draws on metaphors and analogies that were commonplace in his time but that are lost on modern readers. In order to best understand his work, she argues, we need to place it in its original context. Aiming to place the poetry in *our* context—as I am suggesting we do—may seem at odds with this critical insight. But even Tuve reaches beyond the limits of her historical-critical approach. At the end of her study, she writes: "Metaphors cheat time in ways beyond a poet's foresight. The meanings we find still true, even in ways [Herbert] did not foresee, are yet his meanings, but at a level so deep that no man knows or could say in cold formulation the reach and scope of them" (*A Reading of George Herbert* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952], 202, 203).

realize some theological truth.[51] Readers are invited to read Herbert's *I*, *me*, and *my* as their own words. Taking this into account, we could say that the *purpose* of the poem is to speak for and to readers as well as for the poet.

Metrical form: The stanza form that Herbert uses in "Longing" is one that he created for the poem. Each stanza, only six lines long, has lines of four different lengths—two lines of six syllables, followed by a line of eight, then two lines of four, and a final line of two. The varied rhythm and jagged edges that this gives the poem may seem insignificant to readers familiar with free-verse poetry. But it is significant to note that, writing shortly after the sonnet had been the dominant form of poetry in Europe, Herbert constantly invented his own poetic forms, hardly ever writing more than one poem in a single form. Joseph H. Summers suggests: "There was for Herbert no one architectural pattern; there were almost as many patterns as there were experiences."[52] The varied forms in Herbert's poems indicate something about their meaning. Taking into account the varied line lengths in "Longing" and the smaller innovations in rhythms within lines, we can say that multiples are built into the *structure* of the poem.

State of mind: In the second stanza Herbert writes, "My thoughts turn round, / And make me giddy." This dizzy state of mind may remind us that, psychologically speaking, all of us are fragmented to some degree. Our thoughts, feelings, impulses, and sufferings, in the conscious and subconscious levels of our mind, are deeply influenced by our childhood and by those around us. In a sense it is not precisely clear where we begin and where our teachers, relatives, friends, and enemies end. Judith Butler even argues that we are made from and through our connections to others: "One might say, reflectively, and with a certain sense of humility, that in the beginning *I am my relation to you*."[53] Taking into account this psychological insight, we might see some parallel between "My thoughts turn round" and what another poet wrote: "I contradict myself; I am large. . . . I contain multitudes."[54]

These instances of multiples, whether inferred or implied, are subtle. They may not be enough for us to read the poem as being about more than the

[51] Stanley Fish, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1978), 18 and thereafter. See also Kilgore, "Rereading Ourselves in 'Redemption'," 4), and Sheldrake, *The Spirituality of George Herbert*, 16-17.

[52] Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and His Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 90. See also Joseph H. Summers, "Herbert's Form," *PMLA* 66:6 (1951): 1055-1072.

[53] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 81.

[54] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 85.

individual and God, but they do begin to suggest plurality. This sense of plurality is built on and made concrete by a number of plural images in the poem—bones, flames, mothers, infants, beggars, guests, a pile of dust, and the pieces of a broken heart.

Bones: In the second line of the poem Herbert cries out about his "weary bones." Though these bones do not seem to be a specific allusion, they do easily bring to mind Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones coming to life as a multitude of people. Helen Vendler describes "Longing" as a fragmented, jarring, and disjointed poem. She writes that, in the poem, Herbert "is a bundle of unrelated bodily parts huddled together in misery."[55] With Ezekiel's vision in mind, however, we may take these unrelated body parts to represent not just the poet but many people "huddled together in misery." The body contains hundreds of bones. Each bone can represent a person. If the bones should break, each bone could represent two, three, four, or even a thousand people, depending on the size of the shards. But, however we read it, these bones open the poem with a plural image.

Flames: In stanza five Herbert asks God to "Mark well my furnace! O what flames, / What heats abound! / . . . what shames!" On one hand, these flames, especially when paired with "shames," may bring to mind the many people in the *inferno* or *purgatorio*. On the other hand, the flames may bring to mind the many tongues of fire at Pentecost or the holy rings of fire in *paradisio*.[56] In either case we may take them to represent many people. However we read it, though, the flames give the poem another plural image.

Mothers and infants: In the third stanza Herbert speaks of mothers and infants. God gives kindness, he says, to mothers, who in turn give God's kindness to their children. Thus the "infants . . . suck thee / More free." This image is the first place in the poem in which multiple *people* appear. The image is one of comfort and love. But in context of the pain of the whole poem, these mothers and infants may also recall the mothers and infants in the prophecies of Jeremiah and the writer of Matthew.

Beggars and guests: In stanzas nine and thirteen images of "humble guests" and needy "beggars" add more people to the poem.

Throughout the poem are plural images, including images of hurting people. The communal nature of suffering comes through most strongly, however, in two of the poem's most compelling images—a pile of dust and a broken heart. Taken together with the other multiples in the poem, these two images suggest

[55] Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert*, 262.

[56] I am referring specifically to Dante and more generally to the larger medieval cosmology to which *The Divine Comedy* is related.

that, though this poem may seem on the surface to be about only one person, it actually contains the presence of many, at least in the margins of the text.

Pile of dust: Halfway through the poem, in stanza seven, Herbert calls himself God's "pile of dust, wherein each crumb / Says, Come!" This pile of dust presents us with another plural image. But, more significantly, it is a plural image *speaking* with many voices, "each crumb / Says, Come!" If we take the crumbs to represent people, then in this image Herbert includes others as part of himself, even as part of his own body. This pile of dust brings many to voice.

Broken heart: Finally, in the closing stanzas, Herbert presents an image of his heart, broken and crying on its own. In the last two lines of the poem, he writes that his "troubled breast . . . cries" and "dies." In the stanza just before, he writes:

> Lord *J E S U*, hear my heart,
> Which hath been broken now so long,
> That ev'ry part
> Hath got a tongue!

His heart is broken into pieces, and each piece cries with its own tongue. This broken heart gives us still another plural image. In fact, it is another plural image *speaking* with many voices ("ev'ry part / Hath got a tongue!"). If we take the pieces to represent people, then once again we see Herbert including others as part of himself. Like the pile of dust, this broken heart brings many to voice, perhaps including the beggars in the very next line. More than that, however, we see that it is the very core of Herbert's self—his heart—crying out both for and with those who are broken. We might even go so far as to say that a community cries out from his broken heart. In this, to use Herbert's own words, he "presents himself, yet not as himself alone, but as presenting with himself the whole Congregation, whose sins"—whose pains and sorrows, whose very lives even—"he then bears, and brings with his own to the heavenly altar."[57]

When we read in this way, prying into every crevice for multiples, paying close attention to images of the poor, the wanderers, the vulnerable, the broken, and the dying who populate these lines, we can see Herbert speaking from his own pain and from the pain of communal experience. Herbert gives voice to the prayers and cries of the marginalized, the hurting, the frail, the destitute—himself included, but not himself alone. The sighs and tears of the whole poem are the sighs and tears of many people. Though this reading may go beyond what

[57] Herbert, *The Temple*, 60. As Sheldrake observes, for Herbert, "the sorrows, joys, grief and glories of the parish become those of the country parson. . . . To be holy is to share oneself with others. . . . Herbert has a very social and collective understanding of human nature" (*The Spirituality of George Herbert*, 96, 98).

Herbert had in mind, it nonetheless remains within the range of denotative, connotative, and metaphoric possibilities that the poem presents.[58] Reading and rereading in this way, participating critically and meditatively, creatively and prophetically, we can better understand Herbert and take part in his prophetic work. Listening for the spirit in our work with language, we can voice our pain with the pain of others as a way of growing in empathy, awareness, and spiritual authenticity. Reading and rereading, we can raise to God a prophetic voice speaking for and from a community of the brokenhearted (*see appendix below*). We can rewrite Herbert's lines:

To thee *our* cries,
To thee *our* groans,
To thee *our* sighs, *our* tears ascend.
Amen.

Appendix

Reading in the same way, we can also speak for and from a community of those being made whole. I have emphasized the prophetic expression of suffering so far because that seems what this present moment calls for. But hope is always the purpose of the prophetic expression of suffering. I have delayed talking about hope in an extended way because it is problematic to rush to hope quickly if the moment does not call for it. But *after* reading "Longing," we might also read "Love (III)" (Herbert, *The Temple*, 316). Because this poem ends the "Church" portion of *The Temple*, we might consider it as the final word on "the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and [Herbert's] soul" (Walton, "George Herbert," 275). On several levels, this poem speaks to and about the individual person's relationship with God. As in "Longing," the poet speaks here of *I*, *me*, and *my*. But unlike "Longing," this poem has two clear voices. It is in fact a conversation between the poet and Love or Jesus. It begins with the famous lines: "Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back, / Guilty of dust and sin." For several stanzas the poet and Love have an exchange in which the poet insists on his own unworthiness (dust, sin, lack of worth, unkindness, ungratefulness, marredness, and shame), while Love insists that Love has created the person as good and that Love has taken the blame for the person having "marr'd" that goodness. At the end of the poem Love insists that

[58] In a similar context, Cheryl Walker argues for religious readings with a "certain degree of "*playfulness*," "as long as one doesn't do violence to the conventions of informed reading, which are based primarily on the connotative and denotative possibilities of language" (*God and Elizabeth Bishop: Meditations on Religion and Poetry* [New York: Palgrove, 2005], 40).

the speaker sit down to eat a meal with Love, and the speaker finally concedes: "You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat. / So I did sit and eat." The poem mentions no other guests at the meal, so we might surmise that there are only those two at the table, the individual and Love. Indeed, over many years, this poem has spoken the heart of God to many individuals in intimate, personal, individual ways, but this poem also has something important to say about community. Indeed, at the core of the poem is a prophetic impulse that is essential for a community of sufferers to hear in order to have hope. The speaker of the poem dwells on his individual sins, but individuals rarely sin in isolation. Rather, it is to and with each other than we make offenses—*we* who are hurting hurt each other. So, with a poem about shortcomings of the individual, it is not a far jump to think about the shortcomings of the community. Moreover, because there is Love in the conversation, there is much more than the individual. We can read the love of God for all people into any poem that deals with the love of God even for one person because God's love for anyone is part of God's love for all. The love of God is one love. Finally, the central image of the poem, a meal with Love, points through the last supper of Christ (John 13-17) to the marriage supper of the lamb (Rev. 19), which are both not one-on-one conversations with God but communal gatherings of God with the people of God. The one meal was in preparation for great suffering, and the other is to be in celebration of the end of all suffering. So, as with "Longing," we might reread the voice of the individual in this poem as the voice of the people, a community of the brokenhearted, a community of those who are being made whole:

Love bade *us* welcome: yet *our* souls drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
. . . . . .
All of you must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat.
So *we* did sit and eat.