

Affliction And Resignation in George Herbert: Reflections on Human Agency In A Global Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the context of lockdown in a global pandemic, where entire populations have experienced severe curtailments of the opportunity to exercise agency. The experience has made me notice the surprisingly large role that resignation has played in Christian moral thinking in earlier ages. This paper takes the devotional poetry of George Herbert as a case study, since Herbert had a particular preoccupation with the psychology of religious belief in circumstances where the will cannot be deployed to any end. Herbert reflects on the predicament in which the moral life has to continue even though opportunities for the exercise of agency have collapsed. After examining Herbert's poems of affliction, I conclude by setting out a brief case for understanding resignation as a moral practice – a practice that centres not on the will but on imagination and the emotions.

Lockdown and the Loss of Agency

Like most people, my consumption of news media has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and skyrocketed during periods of mandatory lockdown. In the early stages of lockdown in 2020, news outlets such as *The Guardian* featured upbeat commentary on how to get the most out of lockdown. It was presented as an opportunity. You can take up a hobby, learn a language, turn your garage into a gym for daily workouts, grow your own vegetables, spend more time with your children, live slower, read more, connect with your neighbours, catch up for afternoon drinks on Zoom. The underlying assumption was that life is made meaningful through self-expression and the creative exercise of individual agency. Some of our choices had been taken away, but new, subtler choices now presented themselves. We had not lost our freedom but had been given an opportunity to rediscover other, gentler, more localised freedoms.

As the weeks turned into months and the lockdown wore on, the media commentary changed noticeably. Now, opinion pieces addressed questions such as: How do I avoid drinking during the day? How can I tolerate constant interaction with my spouse? Why does Zoom leave me feeling so empty and exhausted? How can I handle the daily tribulations of homeschooling? Larger social questions became increasingly pressing too: What will happen to my business when I can no longer pay the rent? How will I find a new career now that my whole industry has evaporated? What is the government going to do? Who is to blame for all this, and how will they be held accountable? When will it all end? Will things ever be normal again?

The rhetoric of freedom, agency, and opportunity increasingly gave way to a mood of weariness and frustration. The shift marked out the limits of the contemporary western imagination when it comes to dealing with suffering. The same limits are visible in many contexts, for example in rhetoric about cancer patients: they are either ‘battling’ against cancer, or they have ‘lost the battle’. Either we impose our will heroically on circumstances or we are broken and defeated.

As a style of living this is admirable in many ways. Part of the legacy of Christianity in western societies, and especially those societies shaped by the protestant reformation, is a profound conviction of individual agency and an essentially activist conception of society. Social ills are to be rectified; evil is to be resisted; suffering is to be overcome. To live responsibly is to struggle. And there is no doubt that narratives of struggle are one of the ways that we make sense of otherwise meaningless experiences of suffering.

But the global pandemic has exposed the existential limitations of such narratives. One of the main effects of the pandemic, for vast numbers of people, is enforced inactivity: either because you are locked in your home or because your business cannot operate or because you are waiting for a vaccine, or whatever. For most of us, the pandemic has not presented much opportunity for creative struggle. Entire populations have experienced radical curtailments of freedom. This has placed a strain on our moral imagination and our moral vocabulary.

The experience has made me notice the surprisingly large role that resignation – it is sometimes called ‘surrender’ or ‘consent’ – has played in Christian moral thinking in earlier ages. Stoic doctrines of resignation have been roundly repudiated for their lack of revolutionary potential and their apparent acquiescence to social evils. I won’t try to defend Stoicism in this paper, but I will try to show that there is such a thing as a Christian account of resignation, and that such an account provides resources for reflecting on the role of the imagination, language, and emotions in the moral life. I will take the devotional poetry of George Herbert as my case study, since Herbert had a particular preoccupation with the psychology of religious belief in circumstances where the will cannot be deployed to any end. ‘I could not go away,

nor persevere', Herbert writes in 'Affliction' (I),¹ neatly summing up the predicament in which the moral life has to continue even though opportunities for the exercise of agency have collapsed. After examining Herbert's poems of affliction, I will conclude by setting out a brief case for understanding resignation as a moral practice – a practice that centres on the imagination and the emotions, not on the will.

Affliction and Resignation in George Herbert

Titles are always significant in George Herbert, and he has five poems with the identical title, 'Affliction'. That is already saying something about the place of affliction in Herbert's understanding of Christian experience. The word itself has biblical echoes. The 1611 Authorised Version frequently uses 'affliction' to describe God's work. 'Thou broughtest us into the net; thou laidst affliction upon our loins' (Psalm 66:11). 'Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction' (Isaiah 48:10). Through affliction, God breaks through the hardness of the heart and turns people back to God: 'In their affliction they will seek me early' (Hosea 5:15). Affliction, then, is closely linked to God's presence. The most characteristic thing said about affliction in the Bible is simply that God sees, hears, and looks on the afflicted. 'The Lord hath heard thy affliction' (Genesis 16:11). 'The Lord hath looked upon my affliction' (Genesis 29:32). 'God hath seen mine affliction' (Genesis 31:42). 'The Lord saw the affliction of Israel' (2 Kings 14:26). Hence prayers of affliction often implore God not explicitly to alleviate the suffering but simply to look and see. 'Look on the affliction of thine handmaid' (1 Samuel 1:11). 'Look upon mine affliction and my pain' (Psalm 25:18). Not only does God see and hear, but at times God is even said to undergo affliction in vicarious solidarity: 'In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old' (Isaiah 63:9).

Herbert evokes these layers of biblical signification when he uses the word to describe Christian experience. The title, 'Affliction', already anticipates the theological resolution toward which the poems will move. These poems will not be expressions of raw experience: Herbert has no poems titled 'suffering' or 'pain'. His poems, like the Psalms, give voice to human perplexity in the context of God's presence and God's attentiveness. The afflicted soul stands questioningly in the presence of God, and affliction becomes a mode of relating to

¹ Quotations of Herbert's poetry are from *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Biblical quotations are from the King James Version.

God and an oblique way of experiencing God's work in the soul. The suffering person says, 'I am in pain'. The afflicted person says, 'How long, O Lord?' (Psalm 13:1). As Chana Bloch has observed, 'Herbert's complaints, for all their bitterness, are typically not just a grieving but a lifting of the eyes'.²

In the poem 'Affliction' (I), God 'entice[s]' the youthful believer with blessings and promises of pleasure. For a time, God gratifies him and gives him whatever he wants: 'At first thou gav'st me milk and sweetnesses; / I had my wish and way'. But all this indulgence is only leading him into a trap. God strikes him down with illness, takes away the lives of his friends, frustrates his career aspirations, and consigns him to the drudgery and oblivion of academic life. And then, just as the beleaguered speaker is starting to accommodate himself to his diminished prospects, he falls into renewed bouts of illness:

My flesh began unto my soul in pain,
 Sicknesses cleave my bones;
Consuming agues dwell in ev'ry vein,
 And tune my breath to grones.
Sorrow was all my soul; I scarce beleeved,
Till grief did tell me roundly, that I lived.

When I got health, thou took'st away my life,
 And more; for my friends die:
My mirth and edge was lost; a blunted knife
 Was of more use then I.
Thus thinne and lean without a fence or friend,
I was blown through with ev'ry storm and winde.

Throughout the changing movements of the poem, the human party remains relatively passive while all the decisive action is attributed to God. 'Thou gav'st me.... Thou took'st away my life.... Thou didst betray me.... Thou throwest me'. Affliction in Herbert is always affliction by God. Hence the problem it raises is spiritual and theological. Religious faith is sometimes depicted as a consolation in grief, but if anything, for Herbert, faith makes suffering more intense. When the believer falls sick, his soul is afflicted too. The suffering turns inward and so doubles. As Herbert writes in 'The Crosse': 'One ague dwelleth in my bones, / Another in my soul'. The suffering body has become, as Michael Schoenfeldt puts it, a 'site of inwardness'.³ Affliction is the

² Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 278.

³ Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 2.

spiritual condition produced by this double suffering of a body in pain and a soul in a state of perplexity – all in the presence of God.

While sickness and bereavement are bad enough, Herbert suffers most protractedly from a profound sense of unfulfilled vocation. The question ‘what thou wilt do with me’ is never far from his mind:

Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me
 None of my books will show.
 I reade, and sigh, and wish I were a tree;
 For sure then I should grow
 To fruit or shade: at least some bird would trust
 Her houshold to me, and I should be just.

The poet’s problem here is not just one of finding work but of finding a task even remotely proportionate to his gifts and capacities. Like Milton’s sonnet on his blindness,⁴ Herbert’s complaint is that of an inordinately gifted person who has been deprived of any productive outlet for service. ‘Even in Paradise man had a calling’, writes Herbert in *The Country Parson*.⁵ In ‘Employment’ (I), the speaker complains that he alone of all God’s creatures has nothing to do:

All things are busie; onely I
 Neither bring hony with the bees,
 Nor flowres to make that, nor the husbandrie
 To water these.

The scale of Herbert’s dejection over finding meaningful employment can be gauged by what he envies. One might expect him to envy the bees – those paragons of productive industry – but he aims for nothing so high. He fantasises wistfully about being merely the flower on which the bee alights. The flower opens its petals and releases a fragrance; the fragrance attracts the bees; the bees make honey. Herbert evokes the Renaissance notion of a Great Chain of Being but this, in his dejected state of mind, appears as a Great Chain of Industry, a vast and intricate division of labour in which each thing plays a part. ‘All things are busy’. The speaker alone is left out, with nowhere to go and nothing to do. ‘I am no link of thy great chain’. He is not a flower but a ‘weed’. In ‘Affliction’ (I), the listless speaker envies trees because they are so busy: ‘I reade, and sigh, and wish I were a tree’. Again, in ‘Employment’ (II), he envies the industriousness of the orange tree which

⁴ John Milton, Sonnet XIX; in *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2009).

⁵ George Herbert, *The Country Parson*, XXXII; in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 274).

produces flowers even before the fruit has been picked: ‘Oh that I were an Orange-tree / That busie plant!’

The crisis of vocation can prompt Herbert to question the whole basis of his relationship to God. Perhaps he should forsake God’s service and find some other master who will take better care of him and put his gifts to better use? Perhaps he needs no master and should chart his own course, renouncing all thought of higher service?⁶ Who needs a vocation anyway?

The crisis is finally resolved, but not as one might expect. The last stanza of ‘Affliction (I)’ has the speaker changing his mind suddenly, then changing it again, and then changing it a third time – all in the space of six lines:

Yet, though thou troublest me, I must be meek;
 In weaknesse must be stout.
 Well, I will change the service, and go seek
 Some other master out.
 Ah my deare God! though I am clean forgot,
 Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.

Herbert loves to show the sudden mercurial movements of the mind from one state to another. Even by his own standards this stanza is a virtuosic performance of what Donne called the ‘inconstancy’ of religious psychology.⁷ I won’t complain, I will resign myself to my lot – no, I will forsake God altogether – no, I will go on loving even when I stand to gain nothing from it. Most critics find an impressive lack of resolution in these lines. According to Helen Vendler, ‘Herbert has not so much resolved as ended his poem’.⁸ But the poem’s resolution, it seems to me, lies in the way it dramatizes the effects of affliction on the believer’s heart. The youthful speaker of the first four stanzas is full of zeal for – what? For himself, clearly. He is drawn into God’s service by the promise of ‘benefits’, ‘stuff’, ‘wages’, ‘pleasures’, ‘joys’. He has done a cost–benefit analysis and reckons that serving God is well worth whatever inconvenience might be incurred along the way. The speaker of the second stanza is doing sums and calculations, ‘counting’ and recording an inventory of the things that he will gain by attaching himself to God:

I looked on thy furniture so fine,
 And made it fine to me:

⁶ See Herbert, ‘The Collar’.

⁷ Donne, Holy Sonnet XIX; in *John Donne: The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

⁸ Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 46.

Thy glorious houshold-stuffe did me entwine,
 And 'tice me unto thee.
 Such starres I counted mine: both heav'n and earth
 Paid me my wages in a world of mirth.

To contemplate one's 'wages' with satisfaction: is that really what it means to 'seek thy face' (line 18)? The speaker's motives are vain, self-centred, and frankly mercenary. The poem shows what it looks like when the selfish ego enlists in God's service.

Yet by the last line, a seemingly miraculous transformation has occurred. 'Let me not love thee, if I love thee not'. That seems to mean: let me not love you at all if it's only immature, self-seeking love; let me not love you at all if I'm only in it for the 'benefits'. The same sentiment was taken to an extreme in a later age when Simone Weil, partly under Herbert's influence, concluded that it would be better to love God in hell, deprived eternally of God's presence, than to *use* love as a way of gaining something for oneself.⁹ Though Herbert is never quite so austere, his thought begins to move in the same direction at times. In 'The Temper' (I), he calls on God to rid him not only of 'fear' but also of 'hope'. He claims to want nothing but God's will – 'take thy way; for sure thy way is best' – regardless of whether it lands him in heaven or hell: 'Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust, / Thy hands made both, and I am there'. In the same way, the spiritual movement of 'Affliction' (I) is toward a point at which both hope and despair cease, and the heart feels only surrender to God's will, no longer counting either the benefits or the costs. Herbert credits affliction with producing this state of resignation. Affliction is the means by which God weans the heart from hope and fear, those seemingly antithetical states of mind which are in fact the twin symptoms of selfish attachment. To be weaned from hope and fear is painful but it is, in Herbert's view, the only way we can ever learn to love and to be loved without reserve. 'Let me not love thee, if I love thee not'.

Herbert finds God hidden in the experience of affliction, and the poetry enacts the surprising movement from hiddenness to revelation. In 'Affliction' (III), the suffering speaker curses in pain, and immediately the curse becomes a sign of God's presence:

My heart did heave, and there came forth, *O God!*
 By that I knew that thou wast in the grief,
 To guide and govern it to my relief,
 Making a scepter of the rod:
 Hadst thou not had thy part,
 Sure the unruly sigh had broke my heart.

⁹ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Perennial, 2001), pp. 12–15.

Harold Bloom has claimed that Shakespeare's characters overhear themselves and change their minds as a result.¹⁰ Herbert's speaker overhears his own curse – 'O God!' – and immediately perceives 'that thou wast in the grief'. It is as if one were to exclaim, 'For Christ's sake!' – and then instantly to feel strengthened and encouraged by the words. Even when Herbert utters a curse, his 'unruly' words transubstantiate into prayer and consolation. The sudden alteration of perspective comes as he recalls his union with Christ:

Thy life on earth was grief, and thou art still
 Constant unto it, making it to be
 A point of honour, now to grieve in me,
 And in thy members suffer ill.
 They who lament one crosse,
 Thou dying dayly, praise thee to thy losse.

God is hidden 'in the grief' not just as a consoling support but as an active participant. God identifies with human plight and, by suffering with all 'thy members', undergoes that suffering more constantly and more capaciously than the individual believer ever could.

Herbert's long complaint in 'The Crosse' is finally resolved by a direct identification with the sufferings of Christ. The speaker is tortured by the contradictions between his willingness and his inability to serve God:

What is this strange and uncouth thing?
 To make me sigh, and seek, and faint, and die,
 Untill I had some place, where I might sing,
 And serve thee; and not onely I,
 But all my wealth, and familie might combine
 To set thy honour up, as our designe.

And then when after much delay,
 Much wrastling, many a combate, this deare end,
 So much desir'd, is giv'n, to take away
 My power to serve thee; to unbend
 All my abilities, my designes confound,
 And lay my threatnings bleeding on the ground.

The speaker wants to serve God; he is unable to do it. These two irreconcilable facts, 'these contrarieties', wind like a tightening cord around his heart, cutting the shape of a cross into his heart. They are 'crosse actions' both because his will is crossed, and because the movements

¹⁰ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).

in opposite directions form the shape of a cross. Only in the last stanza does another meaning become explicit: the cross in the speaker's heart is Christ's own cross. The heart's affliction is 'felt' by Christ as his own.

Ah my deare Father, ease my smart!
 These contrarieties crush me: these crosse actions
 Doe winde a rope about, and cut my heart:
 And yet since these thy contradictions
 Are properly a crosse felt by thy sonne,
 With but foure words, my words, *Thy will be done.*

The concluding prayer of resignation is a repetition of Christ's words from Gethsemane: 'O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done' (Matthew 26:42). Yet Herbert introduces the quotation by stressing that these are 'my words' too. His own affliction is Christ's; his cross is Christ's; his words of resignation are Christ's words addressed to the Father at the hour of his passion. The poem is co-authored by Christ in such a way the last four words enact a total identification between the suffering Christ and the afflicted believer. As Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen notes, Herbert's poetry itself thus 'not only records but becomes itself a conduit of suffering ... while at the same time constituting a locus for the alleviation and redemption of suffering'.¹¹

As so often in Herbert, the title – 'The Crosse' – evokes the larger ironies and ambiguities of the poem. Even before we begin to read, we are invited to picture Christ's passion, to look for Christ's affliction amid the bruised and baffled experience to which the poem gives voice, to listen for Christ's words amid the human words of the poem. The title already conditions the reader to keep an eye out for signs of redemption. But the redemptive moment, when it finally comes in the last line, is not what we expected. It drives us back to look at the whole poem again with different eyes. Everything the poem has recounted is both 'my words' – a record of human experience – and 'a crosse felt by thy Son'. Christ has been in the poem all along, as the title intimates, but his voice emerges distinctly only in the last line. The whole perplexing course of human life appears for a moment as a cross: not just an imitation of Christ's cross but the cross of Christ itself, taking all human sorrow (just as it takes all sin) upon itself and offering it up to the Father in a cry of ultimate resignation and ultimate trust. Identification with Christ inevitably means identification with his crucifixion: 'if

¹¹ Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen, *Pain and Compassion in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), p. 116.

so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together' (Romans 8:17).

This theme is set out concisely in 'Affliction' (II):

Kill me not ev'ry day,
Thou Lord of life; since thy one death for me
Is more then all my deaths can be,
Though I in broken pay,
Die over each houre of Methusalems stay.

If all mens tears were let
Into one common sewer, sea, and brine;
What were they all, compar'd to thine?
Wherein if they were set,
They would discolour Thy most bloody sweat.

Thou art my grief alone,
Thou Lord conceal it not: and as thou art
All my delight, so all my smart:
Thy crosse took up in one,
By way of imprest, all my future mone.

The poem proceeds by way of comparison, as if Christ's sufferings were merely greater in quantity than the Christian's. His one death is worth more than all my daily dying. Even if I lived a thousand years and died once each hour, it would not compare to Christ's death. Even if the tears of all humankind were gathered together in a vast drainage system, they would not compare to Christ's grief. But the logic of comparison collapses in the third stanza: 'Thou art my grief alone'. Christ has already 'taken up' all grief into his own heart. To take the measure of my own sufferings and compare them to his creates a kind of infinite regress, since each one of my sufferings is also one of his. As a human sufferer Christ differs in kind from all others, not in degree. Yet according to Herbert's Christian metaphysic, the infinite Son of God is united to finite human nature in such a way that he is able to represent and even to touch all grief, all pain, and all dying. Human suffering, as Van Dijkhuizen observes, is 'transformed' by the fact that God, in Christ, succumbs to the vulnerability and suffering of bodily life.¹² The point is not just that Christ suffers *more* than the Christian but that Christ suffers *in* all other human suffering. Christ is capable of this because he suffers not only in his human nature but as the Son of God incarnate who embraces the whole human condition. It is because of this logic of the incarnation that Herbert depicts Christ as (so to speak) the only real

¹² Van Dijkhuizen, *Pain and Compassion*, p. 146.

sufferer, in the same way that one might call Adam the only real sinner. Every human experience of suffering is contiguous to the infinite suffering of Christ. This is the theological basis of Herbert's claim that affliction leads believers into a deeper identification with Christ and a deeper experience of their union with him.

'We are the trees, whom shaking fastens more' ('Affliction' (V)). Suffering experienced *as affliction* – as a painful and perplexing work of God upon the soul – brings the believer into a deeper identification with Christ. Through affliction, God works on the hardened heart to make it soft, supple, and receptive to love.

Resignation and the Moral Life

We are rightly sceptical of passivity; there is an unwritten rule that theology today must support social and political agency. In a technological age we tend to assume that most kinds of suffering are avoidable or at least can be ameliorated by technical means. Nobody would valorise starvation as a way of growing spiritually; hunger is preventable and there are sound economic, industrial, and policy solutions to the problem of hunger in various social contexts. Compared to the pursuit of active solutions, an account of the uses of suffering might seem perverse and condescending.

But two problems remain for any theology oriented exclusively towards activism and the improvement of the world. The first is what might be called the problem of luck: no matter what decisions I make or what kind of social order I live in, I am subject to accidents that can diminish or in some cases even destroy my agency. I fall ill; I fall off my bicycle; my mental health collapses; I discover that I have genetic predispositions to certain ailments; the government shuts down parts of the economy; I lose my job as a result of larger forces beyond my control; with reduced income, I find my range of choices begins to contract. No matter how much agency I exercise and how many technical tools are deployed for the removal of suffering, I still sometimes experience unmanageable suffering due to bad luck.

If the first problem is that I am sometimes unlucky, a second is that I am mortal. This is closely related to the problem of luck. In some ways my mortality is the unluckiest thing about me. I didn't choose to be mortal; I was never consulted about the kind of entity I would become. I found myself in a world where all things die, including me. The problem of mortality has no technical solution. Thanks to medical technology I have a reasonable prospect of dying without pain, and that is a great blessing. But the removal of pain is not quite the same as the removal of suffering. After all, the death of my loved ones will probably hurt me more than my own death and there is no way of adequately medicating myself against grief of that kind.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed vast human populations to the problems of both luck and mortality. Whether we suffered or not personally – whether we got sick or lost our jobs or grieved for loved ones – the pandemic still exposed virtually everyone on earth to the continuing fact of human suffering and the relative limitations of human agency in the face of larger forces.

Where social policy is concerned, an activist conception of life is, I suppose, essential. One does not want to hear legislators and policy-makers expressing resignation in the face of suffering. When a former US President said of the COVID-19 death toll, ‘it is what it is’, many observers looked on with instinctive revulsion. Sentiments of resignation sound perverse on the lips of a leader whose policies can mean the difference between the life or death of hundreds of thousands of souls. But in the time of a pandemic, most of us are not legislators or policymakers. We are not called upon to decide whether or not to declare a lockdown. We experience lockdown as a kind of fate imposed on us whether we want it or not. Most of us have not been invited to make key decisions about the management of a global pandemic; we have only been commanded to watch and wait. If an ethic of resignation does not apply to the sphere of social policy, it has much to say to the domain of individual experience and individual agency.

If I have to suffer then I might as well think about how to do it. Is it purely passive, just something that happens to me? Or am I meant to engage with it in some way? Is there a productive way of using suffering? Can meaningless suffering become meaningful ‘affliction’?

Simone Weil once said that ‘the greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural cure for suffering, but a supernatural use of it’.¹³ I have been exploring a Christian understanding of the uses of suffering through a reading of George Herbert’s poems of affliction. Herbert ‘uses’ his suffering even when there is no expectation that it will be alleviated or overcome. The problem of suffering has no solution, if by solution one means the removal of pain and perplexity. The speaker of ‘Affliction’ (I) doesn’t just recover from ill health, find new friends (the old ones having died), and get a job. Having cast the believer down, God doesn’t simply raise him up again. Herbert experiences affliction as a recurrent mode of Christian experience. And he tries to show that it is, or can become, a uniquely productive experience. Through affliction the heart is weaned of its selfish attachments and driven deeper into union with Christ. Herbert’s poems of affliction are dramatisations of the process by which the believer learns what it means to be ‘in Christ’.

¹³ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 28.

Herbert responds to suffering not with a movement of the will but with acts of language and imagination. The whole process is encapsulated in the little picture-poem, 'JESU':

JESU is in my heart, his sacred name
 Is deeply carved there: but th'other week
 A great affliction broke the little frame,
 Ev'n all to pieces: which I went to seek:
 And first I found the corner, where was *J*,
 After, where *E S*, and next where *U* was graved.
 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*.

The letters of Jesus' name are engraved on the speaker's heart. But when his heart is broken by affliction, the name comes apart too. The heart no longer spells anything. In his affliction the poet has forgotten what his own heart means. Having put the pieces back together again, he discovers to his surprise that the broken heart has come to 'spell' two things at once. Taken phonetically as three words (one thinks of a child learning how to read by sounding out each letter), the letters of the broken heart spell out the comforting sentence, 'I ease you' (I—ES—U). And taken together as a single word, they spell the beloved name of Jesu. The poem is a minute meditation on two commonplaces of everyday speech: the Christian claim that Christ is 'in my heart' (as stated in the first line); and the metaphorical depiction of grief as a 'broken heart'. Herbert puts these two commonplaces together to explore the way Christ dwells in the afflicted heart, spelling two things where before he had spelled only one. The poem charts an internal movement of the emotions and the imagination, from assurance to brokenness to confusion and finally to a consolation that only deepens the assurance with which the poem began. On the other side of affliction, the belief that 'JESU is in my heart' comes to mean much more than it did before. And this transformation within the believer's perception 'is performed in the poem, takes place in the poem as we read it'.¹⁴

Herbert's poems of affliction dramatise a Christian practice of resignation in which the believer makes use of suffering by imaginatively conceiving it *as affliction* and thus by suffering in the presence of God. Such resignation might be considered a moral practice even though it does not arise from agency, just as Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch have argued that 'attention' is a practice of the moral life: a focused activity of the soul which does not arise from the will but is almost the opposite of willing. The essential moral act, in Murdoch's account, is akin

¹⁴ Van Dijkhuizen, *Pain and Compassion*, p. 118.

to the vision of the artist who does not choose or grasp or express a preference but perceives something to be the case: 'there it is'.¹⁵ Herbert's perception of the will of God involves a similar point of naked awareness: 'thy will be done' ('The Crosse'); 'let me not love thee, if I love thee not' ('Affliction' (I)); or, in the celebrated words of 'Love' (III), 'so I did sit and eat'.

Resignation to the divine will, resignation to divine love: what Herbert depicts here is not the exercise of agency but a mental activity that lies, as it were, on the other side of willpower. Havi Carel has analysed the power of illness to disrupt and reorient a person's whole view of life, precisely because illness is unchosen, uninvited, and unresponsive to volition.¹⁶ That is the kind of disruption and reorientation that Herbert documents in his poems of affliction. There are circumstances in which one realises that there is nothing to be chosen and no work to be performed. The will falls silent and the heart consents. To consent to divine love and divine will even in the midst of pain requires a peculiar kind of imaginative vision – but not an *effort* of imagination, otherwise one would still be back with the will and with the expectation that it is in one's own power to do something, to change something, to make something happen. There are, of course, many situations in which I *can* do something and make something happen, but I am not now talking about situations of that kind.

If Herbert 'uses' his suffering, it is not in the way one might use a tool or a technique. He pays attention to his suffering. He 'reads' it like a text.¹⁷ He refuses to flee from it or repress it or dress it up in a positive light. He allows his hopes and fears to be exposed to its flame. He reflects on his suffering until he finds in it a question about God. He finds words for it that tentatively form themselves into prayer. He scrutinises it for anything that reminds him of Christ's identification with the believer. These are not acts of will. They are acts of imagination and language that centre on the intelligibility of the emotions. Martha Nussbaum describes the emotions as 'judgments of value',¹⁸ and the term can aptly be applied to Herbert. Modes of attention, awareness, and feeling can be regarded as morally important even in circumstances where nothing has been willed and no exterior action has occurred. In Herbert's poems of affliction, the will is not involved at all except as a clamour that needs to be stilled.

¹⁵ Iris Murdoch, 'On "God" and "Good"', in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 57.

¹⁶ Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chapter 9.

¹⁷ Sarah E. Skwire, 'George Herbert, Sin, and the Ague', *George Herbert Journal* 28:1 (2005), p. 23.

¹⁸ Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chapter 1.

I do not suppose that such an account of resignation takes the full measure of Christian moral experience. But in the context of a global pandemic, there may be an opportunity to take a sober assessment of the limitations of moral activism and to consider the place in the moral life of thinking, imagination, and feeling even when such movements of the soul cannot – and do not pretend to – change the world.

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