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“He my succour is”:
A Language of Self in Herbert’s “The Holdfast”

by Susannah B. Mintz

Stanley Fish writes in his chapter on George Herbert in *Self-Consuming Artifacts* that Herbert “lets his poems go, so that both they and the consciousness whose independence they were supposedly asserting give themselves up to God.”¹ Fish characterizes “letting go” as “the discarding of those very habits of thought and mind that preserve our dignity by implying our independence,”² a formulation that tends to erase the poet, turning him into an inky conduit for the divine word. “The Holdfast,” Fish argues, is a “quintessential” Herbert poem in that it enacts just such a “letting go.” The poem’s “recalcitrance” — a mood in which the price of being the “beneficiary”³ of so enormous a gesture of love as the Sacrifice is determined to be too high to pay — progresses steadily toward a dissipation of the speaker’s desire for self-worth and his initial expressions of self-righteousness.

Fish suggests that while the “I” begins by insisting upon and defending itself as the producer of action and meaning, clutching for a way to prove presence and agency, to affirm his love for God, the speaker eventually reaches a moment of epiphanic clarity in which the futility of his exhibitions of autonomy becomes clear to him. The word of God is accepted as “all,” and in him all boundaries — between “Him” and “me,” one’s love for him and his goodness, his word and Herbert’s poem — are dissolved; Christ is the ultimate agent and maker, the ultimate substance of all things. The speaker — and the poem — thus lose autonomous existence in what Fish describes as the “supererogatory goodness of God which is so extensive that it finally claims responsibility not only for the deeds that are done but for the impulse to do them. One cannot even take credit for the act of loving God.”⁴ The human writer, chastened and “in spite of himself . . . gives up,”⁵ as his attempt at personal power evaporates into the final triumphant image of Christ.

Since Fish’s 1970 evaluation, the view that Herbert’s poetry testifies to the impossibility of an autonomous, representable self apart from God has been subtly revised; nevertheless, there continues to be a prevalent critical agreement that the poet “writes himself out

of his poems.”⁶ As recently as 1991, Douglas Thorpe, in the introduction to *A New Earth*, provides an example of the way many readers of Herbert carefully, even exuberantly, pay tribute to the intelligence, craft and profound human-ness of his poems, only to relegate the poet to a position of obedient transcriber of doctrine. While aptly observing that Herbert’s poems “reveal that whatever we know of the ‘ineffable’ is known precisely in our own labor, which is inevitably rooted in a concrete here and now,” Thorpe weakens his claim for human agency with the idea that “our own labor is, paradoxically, . . . a giving up, a letting go, a dying to oneself.”⁷ Thorpe’s use of the phrase (and trope) “letting go” is a clear reference to *Self-Consuming Artifacts*.

My interest here will be to read “The Holdfast” as a paradigmatic Herbert poem, not because it dramatizes a self unable to speak or act in the face of doctrine, but because its internal dialogue demonstrates the self’s capability of holding onto a realm of human impulse over and against theological proscriptions. Fish’s rendering of the poem’s speaker as passive, abashed by the authority of Christ, and forced to relinquish an existence separate from God — “humility and self-abnegation” prevail⁸ — underestimates the survival of the speaker in the poem’s central drama. I will argue that “The Holdfast” proceeds as a deeply human, individualized catechism,⁹ in which the speaker’s answers not only become successively more contrary to what has been decreed, but the interlocutor seems increasingly unable to hear the speaker’s responses or to reconcile them with the narrow terms of doctrine. The speaker survives the appropriative responses of this doctrinal other, and reveals that the place from which he speaks is unowned by doctrine; a sense of identity outside the limits set down by his “catechist” emerges from the speaker’s process of defining his individual practice of faith.

Fish’s description of what in his view are essential Herbertian characteristics — an initially aggressive, self-generating and preserving stance, followed by a relinquishing of selfhood in submission to God — is strongly contravened by the complexities of language in “The Holdfast.” The speaker’s revisions of the words of the interlocutor, the fact that he retains command of language through the final couplet, indicate the poem’s concern to interrogate the sense of self possible within the bounds of theology. The portrayal of devotion, too, suggests a relationship between individual and God far from the submissiveness Fish asserts. The speaker tries to locate in the language

of doctrine something on which to "hold fast," and concludes neither by effacing himself before God nor rebelliously rejecting his belief in favor of "himself." Rather, he construes an intricate interaction between self and God, a kind of reciprocal transmittal where God's actions and gifts have no outline, no meaning, without the human speaker who experiences and expresses them.¹⁰

Fish writes that the "central question of the Christian life," as well as of "The Holdfast," is "What must I do to be saved?"¹¹ I would argue that the interchange between self and interlocutor, with its pattern of substitutions and revisions, suggests a more complex engagement with the question, "What does Christianity do to its believer"? Is faith, or the desire to be faithful, as Fish claims, rewarded only with gestures one cannot understand, breaking down independent will?¹² In identifying the complicated, tensely dualistic relationship between human individual and doctrinal interlocutor, Fish brings forth the sense of urgency driving the poem — self and agency are at stake. I hope to show, however, that his conclusion (the self submits wholly to doctrine) is problematized by the deliberately oppositional dynamics of "The Holdfast," whereby the speaker is neither obliterated by the dialectic between self and God, nor shifts the focus of attention away from himself and onto Christ, onto a salvation that can only be supplied by God.

What is at issue in "The Holdfast" is not institutional explanations of Protestant doctrine or other individuals' writings (e.g., Calvin), but rather the impact of doctrine on one particular speaker/poet. Thus while some official tenets of Herbert's religion may be said to provide assurance of a final happiness and comfort through God's grace, we need to read this poem in terms of its unique dramatization of the relation between doctrine and a believer concerned to maintain a sense of agency outside of that doctrine.

Herbert begins "The Holdfast" with characteristic tonal and temporal ambiguity:

I threatned to observe the strict decree
 Of my deare God with all my power & might.
 But I was told by one, it could not be;
 Yet I might trust in God to be my light.
 (ll. 1-4)¹³

“I threatned” thrusts us into the middle of a memory, into the speaker’s consciousness. To whom, and when, is the threat directed? And in what spirit? Are Christ and God the intended recipients, giving rise to Harman’s claim that “it is simply inappropriate to threaten God”?¹⁴ Does the speaker threaten some earthly friend, one with designs on his spiritual status? Might the threat be meant for himself? Because there is no named object of the threat until line 3 (and of course, “one” is neither identified nor necessarily the target of the threat, but simply responds to its content), all of these are possible, thereby establishing an ambiguity of speech and intention that will grow more urgent as the poem continues. Since the speaker only threatens to observe, but does not in fact either observe or even state a desire to observe, the nature of his faith here is less than certain. It is as if the speaker strenuously holds back, reserving something of himself, of his faith: he threatens, but doesn’t *do*. In a period of unstable belief, threats to observe might bring a wayward self back to the center, or express a challenge to “counterintuitive” doctrines.¹⁵ To the degree that “threatned” is an unexpectedly aggressive verb to use in the context of observance, the speaker seems to suggest that before faith can happen, before being able to observe, he must test his own commitment, along with the limits of the religious institution. Of course, threats are sometimes meant to be carried out. If the threat is uttered from within a state of belief, is it merely audacious, uttered despite an understanding of its ultimate impotence? Or ironic, a retrospective depiction of an earlier impulse toward autonomy and agency that further “learning” dispelled? While the end of the stanza makes clear that the speaker’s desire to follow God’s “strict decree” is effectively prevented by the interjection of “one,” actual observance is thwarted linguistically by his own construction, as if he would censor himself.

Harman reads “threatned” as an act of bringing one’s “all” to God’s decree; there is for her “no real sense that an alternative response might be possible” from the speaker’s perspective. But the assertiveness of such an act fades for Harman as soon as the interlocutor breaks in: “the aggressive stance . . . is radically compromised and threats are diffused.”¹⁶ The poem seems interested in exposing the danger of slipping, as Harman does, into a language of error, of judging the speaker just as critically as the poem’s doctrinal other. Viewing the speaker’s position in terms of a “misguided” or even doctrinally impermissible attempt to express

faith stops short of experiencing the full range of the language of "The Holdfast."¹⁷ So curious a manner of setting out to observe one's religion (by way of a threat), along with the fact that the impulse to observe in a particular way (with power and might) is denied by the end of the first quatrain, begs the question of what would happen if the "strict decree" were observed — we never hear the outcome of the threat. In that a "deare" God is also an "expensive" God, one whose exigencies can only be responded to with threats and force, the cost of entering into a relationship with him may be an exhaustive consummation of "all" the speaker has. But at the same time, the speaker's own emphasis on "threatned" sounds as if it could be God, in the doctrinal presentation of him, who is unprepared to receive so total and so strongly independent a human devotion.

In the first quatrain, "might" functions as both noun and auxiliary verb, a doubling that increases these ambiguities of emotion and intention. As a noun — which carries its obvious literal meaning — the word explodes with strength, intensity, and authority at the end of line 2, the speaker asserting a self that is also devoted to God. It is the second "might," appearing two lines later in its auxiliary function, that retroactively pushes the first "might" into the realm of ambivalences. As a verb — registered only as a subsurface connotation in line 2 — "might" denotes permission ("I *am allowed* to observe with all my power") but also recedes into possibility and likelihood, uncertainty and the unknown: "I threatened to observe and I still might, might yet"; "I threatned to observe with all my power & [I] might [do so, but maybe not; such observance is not yet sure]." But why would so palpably "righteous" a beginning need — thematically, theologically — to back away from its stance? The exact meaning of "strict decree" is prominently absent from the quatrain; its definition has been variously understood as "Thy Word is all," as the doctrine of justification by grace, as the "law of laws": "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soule, and with all thy might" (Deuteronomy 6:5).¹⁸ Perhaps, though, the very absence of a stated definition of the decree suggests that what is being explored by the speaker (and the poem) is less a specific scriptural instruction than the language and form of such decrees in general — that is, something about what is required, what it means to observe at all, and to write poetry about that observance.

The "it" of line 3 ("But I was told by one, it could not be") remains equally undefined. What cannot be: threats? observance?

observance with all one's power and might? or even decrees themselves? Nor do we understand why "it" is not to be. Is it simply impossible for anyone to give one's all? Do doctrinal decrees not permit "it"? There is a contradiction here with the biblical source: Deuteronomy declares that "Thou shalt love . . . with all thine heart, . . . soul, and . . . might"; the interlocutor of "The Holdfast" claims that "it could not be." Moreover, we cannot be certain whether the language of "it could not be; / Yet I might trust in God to be my light" belongs to the interlocutor, or is the speaker's own reformulation of what he has been told. The ambiguity coalesces two ideas gaining momentum thus far in the poetry. First, because the thrust of the speaker's "threat" in lines 1-2 is halted by "But," "one" takes on an adversarial aspect, seeming to take something away from an energetic speaker, to deny him the language of his belief. But if "I might trust in God to be my light" is not a direct restatement of the interlocutor's instruction, but a memory, reworded by the speaker, the admonished self recuperates something in the fourth line that he loses in the third. The more powerful, nominal meaning of "might" extends from the second line to the fourth, and by way of his emphatic first-person construction the speaker transforms a commandment to a personal avowal ("I might trust," not the scriptural "thou shalt"). He retains his own language from the rejected threat to the approbation, but softens "threat" to "trust," muffles the blow of "my power" in the brilliance of "my light."

As A.D. Nuttall points out, "pronouns engage so much of Herbert's energy," and they are indeed remarkable in the first quatrain.¹⁹ By the end of the second quatrain, the speaker will have been told (or so we learn via his memory) that "nothing is our own." But in the first, he seems to possess all: "my deare God," "my power & might," even "my light"; even the "one" who exerts influence on the speaker appears only in a passive construction that foregrounds "I," which takes control of the quatrain's active verbs. A first revision seems to have taken place, the speaker refining what he "was told" in a process Harman describes as "not so much accepting correction as working at self-invention, not so much rewriting as writing anew."²⁰ Furthermore, it is syntactically and logically possible to read "it could not be" as neither a memory of conversation nor the words of "one," but as the speaker's own utterance — as a kind of theatrical aside, a disbelieving exclamation ("How is it possible that I am being addressed in this way? This fills me with amazement!").

This would mean that his initial "threat to observe" is not entirely erased (it never is, no matter how this quatrain is understood), but rather added to by the allowance of trusting in God — God "supplying the want."

The speaker maintains a declarative tone at the start of the second quatrain ("Then will I trust, said I"), in which the interjections of the other are no longer indirectly remembered (e.g., "I was told by one") but are directly quoted ("Nay, ev'n to trust in him, was also his: / We must confesse, that nothing is our own.") The speaker's insistence on one-to-one connection ("in him alone") hints at a desire for a relationship with God unmediated by human or scriptural complications, to be secluded from these obtrusive voices that interrupt with corrections and denials. As the poem progresses, the relationship between the speaker and other voices grows increasingly difficult to follow, and it becomes harder to assess the speaker of certain lines, to determine whether speech is remembered or uttered directly in the poem. Only two actual interventions are specified, in the first and third quatrains, and only the second instance ("I heard a friend expresse, / That . . .") is clearly constructed as an indirect quote. What seems to be the intrusion of someone else's language in the second quatrain contains a curious tense shift that complicates easy assignation of speakers. Is one line ("Nay, ev'n to trust in him, was also his") the past tense of the speaker's narration, its tone bewildered, even saddened, at another loss, while the second line ("We must confesse, that nothing is our own") is the dogmatic other breaking in? Is there even another voice at all, or have modes of thought, temporal situations, begun to merge?

One purpose of these subtle confusions, I think, is to call into question the origin of revelation and realization. I am fundamentally in agreement with Chana Bloch, who describes Herbert's poetry as "enacting a process by which believer makes biblical text his own." The self in Herbert is not "humbled and subordinated," she writes, but rather is "vigorously at work and conscious of its own motions in bringing the [biblical] text to life."²¹ But the conflict of "The Holdfast" is not a simple matter of biblical interpretation. The speaker's attempts to follow the instructions of the other meet with denial and contradiction, forcing small revisionary moves — moves that seem instinctive and spontaneous — which will eventually go unheard, or unacknowledged, by the correcting voice. The speaker appears willing to follow doctrinal teaching, but his "answers," made

unique by his own independent participation, are incompatible with the dictates of the other. Bloch acutely describes the central opposition here as “human wit” against “the authority of Scripture,” declaring that the “play of the mind . . . belies Stanley Fish’s picture of Herbert, martyrlike, building his poetry into a pyre of self-immolation.”²² What Bloch sees in somewhat spirited terms (the “play” of mind is “delighted”), however, I read in a more contestorial frame. As one voice threading through the poem seems to purport the impossibility of individual agency, the speaker’s responses describe the way doctrine is internalized, re-worked and worded, perhaps misunderstood, even ignored — a mind not explicitly disagreeing, but at each turn renegotiating the other’s interjections.

In *Confessions*, St. Augustine legitimizes varying interpretations of the Bible:

. . . how can it harm me that it should be possible to interpret these words in several ways, all of which may yet be true? How can it harm me if I understand the writer’s meaning in a different sense from that in which another understands it? All of us who read his words do our best to discover and understand what he had in mind.²³

But Herbert goes further than Augustine’s vision of a flexible text, for his disagreement is not with another, human interpreter of Scripture, but with scriptural doctrine itself. The consequence of Fish’s belief that Herbert’s poems “experience the full force of this admission [Thy word is all] in all its humiliating implications” is that, eventually, the poet “is forced to give up more and more of the resources (and claims) of his art until in the end he is reduced to silence, and disappears.”²⁴ But it is precisely the interpretive work of the speaker of “The Holdfast,” and the imperfect declaration/correction exchange between speaker and other, that contend against the claim that everything is owned by God.

The speaker’s most striking substitution — an assertion of both self and an individually defined, personal credo — comes in the second quatrain:

Then will I trust, said I, in him alone.
Nay, ev’n to trust in him, was also his:

We must confesse, that nothing is our own.
 Then I confesse that he my succour is:
 But to have nought is ours, not to confesse
 That we have nought. (ll. 5-10)

Nothing in the dialogue through line 6 adumbrates the disjunction that occurs between lines 7 and 8. When the speaker responds to "I might trust in God to be my light," with "Then will I trust . . . in him alone," the shift is a subtle one; "him alone" does less to refute or ignore "my light" than to intensify a feeling of intimate spirituality. One would expect, then, the command to "confesse that nothing is our own" to be answered with a confession of owning nothing — that is, for the speaker to continue his apparent willingness to hear and incorporate doctrine. Instead, "he my succour is" emerges as if from within some private realm of belief. The speaker *does* confess, but not at all to what his catechist would expect (catechism anticipates unsurprising answers). The interlocutor's "nothing is" becomes the speaker's "succour is" in a "confession" that, far from disclosing the self's insufficiency before God or disclosing its human sinfulness, affirms, recovering *something* (not "nothing") which the speaker holds for himself.

Nor is this a rebellious stance into which the speaker has been manipulated by the other. Though the speaker's language of faith (and the nature of faith expressed therein) differ radically from what this poem's articulation of doctrine would seem to allow, the easy flow of the poetry in these lines (regular iambic pentameter, plain syntax, the repeated construction "we must confess, that" / "Then I confesse that") gives the feeling that "he my succour is" comes forth unpremeditatedly, instinctively, a personal avowal that simply lays claim to what doctrine denies. In fact, even after "he my succour is" has broken into the catechism, the interlocutor makes no move, uncharacteristically, to subsume the statement into the dialectic. It is as if the act of setting out to confess as instructed elicits what is most fundamental to the speaker about his faith in God — what had perhaps been unconscious until the dialogue brought it forth — that God his "succour is."

The other voice attempts to turn "nothing" into "something" for the speaker, forcing him towards a position where "nothing" is his share of the devotional transaction, where he must abandon calling even faith his own. Three times the voice repeats the equation

— “nothing is our own,” “nought is ours,” “we have nought” — a canny linguistic trick whereby affirmative constructions make “nothing” and “nought” positive, substantive, rather than privative.²⁵ But the speaker’s reply (“he my succour is”) suggests that the edict to confess to nothingness elicits instead an impulse toward matter and elementality.²⁶ “Is,” the only word the two speakers share, declares presence, existence, but the interlocutor’s paradoxical affirmation (“nothing is”) recedes before the speaker’s far more emphatic, non-paradoxical “succour is.” “Succour,” a word that heals and relieves, provides and offers, rather than impoverishing the speaker of options, agency, or language, remains the speaker’s own to the end of the poem. The speaker’s use of “succour” — not “savior” — also implies that salvation is less crucial in “The Holdfast” than the comfort of faith in *this* life. Neither denied nor even directly acknowledged — perhaps not ever heard — by the interlocutor, “succour” and its connotatively soothing effect endure; they “persist,” as Harman suggests.²⁷ Indeed, they remain untouched by the doctrinal other.

Moreover, the speaker takes possession of “succour” as he did of “light”: “Then I confesse that he *my* succour is,” so that God is more than a generalized benevolence; and the statement is an ontological one, so that God is more than a mere offering of assistance. In the other’s formulation, the speaker would have to recognize that even to claim nothing is to overstep his bounds; all that he “has” is to empty himself into God’s omnipotence. In his own formulation, though, the speaker pulls toward himself what his interlocutor would take away. His statement is not that “God is my succour,” with a declarative “God is” given prominence at the start of the line, and speaker taking a subordinate role. Rather, the word-sequence of “he my succour is” brings “he” and “my” into closest proximity, with “my” placing the emphasis of the relationship on what God is to the speaker; “succour” is given weight by being bracketed at the center of the line. Finally, “is” comes at maximal distance from its subject, both asserting predication and working backward in the line to give existence, continuity, to “my” and “succour” as well as “he.” It is difficult to agree, then, with Fish’s view that the speaker “surrenders its pretense to any independent motion and even to an independent existence,”²⁸ or that Herbert’s speakers overall “give themselves up to God, exchanging their separate identities for a share in his omnipresence.”²⁹ The moment of independent articulation signaled by “he my succour is,” a sudden but paradigmatic deviation, is a very

separate articulation of spirituality sustained in the poem precisely because it is unabsorbed by the catechist back into doctrine.

The interlocutor — previously so quick to revise and reject the speaker's statements — by not responding to the terms of the speaker's "confession," somehow ends up denying itself. Having told the speaker he must confess that "nothing is our own," the interlocutor responds to the speaker's unanticipated response ("he my succour is") as if he had provided the "right" response (i.e., "Then I confesse that nothing is my own"). If such were the case, the interlocutor at line 9 would simply conform to its pattern of refuting the speaker's declarations. Because the speaker deviates, though, making his own "confession" in language not belonging to the other, the interlocutor seems to renounce its own command ("We must confesse, that nothing is our own / . . . But to have nought is ours, not to confesse / That we have nought"). The speaker's words go unaddressed. Many critics take his admission that he "stood amaz'd at this, / Much troubled," to mean that the speaker has finally been rendered speechless by the weight of consecutive admonitions. But it seems equally possible that he is confused — not only by what the doctrine-speaking other is telling him to do, or the internal contradictions of the very language of that doctrine (what Nuttall calls the "mind-breaking awkwardness"³⁰ of rules by whose language we are at once required to act and rendered impotent), but also by the interlocutor's apparent inability to take account of the speaker's powerful statement of faith.

The quandary faced by the speaker of "The Holdfast" is an ontological one. The poem dramatizes the self's responses to the limits theology places on its authority in such a way that it can be preserved as a discrete being, one that dictates its faith, how it will pray, even why it believes. But because that self is represented through language, learning about itself and its capacities for self-expression by maneuvering through an obstacle course of the other's language (at times bafflingly self-contradictory), the dilemma is also a linguistic one. Similarly, the impasse at line 10 ("I stood amaz'd at this") is not only a religious one — whether a question of the human individual's theological "right" to action in view of the doctrine of grace, or a realization of being incapable of speaking or acting in the wake of Christ's Sacrifice (that supreme gesture by which all others are rendered inferior, even misguided) — though it is indeed that, since the precedent of a life that was both humanly lived and divinely

sacrificed frustrates purely mortal imitation. Again, the amazement of the speaker has to do with linguistic contradictions in the doctrine as it is put forth, which have reached such an extent that the self is rendered momentarily speechless.

The speaker's ability to confess, to own, begins to break down, but not in a divine, fluid oneness that envelops the human individual, nor, I believe, in what both Fish and Strier call "a new passivity."³¹ The poem's shifting pattern of voices — they speak, are taken over, then speak anew — permits the speaker to retain control of language, while his apparent immunity to the interlocutor's catechism extracts from an erosive and censorial doctrine a more gentle, responsive relationship with God: a succour comes to one's aid.³² The interlocutor's decree that what is ours is to *have* nought, "not to confesse" to having nought, means that to use language to convey having nothing is to make a claim in language for possessing something — which is, finally, to own something that God does not. Thus the first command, to confess, is countered by the second, simply to have nothing. What the interlocutor seems to ignore, however, is that the speaker himself never does make such a confession; his statements in the poem are all substantive, confessing to something: "I threatned," "I trust," "I confesse that he my succour is."³³

Still, for many critics, the speaker of "The Holdfast" is definitively silenced at the point of standing "amaz'd," disappearing in the final three lines of the poem as he is subsumed into God and the doctrinal voice and authority of the "impersonal" ending couplet.³⁴ But the language in these lines asks us to delve further, to consider the possibility that the speaker, or some other vital, more manifestly human voice than has been heard so far, might close the poem. It seems important, first, that the poem continues, that the speaker's temporary experience of amazement and trouble comes to an end with the shift indicated by the conjunction "till" in line 11. What follows is the last intervention by another voice, but we cannot absolutely determine which of the final lines the "friend" speaks:

I stood amaz'd at this,
 Much troubled, till I heard a friend expresse,
 That all things were more ours by being his.
 What Adam had, and forfeited for all,
 Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall.
 (ll. 10-14)

The beginning of the friend's speech is clearly marked by "that," but there is also a period after "his," bringing line 12 — and possibly the friend's expression — to a full stop. Nor can we be certain if the "friend" is the same character as "one." If we assume, as does Fish, that "a friend" is Christ,³⁵ and Christ says that "all things were more ours by being his [i.e., God's]," it seems improbable that Christ would refer to himself by name two lines later. If the "friend" is presumed to be God, he is conspicuously figured in congenial, human terms: "one" sounds vague, indefinite, impersonal; "friend" connotes affection, esteem. Wherever "one" and "friend" originate, however they enter the space of the poem, the ways they approach the speaker are significantly different. "One" interrupts, denies, corrects, deprives; "friend" enters at a moment of "much trouble" and, for the first time, gives something back to the speaker that he does not have to recoup for himself — "all things were more ours." This leads into the end-couplet (which is indented, setting it off visually and spatially from the only line definitely ascribed to another) with a new tone of compassion.

These small points of grammar, punctuation, and form create the possibility that the human self supersedes, even silences, the poem's mysterious others, that the self maintains authority and agency through the last word of the poem. Again, the specifics of Herbert's poetic language lend credence to this idea. The speaker is faced with the conundrum of all things being "more ours by being his." Does this mean that all things are somehow more secure in Christ than in our own, flawed keeping?³⁶ Without pushing the phrase toward darker implications (i.e., a hubristic claim to ownership that disregards God's role), its language does seem to imply that "all things" would still be ours without God, perhaps only — somehow — less ours. By another formulation, all things are still ours (though also his), only more. In line 13 ("What Adam had, and forfeited for all"), which would seem to testify to the most profound human frailty — original sin, and what Adam gave up — the doctrine of the fortunate fall surfaces to such an extent that Adam's forfeiture, his "sacrifice," seems hardly distinguishable in the poetry from Christ's "keep[ing]," suggesting a speaker invested in preserving the human from what God and doctrine decree.

Chana Bloch reads the closing couplet as an echo of Romans 5:19, "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners: so by the obedience of one, shall many be made righteous."³⁷ But the

poem places emphasis on that “one man”; with characteristic Herbertian particularity, Adam is named. “Disobedience” is rendered as “forfeited,” a second revision that recuperates Adam from the ignominy of the verse in Romans. What Adam had (not only paradise/immortality/perfection but perhaps also the independent selfhood for which the poem’s speaker struggles), he “forfeited for all”; the doctrinal meaning, accepted by so many critics, is that Adam denied to all the chance of having the same. But the ambiguity of “for” also connotes, first, that Adam gave something up in order to *receive* all, which can only be an intensely human, mortal existence; second, that Adam forfeited *on behalf of* all, as agent or representative; and third, that Adam’s forfeiture was *for the sake of* all — making Adam seem less disobedient than sacrificial.

That the final couplet can be seen as the speaker’s own words — or at least the human poet’s, rather than a divine editor — reasserts and reinserts in the poem a distinctly human continuity, from Adam to “all” to the speaker himself. In the poem’s eleventh hour, at the moment when the speaker should be at his most humiliated and inconspicuous, doctrine seems to step in to complete the poem with formulaic language. But the negation of the final grammatical unit (“who cannot fail or fall”) signals a binary which must remind us even at the last of those who can fail or fall — specifically, the speaker — and so reaffirms the many possibilities entangled with the state of humanity: choice and error, but also threatening, confessing, writing poems, loving God. In a poem meant to record “the importance attached to, and difficulty associated with, making a lasting appearance in the world,” in a poem that may be, finally, “a lesson in the power and priority of Christ’s voice,”³⁸ the culminating “fall” salvages something compassionate from the kind of negativity such formulations imply. The self who can “fall” is precisely the self who needs a “succour,” and boldly avows one in God.

The linguistic structure of “The Holdfast” helps to sustain this very human aspect of religious belief, which the poem’s internal litigators work to reject. The link between humanity and imperfection made by the final rhyme, “all” and “fall,” is reinforced by the poem’s final phrase, “fail or fall,” which itself continues the very human emphasis established at the start of the first quatrain with “I threatned.” It is the very possibility of failing or falling that makes Christianity real, actual; in a way, the failure of humanity is what makes Christ grand, what allows him the splendor of the Sacrifice.

The sense that the poem records a reciprocal love, for and from God, for and from humanity, can help us to understand the tonally distanced, aphoristic edge of the final couplet. "One," "friend," and "I" disappear behind "Adam" and "Christ," so prominently placed, and the rhythm of the language tends toward the homiletic. Yet while it is true that the human speaker, along with the specificity (and the abstraction) of "one" and "friend," drop away, these final symbolic figures are divine but also human, supreme but also fallen. If doctrine requires that the speaker give up individual agency to recompense Adam's failure to obey, the poem simultaneously privileges Adam — and by association, the human speaker — as it holds fast to a concept of religious faith, different from that expounded by its interlocutor, where the self is not barred from declaring anything, including God, as its own.

I have explored the manner in which many of the poem's words and phrases either apply to or can be spoken by the poet and Christ (or God) equally, both in terms of grammatical logic and thematic consistency. The title of the poem, similarly, unfolds in multiple ways. The "holdfast" certainly refers to God, that global force to which the speaker, "one," "a friend," Adam, "all," and Christ are firmly secured. The notion of being held fast in this way seems both safe and troubling: unwavering positions grant a certain security because they deny change and indecision, but they can also feel rigid, imprisoning. God's believers cling to him, but in a sense he also clings to them; he is a source and space of certitude, a maker and exacter of rules.

"Holdfast"³⁹ describes the speaker as well, and again with more than a single meaning. There is at first an ironic edge, as if the speaker admits retrospectively to notions of holding onto his selfhood until being adequately "corrected" and realizing how futile that pursuit is.⁴⁰ But there is also an insistence in the word, an emphatic affirmation about the speaker and what he will do, must do — indeed, what he is — in response to the doctrine that will be presented to him. The speaker holds fast to self, to speech, to the power of writing poetry, an aim that seems primarily assertive at the start of the poem, then tempers as his understanding of doctrine integrates with a sense that being "religious" is deeply related to being "human." What the speaker holds fast to is what he exhibits in the line "He my succour is" — an articulation of faith not

produced by nor co-opted by the doctrinal other in the poem, one that itself holds onto the human, the “careful.” The holdfast refuses to “let go” into a doctrine that dissolves human agency in the service of godly oneness.

It is difficult not to sense the hand of the poet at work in “The Holdfast,” the skilled manipulation of ambiguity, prosody, emotion, and tone.⁴¹ To the degree that language and speech make manifest, preserve, even augment selfhood, poetry itself is a kind of holdfast. At the same time, the poet behind “The Holdfast” creates a speaker for whom he has obvious concern, and to whom he grants some kind of human — even if fallen — resourcefulness to wend his way through the manipulations, and contradictions, of homiletic discourse. Even within the all-encompassing “keeping” of Christ, who would turn over ownership of all to God, an utterly human presence, though frail and capable of failing and falling, remains to the end of the poem.

I began by claiming that “The Holdfast” is paradigmatic of Herbert’s work, and it is this facility for safeguarding from doctrinal usurpations a private Christianity, a realm of the possible, the affirmative, the enabling in human faith and existence, that relates this poem to others in *The Temple*.⁴² Rather than ascribe any one meaning to the poem’s “strict decree” (the doctrine of grace, “Thy Word is All,” and the law of laws are all plausible within the context of the poem and all would engage this particular speaker in a similar way), I prefer to read the poem as in part interested in locating a realm of benevolence in religion, and finding that realm largely within the human self. The other voice in the poem repeatedly strips away from the speaker a capacity to formulate his own understanding of his faith and his relationship to God, with the remarkable exception of “he my succour is.” That idea — that God is not a pre-emptive force who owns all and allows only “nought” to his believers, but is a source of aid and relief — comes entirely from within the speaker and is never appropriated by the doctrine-speaking other.

I suggested too that linguistic ambiguity in “The Holdfast” serves to question the origin of revelation. Fish contends that the speaker’s amazement at line 12 is a “revelation from without, . . . that the solution, and indeed all else, is beyond him, but that it is well within the capacity and inclination of another.”⁴³ But the definitive moment of the poem seems to come much sooner than this, just as the interlocutor’s instruction seems on the verge of taking control of the

speaker's expressions of faith. "[H]e my succour is" has the force of a private revelation: sudden, automatic, absolute, uncatechistic. The speaker does not empty himself, finally, into those "higher" powers that would force him into passivity. Just as the other is not equipped to hear the claim that "God my succour is," the speaker cannot accept "nothing" as his own.⁴⁴

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Notes

¹Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1970), p. 190.

²Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 157.

³Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 174.

⁴Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 176.

⁵Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 175.

⁶Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 190.

⁷Douglas Thorpe, *A New Earth: The Labor of Language in Pearl, Herbert's Temple, and Blake's Jerusalem* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1991), p. 5.

⁸Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 175.

⁹In *The Living Temple: Herbert and Catechizing* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1978), which does not revise his earlier reading of "The Holdfast" but refers the reader back to *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, Fish offers an extended discussion of *The Temple* as catechistical in structure as well as content. "Herbert's poetry is a strategy," he suggests (p. 27), whereby the catechist/poet carefully plans questions to lead the speaker/reader/catechumen toward a greater awareness of unworthiness and insufficiency.

¹⁰Such a reading of Herbert is implied by Barbara Harman in the compelling introduction to her book *Costly Monuments*. Harman's critique is framed by questions concerning the interplay between culture and self and focuses on the dialectical in Herbert — between scriptural and poetic language, between divine and personal authority, between action and belief. Quite rightly, she takes Fish to task for not accounting for the "persistence" of the self in so many of Herbert's poems. Finally, though, Harman seems to agree with Fish that even poems which carefully look after their human speakers grant no lasting existence to those selves, "whose silencing they also record." See *Costly Monuments: Representations of the Self in George Herbert's Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), p. 35.

¹¹Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 174.

¹²Fish has been challenged on this score by Richard Strier, who argues that the poem counters the hopelessness of "human insufficiency" with the "unspeakable comfort" of the doctrine of grace. Strier's analysis does much to recover the poem — and the reader — from the abject "humiliation" Fish would have them subject to. But his reading of the speaker's relationship to the interlocutor renders the speaker more accepting of doctrine than the complex revisionary moments in the poem seem to suggest. See *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 66.

¹³*The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (1941; corr. rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 143. All quotations from Herbert's poem will be indicated by line numbers in the text of my essay.

¹⁴Harman, p. 52.

¹⁵Strier, p. 70.

¹⁶Harman, p. 52.

¹⁷Strier defines "threatened" as "comic," a moment where the speaker mocks his own "mistaken" attempt to be pious (p. 67). Chana Bloch also finds in the speaker's tone at the start of the poem "an air of comedy." But even acts of confrontation made in "jest" — indeed, much like jokes themselves — may involve anger, resistance, reluctance, opposition. See *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), p. 156.

¹⁸Respectively, Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 174; Strier, p. 66; and Bloch, p. 156.

¹⁹A.D. Nuttall, *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante and St. John* (New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 60.

²⁰Harman, p. 53.

²¹Bloch, pp. 35, 30-31.

²²Bloch, pp. 23, 31.

²³St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), pp. 295-96.

²⁴Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, pp. 156, 191.

²⁵Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:27-29: "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are."

²⁶William V. Nestrick writes that "Herbert's poetry is elemental By rendering human language its curious status of being in and out of this world, Herbert reasserts the value of an individual maker." See "'Mine' and 'Thine' in *The Temple*," in *"Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne": Essays on George Herbert*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), pp. 115, 127.

²⁷Harman, p. 34.

²⁸Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 173.

²⁹Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 190.

³⁰Nuttall, p. 32.

³¹Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 176; Strier, p. 73.

³²As Nuttall writes of "Redemption," "we are made to sense the presence of some unimaginable love, sweetness, splendour"; Calvin's "divine landlord" is made, "most tenderly, to seem provisional and tentative here" (pp. 33-34).

³³Cf. the fourth and final stanza of "The Reprisal":

Yet by confession will *I come*
 Into thy conquest: though *I can* do nought
 Against thee, in thee *I will* overcome

The man, who once against thee fought. (my italics)

³⁴Strier calls the couplet "hymnlike," its speaker "impossible to assign" (p. 72). For Harman, "Christ's voice" closes the poem; in Nuttall's reading, it seems to be God.

³⁵Fish writes that "friend" is "Herbert's special word for Christ," *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 198.

³⁶Strier (p. 72) and Nuttall (p. 71) both suggest this idea.

³⁷Bloch, p. 158.

³⁸Harman, pp. 54-55.

³⁹Hutchinson cites Psalm 73:27 from the Book of Common Prayer: "it is good for me to hold me fast by God" (p. 528).

⁴⁰Strier translates the word and its impulse as "comic." He also claims that "Christ is the true 'holdfast,' the true agency by which we are held in place — as opposed to our own 'power and might'" (p. 72).

⁴¹Roger B. Rollin, in his self-consciously titled essay, "Self-Created Artifact: The Speaker and the Reader in *The Temple*," describes Herbert's "elaborately architectonic character": "The firmness of artistic control can to an extent mitigate for the reader those psychospiritual crises they dramatize: Alienation, anxiety, and fragmentation are tempered by the masterful handling of form and style" (in Summers and Peabworth, pp. 147-61, 157).

⁴²See, for instance, "Affliction" (I), "The Collar," "The Windows," "The Temper" (I), "Coloss. 3.3," "The Forerunners," "Easter-wings."

⁴³Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 175.

⁴⁴I am indebted to Edward Snow for his suggestions and encouragement during the writing of this essay.