

prospective syllabus, May 30, 2019
Topics: George Herbert and the End of the Book

ENGL-4950/3- BTS-5700
CANADIAN MENNONITE UNIVERSITY
COURSE SYLLABUS
2019-2020, Fall Semester

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Lecture times: Monday 8:30-11:15 A.M.
Examination date and time: tba
Office hours: after class or by appointment

Last date for voluntary withdrawal without academic penalty: November 12

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar will study George Herbert's poetry, material book history, and 17th century theology. It will consider the particular purposes of Herbert's work in the context of historical primary sources and of modern critical interpretations, asking most centrally how poetry does theology. *Prerequisites: 6 credit hours of introductory English (1010-1050), including one of ENGL-1010, 1020, or 1050, or permission of the instructor. A writing course fee will be assessed for this course.*

Our readings will center on the professor's book-in-progress, also titled *George Herbert and the End of the Book*. See below for a description of the book. We will alternate weeks focusing on Herbert's poems and other primary work and weeks focusing on the book-in-progress.

The W (writing) aspect of this course will address higher-level writing and publishing concerns. Skills such as bibliography management, source-checking, seeking and responding to critical commentary, and working with publishers will be addressed. We'll use a scaffolded writing process, including proposal, bibliography building, drafts, oral presentation, source-checking each other's work, and final essay.

George Herbert (1593-1633) is one of the outstanding poets of English literature and of the Christian church, best known for his poems "Easter-Wings" and "Love." This course will take up his work within its literary, doctrinal, and social contexts, considering it especially in light of the lively early modern approach to biblical texts.

This course will function as a seminar, in which students will be expected to arrive in class fully ready to participate in a group exploration of assigned texts and related readings. Student presentations will be a key element of the course.

TEXTBOOKS AND OTHER REQUIRED/RECOMMENDED READING

Required Texts:

Herbert, George. *The Complete English Poems*. Ed. John Tobin. London: Penguin, 1991.

Recommended Texts:

- Helen Wilcox's annotated *The English Poems of George Herbert* is on reserve in the library. It is an excellent starting point for work on the poems.
- *The Digital Temple : A Documentary Edition of George Herbert's English Verse*, edited by Robert Whalen and Christopher Hodgkins is another invaluable research tool. It gives you all the earliest versions of the poems as well as commentary. It is available through the CMU Library catalogue.
- I will provide links to or copies of other relevant texts as we go.
- I recommend a writing handbook such as *A Pocket Style Manual*, by Diana Hacker.
- The OED (*Oxford English Dictionary*) Online, found through the CMU Library website, is the standard resource for looking up historical word meanings, and should be your constant companion when reading older texts.
- The *MLA Bibliography* is the standard tool for finding secondary research in English; *JSTOR* is a very good database of secondary material, including many full-text articles, and *The Literary Encyclopedia* is a good place to start reading about particular authors and texts. All three are online and are available through the CMU Library website.
- *EEBO (Early English Books Online)* is a highly useful database for research in Herbert's period. You can access it at any University of Manitoba Library location or by joining the Renaissance Society of America (student rate, \$35 USD)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & GRADING

The assignments in this course will include the following:

Written summaries of readings

Class presentations

Bibliography building

Source-checking

Proposal of an essay topic

Major essay

Book Description: *George Herbert and the End of the Book*

My project's working title is *George Herbert and the End of the Book*. The title is deliberately meant to hook into our present questions about the book, but addresses these by reading Herbert's book of poems with poetic, affective, bibliographical, and theological attention. My argument cuts against a general sense that reformation theology and Herbert's poetry were sad and world-denying by showing that Herbert was materially and poetically exuberant, and that this exuberance was grounded in reformed doctrines of Incarnation and resurrection. I agree that sorrow was at the center of reformation spirituality, but that spirituality does not stop there. "Easter-wings," for example, materially and affectively turns sorrow into joy. If writing marks absence, it also can teach presence, and the "end of the book" is to be—in Herbert's words—a "handsell," a pledge of love.

The book thus troubles our not-founded, but yet over-simple idea that the Reformation was dualistic, while demonstrating that for Herbert reading is always re-reading (Stanley Cavell: marriage is always re-marriage). That is, reading is always an embodied encounter with an other, a re-iterative process of entering into a text, a story, and slowly learning one's place in it, by reading and—more to the point—by being read. Readers

discover that they are known. While this argument builds on other recent work, what I demonstrate is how much—and again, how exuberantly—Herbert used the material book—its pages, its textual places, its sheer physicality—to teach reading, prayer, life as a practice of space (to use De Certeau's term).

Chapter outline of the manuscript along with a paragraph-length description of each chapter.

1. Introduction: Herbert's body language and the book as hope
2. Framing the Reader: the opening sequence of *The Temple*
3. The Afflicted Reader, or affliction and mirth: indexing the body
4. The Capacious Body of Christ: "Longing" and "The Bag"
5. The Gift of the Book: "H. Scriptures" and "Judgement"
6. The End of the Book: "Love" and the consummation of reading
7. Conclusion: The very end of the book, or three endings, and two blessings

The **introduction** sets up what follows by laying out the doctrinal reasoning of reformed approaches to materiality, and by considering, in particular, Herbert's figuring of scripture as personal letter. The paper of scripture, the body of the book, as it were, is linked in "The Church" to the human body of Christ himself, as a double-layered promise: Christ's resurrected and glorified human body promises a common resurrection, and the body of the book promises the return of Christ, in his body. For Herbert, as is manifest throughout his book of poetry, these promises are not words alone, or "bare words," but words inhabited by Christ, promises made tangible through blessing. The book of scripture is a "handsell" or pledge, one that participates in that which it promises. Herbert criticism has tended to read the poems as moving from public to private, from outer to inner. At the same time, work on the material book in the reformation has assumed a material-spiritual dualism, most sharply articulated by James Kearney, who describes the book itself as a kind of sinful material remainder, haunting the reformation project of spiritual purification. *George Herbert and the End of the Book* does not deny that such internal, purifying impulses were present in Herbert's time and even in his poetry itself, but argues that Herbert ultimately enacts a remarkably vibrant and powerful confidence in the public, material book to be itself a redeemed and redeeming presence. It is not that the public book gives way to the privacy of the heart, but rather, that the book invites the secluded, private heart into the public, into the common space of the church. The most important move of this present study is to recognize that for Herbert, the public space is theological space. Doctrine is thus not Strier's private, immaterial space, nor Schoenfeldt's code for secular bodily relations, but rather itself a discourse accounting for God's freedom to redeem all things in love. Herbert demonstrates (not uncomplicatedly!) a generative confidence to use poetry to do doctrinal work, pushing the short poem form out to vast and intimate uses, and laying claim to and baptizing the space of the page in the process.

Chapter one, on "The Altar" and the opening sequence of "The Church" considers the first poem not only as a declaration of poetic and devotional intent, but as a claim to the page itself as a space of reckoning, particularly the reckoning of human and divine that defines any altar. The page in an important sense volunteers itself as altar, or meeting place, and proposes an equitable if unequal account balance, performing asymmetry as symmetry. The next poems take up but immediately overwhelm this claim, displacing a balanced reckoning with the mystery and wonder of Christ's death, a displacement that the poems deal with exactly as an attempt to re-establish reckoning itself, both as fiscal and as poetic accounting. I begin though by considering Herbert's choice of an altar for his initial poem as a deliberate move to take up the first moves of devotional texts and love poetry, both of which used the altar. Herbert does not simply build an altar and then displace it; rather, he takes up the common altar and throws it into

the incontestable witness/judgment of Christ, who is both God and Love. In so doing, Herbert applies intense pressure to the textual convention by undercutting its foundations and at the same time, taking it seriously by reorienting it to its true and living (and moving) foundation: Christ. From the beginning, then, Herbert presents the Christian page not as a stable edifice, but as a space always subject to overflow.

Chapter two explores the instability of the Christian page by taking up the “Affliction” poems, which present themselves as a highly deliberate series of interruptions to steady reading. Herbert, in fact, seems intent on frustrating and even afflicting his reader. Herbert famously celebrates the life-giving effect of multi-linear reading in “H. Scriptures II”, but the precondition of that realization is the experience of text—and life—as unpredictable and interruptive. Only when reading-as-mastery has been disrupted and even devastated does the text become a book of remedies, of salves for body and soul. Herbert poetically takes up commonplace books and herbals on his way to an exploration and dramatization of the interruptive heart of scripture itself as the non-masterable center of the life of the church.

Chapter three considers the poetic pair “Longing” and “The Bag” as Herbert’s hitherto unexplored pastoral and doctrinal intervention into one of the most hotly contested theological topics of his time: predestination. The poems, as I argue, apprehend the doctrine not only conceptually, but also and even primarily as a problem of space, felt in the space of the page. “Longing” begins with the same sense of vertigo that characterizes the “Affliction” poems, opening in its center the dizzying prospects of theological speculation, felt in either the possibilities of divine determination or absence. Remarkably, though, the poems make a vast claim on controversial doctrine without themselves becoming controversial. Whereas the Calvinist doctrine of election had quickly become ramified into a doctrine of double-predestination, a practically-unpreachable doctrine that opened a possible chasm between the individual reader and Christ, determined by the unknowable will of an unsearchable God, Herbert presents first one poem of fourteen broken stanzas followed by another poem of seven full stanzas, showing in the bodies of the poems themselves division and unity, longing and completion. The tumble of individual experience in “Longing” is taken up and redeemed in Christ’s spontaneous and free descent and redeeming ascent in “The Bag.” Further, Herbert figures the reader’s participation in this movement in the wildly physical moment of Christ offering his breast cavity itself as a bag for our letters. By figuring prayer as writing that physically enters the body of Christ, Herbert draws upon and exercises the sense developed throughout his poetry of writing—and critically, in its materiality—as lively and charged, connected to the very nature of salvation itself, which is grounded in the body of Christ.

Chapter four considers the book as gift, focusing on the poem “Judgement.” The poem, after evoking a legal proceeding cum schoolroom in which the judge demands to see “everyman’s peculiar book,” turns on the daring and disruptive “thrusting” of a “testament” into the judge’s hand, followed by the speaker’s bold “scan this.” The poem frames itself as a speculation on the last things, a speculation which we can see, in Thiel’s terms, as founded in the theological virtue of hope. But the speculative act works by first evoking, then overturning a common image of judgment. Whereas the situation imagined calls for those under judgment to produce their self-generated books for evaluation, the speaker, when it is his turn, instead presents scripture, not merely shown, but delivered, hand-to-hand. This moment of exchange at once reveals the judge as Christ, the thrust of the book recapitulating the thrust of the nail, invoking the physical memory of the new testament, that is, the new covenant written in Christ’s blood, identifying the material book with its source: Christ’s “fair though bloody hand” (todo). Importantly, the speaker not only gives the book to Christ, but *returns* it as the “handsell”—or promisory hand-gift—of “H. Scriptures I.” Thus the poem also brings into play the problem of the gift, and particularly the paradox of the gift returned, expressing the strange movements of the economy of grace.

Chapter five continues with the Last Things poems, beginning with “Heaven” and concluding with “Love” (3), Herbert’s surprising culmination of the last things. I argue that Herbert’s most famous poem gestures toward the consummation of the book into/as the body of Christ and the resurrection of all flesh. “Heaven” conspicuously does not speculate from a heavenly vantage point, but rather listens to the heavenly as Echo, figuring scripture as sacred grove, made manifest in its leaves: strikingly, the rustling of

the material page itself implicitly becomes an auditory sign of the world to come. The chapter goes on to ask the question of materiality more generally by considering the reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper, hinging on Calvin's confidence in bread-ness itself to qualify bread to act as sacrament. This somewhat counter-intuitive move, I will argue, is felt in Herbert's frequent figuring of the priest as "market man." While other readers have heard in Herbert's market voice a tone to be tried and then superseded, I argue that this voice, while not in itself sufficient, proclaims something crucial about God Incarnate, the Sacrament, and flesh itself: that the common experience of the material world is itself a gift, that nature while fallen is also always already graced. The chapter takes on the particular materiality of the poem "The Priesthood," which both figures and is figured by the vehicle of pottery; Herbert joins that most tangible of crafts to poetry and the page, and through poetry to himself as priest. Finally, "Love" (3) presents Christ in the flesh, beyond the need for textual mediation, but of course, it is also a textual/material speculation. It works by returning—this time with more satisfaction/more successfully—to the technique announced by "The Altar": the presentation of the page as the heart. The poem invites the reader to see not the book, but the Word, but, irreducibly, the Word made flesh, in a hopeful speculation of the fleshy heart.

Some Areas of Exploration (for major paper and general purposes)

1. The Sidney Circle: Older relatives/friends in Sidney circle
 - a. Philip and Mary, Astrophil and Stella + Psalms, *Apology*
 - b. Mary Wroth
 - c. Lord Cherbury: poetry and natural theology/Deism
 - d. Donne
2. Theology
 - a. Augustine
 - b. Martin Luther
 - c. John Calvin
 - d. Thomas Cranmer & 39 Articles
 - e. William Perkins
 - f. Richard Sibbes
3. Poetry (other influences)
 - a. John Donne
 - b. William Alabaster
 - c. Robert Southwell
4. Poetry (influenced)
 - a. Richard Crawshaw's *Steps to the Temple* and the English Roman Catholic tradition
 - b. Henry Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans*
 - c. Christopher Harvey's *The Synagogue*
 - d. An Collins's *Divine Songs and Meditations* (and other women who wrote poetry in response to Herbert's work)
5. Liturgy
 - a. Book of Common Prayer (possibly in contrast to Roman and Genevan rites)
6. Bible and biblical commentary
 - a. Geneva translation
 - b. KJV
 - c. Psalter (Coverdale)
 - d. Sternhold & Hopkins metrical psalms
7. The state of the English church

- a. Puritans and Ceremonialists
 - i. The Genevan influence & the Laudian response
 - ii. Herbert's *Country Parson*
 - iii. Approaches to the Eucharist
 - iv. Defining the church: Hooker vs Predestinarians
- 8. Church Arts
 - a. Architecture and furniture, painting
 - b. The church year: the feeling of parish life
 - i. Ceremonies
 - ii. Feasts
 - c. Music
 - i. Cathedral
 - ii. Parish
 - d. Visual arts
 - i. Emblems
 - ii. Biblical illustrations—Little Gidding
 - iii. Stained glass
- 9. Herbert and the Garden
 - a. The natural world in the poetry
 - b. Herbals, remedies, beauty, commonplaces
- 10. Herbert and Suffering
 - a. His illness and his poetry