CHAPTER - IV

THE JUST GOD
AND
THE SUFFERING INNOCENT

In the previous chapter it is pointed out that the aim of the artist in The Temple is the beautification of human life, as well as of art itself. In other words the main concern of "man the maker" is to elevate the character of "man the doer". The central figure is man with the faculty of his creative imagination, which is instrumental both in designing life and in designing poetry. In this connection the function of creative imagination in general has been discussed.

In the present chapter a particular and very important function of the creative imagination is dealt with. When creative imagination works in shaping human life it is called upon to regulate man's relations with his fellow beings, with nature, and with God. Of all these relationships the most important is man's relation with God. The central theme of Herbert's poetry is the mystery of God's art in relation to man. It is in this field of Man's relation with God that the creative imagination of man faces the severest test in qualifying itself for being called "creative". If it fails here in
performing its creative role, man's relation with God will be lost in the mystery of incomprehensible problems and either God will appear to be unjust and unkind or man will appear to be foul and filthy. This chapter examines how Herbert's imagination acts creatively and solves this particular problem.

All men and women, particularly those who are highly sensitive and live an intense and acute life, feel that man is born weak and is commanded to be strong. God is said to be just but is found to be unjust. Herbert's brief lyric "Bitter Sweet" provides a "concentrated introduction" of this confusion and mystery:

Ah my dear Angry Lord
Since thou dos't love yet strike
Cast down yet help afford
Sure I will do the like.

I will complain yet praise
I will bewail approve
And all my sour sweet days
I will Lament and Love (1-8)

Another parallel between the mystery of God's ways and the mystery of man's ways is illustrated by "Justice", in which the following quatrains demonstrate the hard ways of God.

Lord thou did'st make me
yet thou woundest me
Lord thou dos't wound me
yet thou dos't relieve me.
Lord thou relievest
    yet I die by thee
Lord thou dos't kill me
    yet thou dos't reprieve me. (1-8)

The poem proceeds further to demonstrate the hard ways of man.

For I dopraise thee yet I praise thee not,
    My prayers mean them yet my prayers stray. (9-10)

This is the condition of a sensitive soul that sincerely expresses the internal spiritual tension. Commenting on this poem Arnold Stein says:

"Man's complete dependence and complete inability to understand are hammered out in purposive rhetoric and rhyme"(25).

Another important religious poet G.M. Hopkins equally famous for his "never ending quest after spiritual perfection", and who lived "acutely with all his senses" demonstrates the same incomprehensibility of God's ways and more frankly points out another aspect of God's injustice. He questions God as to why sinners prosper.

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee; but, Sir, so what I plead is just.
Why do sinners' ways prosper ? and why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end.

("Thou art indeed just, Lord " 1-4)
Therefore he feels:

"Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend" (5).

Herbert expresses the same tension with greater intensity, concentration and compactness in the close combination of words like "dear angry Lord". The expressions like "Ah" in Herbert and "O" in Hopkins reveal a soul that is not at peace and is under terrible agony of some mysterious spiritual conflict or tension. There is an acute feeling of the absence of harmony. Father Lahey, in his memoir of Hopkins says that this spiritual restlessness or disquiet, or this absence of spiritual complacency is of the very essence of Christian mysticism. Explaining this state of spiritual tension Father Lahey writes: "All writers on mysticism - St. Teresa, St. John of the cross, Poulein Maumigny etc - have told us that this severe trial is the greatest and most cherished gift from one who has accepted literally His servant's oblation" (qtd. in Read 359).

The best example of innocent suffering in Christian scripture is the story of prophet Job in The Old Testament. The suffering of this devotee is more tragic than that of any tragic hero of the non-Christian classical literature, because here the goodness of the tragic hero is a higher type of goodness. The heroic conception of goodness emphasizes the absence of sin or any imperfection. But in the classical concept as
presented by Aristotle, simply desiring some specific good end can qualify a man to be called good. He may have other imperfections and those or any one of those imperfections may be responsible for his suffering, but his particular good intention retains our sympathy for him. The reason that Aristotle offers for this in his poetics is that "the entirely good man passing from happiness to misery is not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply odious to us" (qtd. in House 85).

He rejects such characters in effect, because his suffering "offends our sense of justice". But the suffering of Job is the suffering which is more than tragic, which offends our sense of justice and makes us feel that God is unjust.

It will be a rewarding exercise to watch the human drama and the divine mystery behind the story of Job purely from the human point of view and on the mundane plane. Therefore, here the story is presented in a way which is slightly different from that of the Bible. The story of Job begins with the following information about the man.

There was a man in the Land of UZ whose name was Job and the man was perfect and upright and one that feared God and eschewed evil. (Job 1.1.)

He had a big and happy family of seven sons and three daughters. He was a very rich man having "seven
thousand sheep and three thousand camels and five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred she-asses and a very great household, so that this man was the greatest of all the children of the east" (Job 1.3).

One day a man came to Job and informed him that while the oxen were ploughing and the ass feeding beside them, the Sabeans fell upon them and took them away and killed all the servants. This way suddenly the tragedy began. Next came the news that fire from above had burnt up the sheep and all the servants employed there. Soon followed another messenger and conveyed the message that the Chaldeans fell upon the camels and have taken them away and finally came the painful news about his sons and daughters. When all his sons and daughters were eating, drinking and making merry in the elder brother's house, "And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men and they are dead, and I only am escaped alone to tell thee" (Job 1.19).

The innocent and hiterto quite prosperous and happy man was shocked and surprised and found that he was suddenly deprived of all the things that gave him happiness. He stood bewildered unable to understand how it happened, got up quietly, rent his mantle and fell down upon the ground to pray to God. He consoled himself by uttering the following famous words : "And he said,
Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall, return thither; The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1.21).

The tragedy did not stop there. Oneday Job was surprised to find that he was smitten with some boils from the soles of his feet to his head. He found himself in terrible pain, scratched his body day and night and sat among the ashes. His wife told him in disgust:

Dost thou still hold fast thine integrity? Renounce God, and die (Job. 2.9)

His three intimate friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar came to him to comfort him. They sat with him upon the ground for seven days and seven nights. They sat silently and said nothing to him because they found that his pain was terrible, and his grief was very great. After seven days his friend Eliphaz broke the silence and spoke to Job.

He said that Job had given wise instructions to many. He can be wise in his own case. He should pray to God to forgive him for the sins he might have committed, because God is Just and never punishes the innocent. He said:

Remember, I pray thee, who ever
Perished being innocent?
Or where were the upright cut off?
Accordingly as I have seen, they that plow inequity
And sow trouble, reap the same,
By the breath of God they perish,
And by the blast of his anger are they consumed.
(Job 4.7-9)

The other two friends also echoed him. Job closely examined the life he had led and found that he had not committed any sin against his Lord.

If I have sinned, what do I unto thee,
O thou watcher of men? (Job 7.20)

The remarks of his wife and his friends added insult to injury and in that state of terrible agony he found no way of relief other than death. He longed to die but death did not come to him.

Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, And life unto the bitter in soul; which long for death, but it cometh not.
(Job 3.20-22)

This would be the state of mind of any ordinary man whose knowledge is confined to the happening of this phenomenal world. Though Job was a prophet yet he was like an ordinary man here and his knowledge was confined to the phenomenal world as long as God did not reveal his purpose to him. He could not understand the cause of his suffering. He revolts and questions God. Richard B.Sewall rightly points out that the story of Job is not an illustration of "the ancient piety that is a goodman blessing the Lord even in his afflictions and being rewarded for his constancy" (23). Job revolts and
questions like an ordinary man: "There was no mortal cause for his suffering, nothing in his past to account for these repeated calculated blows. If he had sinned, he had not sinned that much" (Sewall 24.) Thus we see that in the grip of tragic circumstances, if revelation does not come even to a prophet (revealing a perspective much wider than this phenomenal world) or if the creative imagination of a poet fails to establish any link with the creative design of the creator, both the prophet and the poet are like ordinary men. They feel trapped in a situation which they fail to understand and out of which they are unable to escape. The only way left is to suffer with a questioning and unanswered soul. But if the revelation comes to the prophet or if the creative imagination of the poet acts creatively, the perspective changes and one finds that the matter is quite different. We should see the suffering of a prophet like Job or of poets like Herbert and Hopkins in this wider perspective. With a limited range of knowledge, Job and with him all of us take the story to be a story of conflict between Job and God. Being pure and innocent Job is compelled to think that God is unjust in inflicting pain on him. Similar is the case with poets like Herbert and Hopkins. Hopkins in his poem "Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord" complains that people who are given to lust and evil ways prosper, whereas he, who always serves God is thwarted. Even in the animal world he finds

... Birds build but not I build: (12)
Herbert widens the range of his complaint and going down to the world of plants, says:

Yet can I mark how herbs below
    Grow green and gay
As if to meet thee They did know
    While poore I decay. ("The Search" 9-12)

Then raising his eyes up, he finds

Yet can I mark how stars above
    Simper and Shine
As having keyes unto the love
    While poore I pine. ("The Search" 13-16)

Another highly significant and equally bewildering question that pertains to Herbert's poetics is that poets who are sensuous and lustful and who write verses in praise of women thrive well whereas he, who writes verses in praise of God, feels thwarted.

The torture of this question and the eagerness to know the answer is so intense that Herbert wants to meet God and get the answer.

My knees pierce the earth, mine eyes the skie
    And yet the sphere
And centre, both to me denie
    That thou art there. ("The Search" 5-8).

He does not meet God but his heart and mind are now ready to receive the divine intuition. If one compares Herbert's position with that of Job, one finds that Job is in a better position. He is perfectly innocent and is also a prophet. Herbert and Hopkins are not prophets;
they are poets and they have some imperfections. Herbert confesses that he is not pure and noble. "But he groaneth to be so". Elsewhere he says:

Lord, I confess my sin is great
Great is my sin, oh; gently treat.
With Thy quick flower, Thy commentary bloom
Whose life still pressing
Is one undressing
A steady aiming at a tomb.  ("Repentance" 1-6)

Prophet Job, on the other hand, is clean and is helped by direct revelation from God. The poet is helped and guided only by his own creative imagination. When the revelation comes to the prophet, when the creative imagination of the poet gets the glimpse of God's creative design, the perspective of the conflict mentioned above changes and things are found to be in perfect harmony. First, let the case of Job's mysterious suffering and his spiritual conflict be examined. According to the story of biblical revelation the conflict is not between Job and God, but between Satan and Job: because one day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.

And the Lord said unto Satan, whence Comest thou? the Satan answered the Lord, and said, from going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.

And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job? For there is none like him in the
earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and eschewth evil. (Job 1. 6-8)

At this Satan argued that Job is pious, perfect and thankful to God because God has given him riches and happiness. Therefore Satan said, "Put forth thine hand now and touch all that he hath and he will renounce thee to thy face" (Job.1.11)

After hearing this argument from Satan God granted power to him and allowed him to deprive Job of all his riches and happiness.

Now suddenly for Job the face of the universe changed. The succession of catastrophes that befell Job was thus "The result of a wager between God and Satan to test Job. Job, who could know nothing of the wager suffered at the hands of Satan with the approval of God whom to worship and to love had been his daily blessing" (Sewell 23-24).

Job is shocked and pained and is not able to understand why is much loved God turned suddenly hateful and maligned. But viewed in the perspective of the wager between God and Satan we find that God has not turned hateful. It is out of Love that the suffering comes and as Paul Sanders writes : "If we think of a contest between Job and Satan, Job is spiritually victorious"(54). This change in the perspective becomes possible only when we get the information about the wager between God and
Satan through the divine revelation which is rightly defined to be "the supersensible perception of the supernatural truth." (Forlov. Dictionary 1984).

Another important thing to be noted is that Job's friend who argued that God is just and Job must have committed some sin, incurred God's severest wrath. Though it appears that he spoke in favour of God and God's justice. The irony of the situation is that God gets so angry with him that He decides to punish these friends, but they are pardoned only when Job prays for them. God ordains:

Job shall pray for you; for him will I accept, that I deal not with you after your folly; for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath. (Job 42.8)

What a beautiful exposition of the mystery of God's ways towards man which is the most important theme of George Herbert. The story of Job cracks this mystery and enables us to have a clear understanding of God's ways towards man and makes the required adjustment accordingly in our life here on the phenomenal world. Job's religious experience teaches us that one must honestly grasp an experience and must not become restless if it happens to be bitter. Human knowledge is so limited that we can not know with certainty what is good and what is bad for us. Every actuality however hard, must be faced quietly.
Therefore, speaking about the message of the Book of Job, Paul S. Sanders says: "Its message is an 'existentialist' one: man must fearlessly encounter what is; truth must be taken into oneself; a person must, as Tillich says, become who he is. Whoever attunes his being to the pulses beating through any honestly grasped experience, and through every great work of literature, moves significantly in that direction" (19).

In this world it may appear that the innocent suffer and on the other hand "the tents of robbers prosper and they that provoke God are secure". (Job 12.6). But we must not be surprised or disturbed. We must not jump to the conclusion that God is unjust or the man who suffers is a sinner. Job suffers a lot not because he is a sinner, not because God is hostile to him, but because he is good and is much loved by God. God is proud of him and wants to prove his goodness and greatness to Satan. So, as we know, Job's suffering was the "result of a wager between God and Satan to test Job".

Job passes the test, comes out victorious and as the epilogue of the book informs us, God gave him twice what he had before

So the Lord blessed the later end of Job more than his beginning.

(Job 42.12)
The story has nothing tragic in it. Therefore, D.D. Raphel says that "the Book of Job is not a tragedy because the grandeur of the hero is deliberately shrunk to nothing before the sublimity of the power he has questioned" (53). Job had mistaken a great friend to be a foe. When he discovered his mistake he repented and said "wherefore I abhor myself and repent" (Job 42.6). We find nothing but love and benevolence in the power he has questioned and his suffering is far from being tragic. In fact, a truly religious man can never be tragic in his suffering. According to I.A. Richards "tragedy is only possible to a mind which is for the moment agnostic or manichean. The least touch of any theology, which has a compensating heaven to offer the tragic hero, is fatal" (qtd. in Raphael 46). Karl Jaspers also explains how Christian salvation opposes tragic knowledge: "The chance of being saved destroys the tragic sense of being trapped without chance of escape. Therefore, no genuinely Christian tragedy can exist" (38). In that case how is it that genuinely Christian or highly religious souls like Job, Herbert and Hopkins are so furious in their complaints, so tragic in their feelings and questionings? Why does Job curse his life and his parents who gave him life? Why does Hopkins question God and why does pious Herbert bitterly complain that everything is gay, but only he decays? Herbert becomes so unhappy with God that he says;
Yet, though thou troublest me, I must be meek;
In weakness must be stout.
Well, I will change the service, and go seek
Some other master out.

(Affliction I 63-64)

This way these religious Christian souls fret and fume,
doubt and complain as long as they view their problems
standing on the level of the common human beings and are
not aware of the solutions that belong to the superhuman
world. This is only a passing phase. From total despair
they gradually pass to a less severe stage where they
hover between hope and despair. Job says:

Though He slay me, yet will I wait for him:
Nevertheless I will maintain my ways before him:

(Job 13.15)

Similarly Herbert's Bitter Sweet provides a more con­
centrated demonstration of this hovering mood.

I will complain yet praise
I will bewail approve
And all my sour sweet days
I will Lament and Love. (5 - 8)

According to Arnold Stein this hovering mood, these
"strongly individual complexities observed in 'Bitter
Sweet' are deeply characteristic of Herbert, as Laments
pure and simple are not" (87). Then after that hovering
mood they pass to the world where there is no bitter
conflict but sweet harmony, where they find the solution
and feel reconciled. A prophet finds it through revelation and a poet through his imagination, not ordinary but creative imagination. After this there is no agony of alienation but the peace of reconciliation:

My God, Thou art all Love,
Not one poor minute escape thy breast
But brings a favour from above
And in this Love, more than in bed, I rest.

('Even Song' 29-32)

Thus we see that this development of the soul from pure doubt and complaint to a hovering between hope and despair and finally to hope and happiness is the story of a direct personal spiritual experience. It is not at all a matter of impersonal Christian doctrine. Yet the Christian doctrine can not be ruled out and dismissed considering these spiritual experiences and developments. D.D. Raphael, in his essay "Tragedy and Religion" explains that "Judaism and Christianity take it for granted that God must be just, and that the problem of innocent suffering must have a solution .... But if, as it more often happens, he (the Writer) simply pinpoints the problem, without offering any solution, his attitude is not that of religious faith, but of the religious questioning, that leaves open the gate to scepticism at least as wide as the gate to faith" (46). It is in this state of mind that one hovers between hope and despair,
between faith and doubt and it is as noted above the most characteristic mood of Herbert in which he writes the poem "Bitter Sweet". Not only Herbert, but Job and Hopkins are also seen passing through this stage of hovering between faith and doubt. Job hovered because he could know nothing about the wager between God and Satan. When he knows that, he feels that bearing the temporary torture will bring him greater victory or reward. This solution removes the tragic element from his suffering or as I.A. Richards says, the "touch of theology" proves fatal to the tragic feeling.

In the case of Job the knowledge of the solution came through revelation as he happened to be a prophet. But what about Herbert or Hopkins or any ordinary man? They have their imagination. Those who are religious by temperament and know all about Job try to imagine that the creator might be having some secret spiritual design for their undeserved suffering. The imagination of the poet is comparatively keener and sharper than other's imaginations. While discussing the process of poetic creation Herbert Read brings the poets closer to the prophets and shows how they are open to messages from above. Referring to the traditional view Herbert Read writes: "All the Hebrew prophets were regarded as being thus breathed into, or inspired. It was, therefore, natural enough at a later stage of development to
transfer this concept to the poet, for the poet, like the
prophet, seemed to speak with a more than human voice ...
Even at its most rational extreme the classical world
could still play with the idea of a muse, whose more than
human accents fell into the attentive ear of the poet"
(Charles Morgan 178). While discussing creative
imagination, quotes George Moore and shows how a poet
imagines with attentive ear, waits patiently for the
muse, "prepares silent hours for her" to get the whisper
from her or to receive the divine message (73).

Herbert was not only a poet, he was a religious poet. His
imagination was instinctively or naturally inclined
towards his creator. When this imagination succeeds in
imagining and tracing the design of the creator even
behind his suffering and makes him feel reconciled with
God, it deserves to be called creative. It is a very
significant moment of test and by passing that moment of
test the imagination qualifies itself to be "creative".
Herbet had that creative imagination. It is this creative
imagination that provides him the leap from the wavering
world of doubt to the solid world of faith, from the
bewilderment of problems to the discovery of solution.
Before that such people brood and try to find if there is
some such divine programme. They pray and long to know
the art that will enable the creative imagination to play
the role of revelation and reveal the mystery of God's
ways to man. In that case they will be able to see a
grief, as great as that of Job, in the right perspective.

Yet even the greatest grief may be relief
Could he but take them right.

("Man's Medley" 31-33)

If he succeeds in taking them right his complaint will turn into praise. For he writes:

Happy is he whose heart
Hath found the art
To turn his double pain to double praise.

("Man's Medley" 34-36)

He longs for this to happen. So he prays to God in these words:

Sweeten at length this bitter bowl
Which thou hast poured into my soul.

("Repentence" 19-20)

Such moments of prayer are, as Morgan says "ecstatic" not "intellectual" and it is a mutual act between man and his God which prepares the ground for the action of the creative imagination through the dynamic balance of the ascending human mind and descending divine grace.

According to Charles Morgan such longings or such prayers of man and "all his religious disciplines, all his great exercises, whether he be Catholic or Protestant, Buddhist or Hindu, have as their purpose to cleanse himself of spiritual impediment, to lay open his heart to enable himself to receive his God"(64) or to receive God's message. Aiming at these things, and longing for them
Herbert's imagination moved upward towards the creator. When the ascending human imagination got the touch of the descending divine grace it became creative. Blessed with such a creative imagination Herbert imagines that while creating the universe God has acted like a musician, and has tuned jarring chaotic matter into the order of cosmic harmony.

In his "Providence" he has presented God as the first composer. To Herbert music is the finest of all philosophical arts, which constantly transforms its material into measured order of sound and silence. The thought that music in its highest form is inaudible was endowed with considerable attraction by the Platonist and Herbert understandably responds to that attraction when he presents the creator as the first composer: and writes:

... All must appear
And be dispos'd and dress' d, and Tun' d by thee,
Who sweetly temper' st all, if we could hear
Thy skill and art what, musick would it be:

("Providence" 37-40)

While moving in this direction his imagination examines his suffering which appears to be somewhat undeserved and makes God appear unjust. But for the great composer Herbert's pain and suffering must be within the cosmic music and also a part of it. Herbert is then led to imagine that the great composer or his creator puts
strain on him as a musician strains the strings of a musical instrument with the motive of producing sweet melodies. Thus come the significant and highly valuable lines of his poem "The Temper".

Yet take thy way, for sure thy way is best
Stretch or contract me, thy poor debter,
This is but tuning of my breast
To make the music better. (21-24)

Here we are reminded of Charles Morgan's view:
"When we imagine with love, we create what we imagine; that what we then create has real and extending value, and that nothing else has" (59). Herbert has imagined with love and what he has imagined is certainly of real and lasting value. Here Herbert's imagination reaches the creator, catches a glimpse of his'creative design and is therefore, creative. This is not the magic of metaphysical wit or conceit but the miracle of Herbert's creative imagination. As God's revelation enabled Job to see that God imposed suffering on him only out of love, so Herbert's creative imagination enabled him to see that God puts strain on him to extract beautiful strains out of him. It is in fact a manifestation of God's special love for him. This beautiful discovery that resulted in the composition of such a beautiful poem shows that the mysteries of life and of creation can be understood and solved if human imagination is rightly or creatively used.
But how often and how many of us have such right use of imagination? Discussing the creative imagination Charles Morgan points out: "Man's chief folly is in his misuse of imagination" (59). But Herbert's poem "The Temper" is a rare example of the proper use of imagination which gets transmuted into the creative imagination.

The moment Herbert sees God in this light in a flash of illumination that his creative imagination brings, the unkind God whom Herbert had questioned is suddenly transformed into a benevolent and sublime God. Now Herbert finds himself shrinking into a very humble position. He feels himself "guilty of dust and sin", not fit to get so much of love from God or to be His guest. But God loves him and welcomes him.

Love bade me welcome: Yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey'd love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew near to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd anything.

A guest, I answer'd worthy to be here:
Love said, you shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my deare,
I can not look on thee
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply
who made thee eyes but I?
("Love III" 1-12)
The beautiful and remarkably significant line "Love took my hand and smilingly did reply" reveals affectionate intimacy between the poet and his creator and also shows that the descending Divine grace has taken the hand of the ascending human imagination lovingly and smilingly, which results in the dynamic balance that is responsible for the composition of highly creative poems like "The Temper".

Herbert's imagination becomes truly creative and succeeds in discovering the truth that, in creation there is nothing, including his own suffering, which is out of tune with the divine cosmos. It enables Herbert to have the full enjoyment of the living company of God. A rebel, who once questioned God's justice and said

Full of rebellion, I would die,
Or fight, or travel, or deny
That thou hast ought to do with me.

("Nature" 1-3)

Now completely submits himself to his master and quietly lying in the lap of divine Love feels that in this love, more than in bed, he enjoys perfect rest.