Glass, Man, and Frost in George Herbert and Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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GEORGE HERBERT AND COLERIDGE, in both poetry and prose, share many of the same concerns. Both men are devoted to the incorporation of God in a unified explanatory system, a problem that surfaces in their work, including through a preoccupation of the subject, object and medium to explain the relationship between the natural material world and the immaterial world of the divine. Several avenues could be used to pursue both the issue of influence, Coleridge having returned to Herbert's poems throughout his life, and confluence, in that both men shared the artistic dilemma of all devotional poets of using the limited language of the material natural world to approach and describe the divine; I trace the influence and adaptation of Herbert's ideas in Coleridge's writing through the enduring metaphor of glass—an image predominant in Herbert's poetry. Coleridge appropriates this metaphor and transforms it in his own poetry, poetics, and philosophical prose writings over the course of his literary career. The implications of the secular and sacred imaginings of both men explore the recurring protean metaphor of glass and mankind as both the object of divine love and the medium of divine communication.

In Herbert's *The Temple* glass is a metaphor with important implications for structure, process and unity/integrity in the role of religious love and faith. *The Temple* is a work whose structure divides the concerns of the poetry into architectural elements, reproducing the structure of the church itself. The real temple though, is man. The result of such reproduction of structural architecture is a triadic metaphor of integrity in which Christ reflects God and man as well as a further adumbration of the triadic metaphor in which the poetry reflects the temple of the church and the temple of the human heart.

One important architectural element of any church is the stained glass windows. They are a medium to allow in light; they are a manifestation of the subject of the service, a type of solid logos; and, they are an object of aesthetic beauty and comfort. Clifford Davidson addresses the role of 'The Windows' in Herbert's work as 'a crucial poem…since the analogy between certain physical attributes of the church building and personal experience with its need for illumination in order to achieve direction in one's pilgrimage of life is herein utilized in such an important way.'[1]

Let us consider Herbert's poem 'The Windows':[2]

> Lord how can Man preach thy eternal word?
> He is a brittle crazy glass:
> Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford

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1 Clifford Davidson, 'George Herbert and Stained Glass Windows,' *George Herbert Journal,* 12.1 (Fall 1998), p.36.

2 George Herbert, *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), pp. 67-68. Hereafter, referred to in text as WGH p#.

This glorious and transcendent place,
To be a window, through thy grace.

But when thou dost anneal in glass thy story,
Making thy life to shine within
The holy Preachers; then the light & glorie
More rev'rend grows, & more doth win:
Which else shows watrish, bleak, & thin.

Doctrine and life, colors & light, in one
When they combine and mingle, bring
A strong regard and aw: but speech alone
Doth vanish like a flaring[3] thing,
And in the eare, not conscience ring.

The above poem works to explore those relationships between building and experience because of the instability, or rather, the flexibility of the metaphorical and physical properties of glass. Glass itself is a solid metaphor. Created from the dry dust of the earth, it grows liquid and flexible in the heat of flame and cools in solidity—exquisitely fragile. That glass may be colored 'annealed' in fire, or, completely transparent. In window form it is a barrier between the inside and the outside that can be looked *at* or *through*—connecting the church to the earth and sky beyond—a transparent opacity. Glass as a linguistic metaphor in this poem is even more productive. The windows of the church are the ministers of the church. Humankind is 'a brittle crazy glass,' that is fragile, patched together. However, as part of the 'Temple,' part of the structural integrity of the church, a minister goes beyond the merely material object. In this analogy the act of ministering creates from the patched together glass a medium of communication that interpenetrates the internal and external. The window (or minister) is a conduit between the light and glory of God and the material and earthly.

The communication of the Christian narrative takes shape in the metaphor of communication as the stories of Christianity are literally recreated in the annealed (fired and colored) glass as the subject of the service and again the word is recreated in the reiteration of the scriptural: logos in the window, logos in the liturgy, logos in Christ, logos in humankind when ministering. Furthermore, the story is actually *improved* when it passes through the minister. When the word passes through the 'holy preachers; then the light & glory/ More reverend grows.'[4] The religious implications for Christ are inescapable. Christ is another image of the infinite divine light and logos contained in a vessel crafted from the dust of the earth. Words and windows pass from mere things to be seen to things to be seen through and ways of communicating.

[3] It should be noted, due to the importance of the use of the metaphor of annealing, that the Bodleian Manuscript (Tanner 307) reads "flaming" for "flaring."

[4] WGH pp. 67-68: lines 8-9.

Finally, the human experience, as interpreter, is important to this scene. All of the elements must be internalized in the listener 'when they combine and mingle/ Bring a strong regard and awe.'[5] The subject of the divine logos of Christ becomes the medium of Christ through ministry, creating the object of Christ in the human heart. Christ is the transformative force of the growing metaphorical symbol of logos. The divine transforms, interpenetrates and inhabits the material. The material object of Christ and the divine force of Christ are two parts of a triadic symbol. The third component of logos/text requires interpretation through man. The fluidity of the metaphor and the structural echoing recreating the temple of heaven, the temple of Christ on earth, and the temple of the human heart meet in that metaphor of glass. The minister supplies the faith that is a necessary component for all of these transformations. Richard Todd in his book, *The Opacity of Signs*, explores these ideas of the relationship of God and Man and text and reader where he writes:

> The poetry of the *Temple* is illuminatingly approached in terms of Herbert's interpretation of his experience of relationship with God…Interpretation is necessary precisely because of man's fallen nature: he is *homo significans* for whom all communication, with God and with his fellow men, must take place through the medium of signs.[6]

Todd's focus on the transformation and interpretation in the signs indicating God, hinges on the flexibility of poetic metaphors in Herbert. As with the minister who is imbued with faith, interpreting the relationship between God and Man, the glass filters in the manner that faith filters and transforms the light. Without faith you have 'speech alone,' which does not reach the interior, the conscience of mankind. Faith is the glass that focuses and filters the divine light for human consumption. Such consumption or interpenetration of the divine with the material is necessary in the greater theology of the object of divine love (man) becoming the further medium of divine love.

The consumption of divinity and particularly the logos recurs in his poem 'The Holy Scriptures I': 'Oh book? Infinite Sweetness? Let my heart/ Suck ev'ry letter, and a hony gaine.'[7] This consumption is a healing act 'to clear the breast, to mollify all pain.'[8] The scriptures heal human vision: 'this is the thankful glasse,/ That mends the lookers eyes.'[9] Here the scriptures are refigured as a mirror. The reflection in a mirror is the face of the observer. The scriptures reflect back the face of the reader in a 'healed' form.[10] The eyes,

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5 Ibid. lines 12-13.

6 Richard Todd, *The Opacity of Signs: Acts of Interpretation in George Herbert's 'The Temple.'* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), p. 6.

7 WGH: p.58: lines 1-2.

8 Ibid. line 4.

9 Ibid. lines 7-8.

10 Here I adopt the conclusion of Charlotte F. Otten that the 'thankful glass' has healing properties. See 'The Thankful Glass,/That Mends the Lookers Eyes in Herbert's "The Holy Scriptures 1"', *Notes and Queries*, 38 (March 1991), p. 83.

another window turning into the mind and out into the world, mirror the scripture. It is an image of the infinite, a regress of reflection, but each reflection revealing an improved and higher form. The poem continues refiguring the book, the logos, as reflective 'This is the well that washes what it shows.' Water is a kind of glass mirroring back the observer. Yet, it can be applied to—or enter into—that observer; it interpenetrates the finite and infinite. It 'washes what it shows.' Again, there is a cleansing act performed by the scriptures/well/mirror in this progressive metaphor. The person gazes at the object, sees itself, and becomes subject of the mirror. The object became the medium for this healing or cleansing act in which the scripture can nourish and become part of the observer. It is conduit to, reflective, and constitutive of, the subject and object. In this protean metaphor dust holds water; glass holds light; man holds God. Dust becomes man; man becomes light; man becomes God. Glass is again the medium that is between man and the word that allows the passing of one into the other that heals and corrects the vision of mankind.

The concerns of Herbert as expressed in his progressive metaphor of glass are the concerns of Coleridge in his theological, philosophical, and linguistic/literary endeavors. In the realm of the theological Coleridge searched to reconcile faith and reason in the relationship between God and mankind. His philosophy was bent on explaining the subject-object dilemma and the consequent problems inherent in the act of communication to bridge the void of separate selves. Poetically his work strives to have the limited language of humanity capturing these visions of infinity, communication, and communion. Coleridge worked his entire life to define these questions and more worrisomely to find their answers. As he searches for these answers, he periodically returns to the work of George Herbert.

It is impossible to know when Coleridge first read Herbert. Considering Coleridge's background, it is certainly possible that in 1809 (when we see some of the first direct attributed references to Herbert), he was revisiting and not discovering Herbert, and may have been influenced earlier. Coleridge owned a copy of Herbert's poems and may have additionally borrowed other copies. He annotates the *Temple* in 1809, references Herbert in *The Friend*, mentions him in *Letters* in 1818, 1820, 1825, and 1826, points to him as a positive poetic example in the *Biographia Literaria*, rereads him and offers quotes and comments in Notebooks 2, 3, and 4. Most notably, unlike many other figures throughout Coleridge's intellectual development, Coleridge's appreciation for Herbert only grows in a steady trajectory. He also carefully credits Herbert. When he quotes Herbert he does not forget to give him attribution.

As Coleridge and Herbert share many of the same philosophic and poetic issues and it is not clear when S.T.C. actually first read Herbert, I begin with the 'Allegoric Vision' in the 1795 Lectures where the figure of Religion:

> led us to an Eminence in the midst of the valley, on the Top of which we

> could command the whole plain, and observe the Relation of its different parts, each one to the other. She then gave us an optic Glass which assisted without contradicting our natural vision and enabled us to see far beyond the valley.[11]

This glass is the 'thankful glass' of faith. It 'heals' the vision of the pilgrims. Furthermore, glass is the metaphor of a medium that connects man to the material world that 'whole plain' *and* the infinite or divine existing 'far beyond.' Whether Coleridge had read Herbert before this production or not, they are concerned with the same issues and solve the same difficulties using the metaphor of the useful glass of faith that 'heals' and corrects man's vision. This allegory moreover, is reworked in *The Statesman's Manual*, the *Courier* in August 1811, and *Lay Sermons* of 1817.

Coleridge also adopts the metaphor of stained glass in the *Historie and Gests of Maxilian* in 1822, where in a discussion of doctrine and scripture in fallible men he writes:

> and yet even in these, with all their unremoved defects of knowledge and amid the imperfections common to their age, see how the Light overshines the darkness. What? If when (the) stained Glass of studious Research discover here and their (re in the sacred volume) an unpurged spot//when I look at the entire Orb (as one that is) seeking the Light, I can behold nothing but Light.[12]

Here the reasonable enquiries of 'studious research' are figured as stained glass. The research and the men who perform it are capable of being a light transmitting medium for the scripture connecting the material to the immaterial in a ministerial act of communication. The result is that the scriptures, whether or not perfectly correlative, create a transparency or an 'orb,' for seeing the light of God. The scripture penetrates the man who acts as a medium for the transmission of the light of God.

As early as the Notebooks for July-September 1809 there are intriguing entries on Herbert. Coleridge quotes passages from 'Doomsday,' 'Employment,' 'Bosom Sin' and others. Amidst the quoted passages from Herbert are other notes in which Coleridge discusses light and fire, transparent snow and water and truth. They may be unrelated thoughts, although I see more purposeful connections, but they may have been written simultaneously. Entry 3580 gives long quotes from Herbert's 'Doomsday' and 'Death' ending with a proclamation that 'from these elucidate the law and effect of associated

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[11] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Lecture I,' *Lectures 1795 On Politics and Religion: The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. By Kathleen Coburn et al., (London: Princeton University Press,), p.91. Hereafter, LPR.

[12] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Historie and Gests of Maxilian,'*Shorter Works and Fragments II: The Collected Works Of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Eds. H.J Jackson and J.R. de J. Jackson, (London: Princeton University Press,) Volume 2, p.965. Hereafter, SWF.

forms and feelings.'[13] Clearly, Herbert is provoking thoughts of larger projects. Entry 3579 I see as significant related commentary on this larger project. He writes:

> A man may look at Glass or thro' it, or both/ All earthly things as glass, see Heaven thro'—Ceremonies religious should be pure Glass, not let in thro' the gorgeous Crimsons, and Purple-blues, and Greens of the Drapery of saints and Saintifier.[14]

It is here in the third notebook that Coleridge delineates himself from Herbert in the preference and search for the most transparent possible medium for reading the *liber creaturum.*

One more element of Herbert's use of glass must be accounted for and that is the idea of structural integrity. In *The Friend*, Essay VI 'On the Communication of Truth' Coleridge asserts in the first numbered point of the essay that:

> the cause [of error in communication] should lie in the fault or defect of the recipient, not the Communicator, whose paramount duty, whose inalienable right is to preserve his own Integrity, the integral character of his own moral Being. (SWF 45)

In this passage on *communication* of truth, the word 'integrity' is footnoted by Coleridge. The footnote defines integrity in verse 'Thou must resolve upon Integrity / God will have all thou hast, thy mind, thy will / Thy thoughts, thy words, thy works.'[15] The footnote continues in praise of Herbert's poems. The emphasis of integrity here is not only on truthfulness or moral action, but also as a reflection of being in *relation* to God. This essay goes on to describe the process whereby communication grows:

> Observe, how graciously Nature instructs her human children. She cannot give us the knowledge derived from sight without occasioning us to first mistake images of reflection for substances. But the very consequences of the delusion lead inevitably to its detection; and out of the ashes of error rises a new flower of knowledge. We not only see, but are enabled to discover by what means we see. (SWF 47)

The outcome of such integrity of being operates by taking the reflection of images of the material world (the objects we see) and exposes the medium by which we can see. This is a new and higher kind of knowledge. The structure then sets the limits of what is and is not natural and material, but the interpenetrating human conscience opens the path to further knowledge.

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[13] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge Vol.III 1808-1819*. Ed. Kathleen Coburn, (London: Routledge, 2002). Hereafter, CN Volume #, entry #.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge writes, 'another exquisite master of this species of style, where the scholar and the poet supplies the material, but the perfect well-bred gentleman the expressions and the arrangement is George Herbert.'[16] He put George Herbert in the category of those who 'conveyed the most fantastic thoughts in the most correct and natural language' (BL II 94). The most natural language would be the most transparent medium possible for the transmission of what is fantastic and complex. His praise in the BL is not completely unqualified, he does still call Herbert 'quaint' but you see a growing appreciation for the filtering of those fantastic thoughts into the plain language of man. The concern of the communication of the divine into the material (fantastic into plain) in which man is both the object of divine love and its medium is a growing philosophical fascination for Coleridge.

By 1825 we see a Coleridge who not only praises Herbert, but is also attempting to imitate him. In February 1825, we have a very long notebook entry that contains a draft of Coleridge's poem 'Work without Hope.' The poem as it was published seems a straightforward sonnet, composed in plain language—not the wild fantastic visions of youthful Coleridge. The notebook entry 5192 reveals that Coleridge wrote it in an attempt to create a 'Strain in the manner of G. Herbert.' The entry is fascinating in several points. It begins 'I have often amused myself with the thought of a self-conscious Looking-glass.' And continues:

> It struck across the eolian Harp of my brain that there was something pleasing and emblematic…in two such Looking-glasses fronting, each seeing the other in itself, and itself in the other.—Have you ever noticed the vault or snug little apartment which the Spider spins and weaves for itself, by spiral threads round and round, …This too connected itself in my mind …that spidery Witch, the World, spins its threads narrower and narrower,…till it shuts us up within four walls, walls of flues and films, windowless—and well if there be sky-lights, and a small opening left for the Light from above. (CN IV 5192)

This image is structured as an infinity symbol. The spider, which is the world, traps and confines the speaker between two mirrors. The act of infinite regress in the reflection of the mirrors is a kind of maddening reflection. The problem in this structured reflective image is that the world is devoid of windows. This image yokes the world to the speaker's own mind and image. The loss of the medium of the window and the divine light is significant. The poem contains the following lines:

> The world her spidery thread on all sides spun
> Side answ'ring Side with narrow interspace.
> My Faith (say I: I and my Faith are one)

[16] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions. Vol. II.* Ed. James Engall and W. Jackson Bate. (Princeton: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 93. Hereafter, BL vol#, p#.

> Hung as a Mirror there! And face to face…
> But *That* is broke![17]

The lines locate faith in reflection along with the self. One of the mirrors is broken, but it is not clear whether it be faith or self. The effect however, is clear enough. The world becomes a trap and limit—a walling in of the self, a turning inward rather than looking out to the world as a divine text.

This poem is a response to Herbert's poem 'Employment' which asks the creator to send a poetic 'straine/ to my poor reed.'[18] Herbert's last line is a prayer to be used as a medium to transmit the logos of God, Coleridge's last lines (in the notebook version anyway) act similarly: 'A Dusky Chamber that excludes the day— /But cease the prelude & resume the lay.' This 'dusky chamber' is *almost* devoid of light that cannot penetrate to the man behind the wall of the world. But, perhaps before there is total darkness there may be the possibility of man as the medium of God again.

Coleridge through all of his writings labored over these ideas of the object, subject, medium relationships. He wrote reams discussing the role of faith and reason. He yearned desperately to clearly elucidate the relationship between Man and God. In the end, after thirty years and volumes of prose writing, it seems to me that what Coleridge could never quite expresses explicitly and logically in prose he, like the poet Herbert that he grew to admire so much, had already intuitively expressed in poetry. I'd like to briefly turn now to 'Frost at Midnight.'

'Frost at Midnight' is essentially a poem about communication between the speaker and God. The speaker, after all, wishes that his child will learn to read:

> … that eternal language, which thy God
> Utters, who from eternity doth teach
> Himself in all and all things in himself.
> Great Universal Teacher! He shall mould
> Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask. (PW 171 60-64)

Here is the Renaissance concept of the *liber creaturum.* One important aspect of the book to be read is that it is to be taught by provoking questions in the human mind. By presenting the child with the wonders of the natural world it will induce a questioning in the child it will 'by giving make it ask.' This is an essentially chatechistic methodology between world and human. In 'Frost at Midnight,' nature ministers to the narrator in this manner. This questioning in the poem is provoked by the narrator's contemplation of the frost forming mysteriously.

The poem opens with 'The Frost performs its secret ministry/Unhelped by any wind' (1-2). This matter of fact statement seems to have no apparent

[17] Ibid.
[18] WGH p. 57

connection to the immediate statements that follow it that speak of crying owls and the inmates in the cottage. The Frost works as a catalyst. Its very silence, its secretive catechism is the key: 'Tis calm indeed! So calm that it disturbs and vexes meditation with its extreme silentness' (8-10). The frost has begun the process of meditation and reflection necessary for the communication of God. Frost's transparent nature is not unlike glass. It is made of a transparent substance that can change forms in heat and cold. It can be clear or opaque. It is a medium for catching and conveying light. It is, like glass, a *thing* to be seen and a *way* to see through—object and medium. It may even, on the windowpane of that little cottage, be annealing itself into pattern. Rather than a pattern of stained glass that recreates the symbols and texts of Christianity, frost replicates the symbols and texts of nature. The window of the narrator's cottage functions very much like the stained glass window of Herbert's *Temple*. It's structural integrity as a medium for communication with nature transforms and adumbrates in the heart and mind of man. Keeping with Coleridge's stated preference that clarity is the perfect medium for the material world (CN IV 3579) the poem transmutes glass and water to perfect the metaphor. This opening begins the structuring of the lesson. The human mind finds that way leads to way until another transparent film provokes:

> … the hush of nature
> Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
> Making it a companionable form,
> Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
> By its own mood interprets, every where
> Echo or mirror seeking of itself. (17-22)

This sympathy with nature begins as an echo or mirror image. The image grows and transforms throughout the poem with the mirroring of the father's past in the hostile landscape of the city and the son's projected future in the country, analepsis and prolepsis provoking questions and ensuing possibilities leading on to other images of God and nature. The ministry of transparent objects to see and see through catechizes the narrator.

These images culminate in the poem bringing us back to the image and idea that began the questioning. That transparent form of water is figured in almost every form in the last few lines. Water is the 'snow on the bare branch,'(68) the 'eve drop' falling from the thatch (70) and the 'Smokes in the sun-thaw' (70). All of these images are of the transparent coating that faith can use to act as a lens to help the child read the language of nature. Here is the fluid metaphoric integrity of being in relation to God. The reflections mistaken for substance cause the provocation and emergence of new knowledge

We end the poem with the 'secret Ministry of frost' (72). The frost here is hanging those same 'eve drops' up as icicles. The icicles engage in a final act of communication. They are 'quietly shining to the quiet moon' (74). Here is the final image of silent communication of nature and man reaching outward to

the heavens. The light shining through the medium of those transparent icicles surely, as Herbert says, 'More reverend grows.'[19] The poem is about questioning, growth and maybe most importantly noticing the signs around you in the world. The speaker's faith acts to focus and interpret the details of the material creation to provoke an understanding of the divine. We as readers become the interpreters of the scene and when these words in us meet and mingle surely, again in Herbert's words we feel they 'more reverend grow.' Reflection, communion, and growth are an arduous task. The thoughts, words, and works of religious faith are a lifetime of growth in which man is the subject, object, and medium of divine love. Coleridge was to say some twenty eight years later that 'when a man begins to be interested in detail, from hour to hour, & feels Christianity as a Life, a Growth a pilgrimage through a hostile Country…then he will enjoy *The Temple*, for the same reason that men in general enjoy Franklin's *Travels over the Frozen Zone* or *Parry's Voyages*' (CN IV 5327). And, I submit for the same reason that we enjoy 'Frost at Midnight.' The details, from hour to hour in the poem, constantly provoke, reflect, and recreate the communication in the heart and mind of man with the secret silence of the Divine.

[19] WGH p. 68: line 9.