

Lecture 19: George Herbert's Art of Love

Herbert wrote almost exclusively what is called meditative or DEVOTIONAL poetry: making love to God.

Nearly all of Herbert's English poetry is found in *The Temple*, which is not simply a "collected works" but a coherent recreation of the poet's spiritual life, imagined as a process of discovering how to love God.

According to Isaac Walton's *Life of George Herbert*, shortly before his death, Herbert asked a friend, Arthur Woodnoth, to deliver the manuscript of *The Temple* to a mutual friend, Nicholas Ferrar, and spoke to him thus: "Tell him, he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul, before I could subject mine to the will of *Jesus my Master*: in whose service I have now found perfect freedom; desire him to read it: and then, if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor Soul, let it be made publick: if not, let him burn it: for *I and it, are less than the least of God's mercies.*" [1]

Poems generally characterized by tension between agonized struggle and formal control.

Often formal control is more obvious than the struggle.

In a poem like “The Altar,” for example, an emblem, or visual representation, of its apparent subject: (B 1607)

The Altar.

A broken A L T A R, Lord, thy servant reares,
Made of a heart, and cemented with teares:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workmans tool hath touch'd the same.

A H E A R T alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name;

That, if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O let thy blessed S A C R I F I C E be mine,
And sanctifie this A L T A R to be thine.

Another visual poem is the one called “Easter Wings”:

Easter-wings. (B 1609) [2

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:
With thee
Oh let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne:
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.
With thee
Let me combine
And feel this day thy victorie:
For, if I imp my wing on thine
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

At first thou gav'st me milk and sweetnesses;
I had my wish and way: 20
My dayes were straw'd with flow'rs
and happinesse;
There was no moneth but May.
But with my yeares sorrow did twist and grow,
And made a partie unawares of wo.

My flesh began unto my soul in pain, 25
Sicknesses cleave my bones;
Consuming agues dwell in ev'ry vein,
And tune my breath to grones.
Sorrow was all my soul; I scarce beleev'd,
Till grief did tell me roundly, that I lived.

* * * * *

Whereas my birth and spirit rather took
The way that takes the town;
Thou didst betray me to a lingring book,
And wrap me in a gown. 40
I was entangled in the world of strife,
Before I had the power to change my life.

* * * * *

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! ev'n as the flowers in spring;
To which, besides their own demean,
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.

Grief melts away 5
Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.

Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart
Could have recover'd greenesse? It was gone
Quite underground; as flowers depart 10
To see their mother-root, when they have blown;
Where they together
All the hard weather,
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

These are thy wonders, Lord of power, 15
Killing and quickning, bringing down to hell
And up to heaven in an houre;
Making a chiming of a passing-bell.

We say amisse,
This or that is: 20
Thy word is all, if we could spell.

O that I once past changing were,
Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!
Many a spring I shoot up fair,
Offering at heav'n, growing and groaning thither: 25
Nor doth my flower
Want a spring-showre,
My sinnes and I joining together:

But while I grow in a straight line,
Still upwards bent, as if heav'n were mine own, 30
Thy anger comes, and I decline:
What frost to that? what pole is not the zone,
Where all things burn,
When thou dost turn,
And the least frown of thine is shown? 35

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: O my onely light, 40
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.

These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
To make us see we are but flowers that glide:
Which when we once can find and prove, 45
Thou hast a garden for us, where to bide.
Who would be more,
Swelling through store,
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

How do we see ourselves when we see ourselves as
flowers? What characteristics do we share with flowers?

Consider the lillies of the field, how they grow; they toile
not, neither doe they spinne. And yet I say vnto you, that
euen Solomon in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of
these. (Matthew 6:28-29)

The scriptural quotations I have placed at the beginning and end of “The Flower” mark the dynamic poles that define Herbert’s imaginative and spiritual growth, leading to a joyful acceptance of mortality. That growth culminates in the poem called “Love (III).”

In this poem, the practice of poetic craft, the ART of Love, is fully realized as a form of spiritual discipline, which is the art of LOVING God.

This poem is a form of COMMUNION with God, what Herbert called “the Church’s mystical repast.” [3

Both poet and reader become one with God by partaking (spiritually & imaginatively) of his flesh and blood—by eating the Host/Christ. We participate in a ritual of Thanksgiving (Eucharist) and Sacrifice, in which the giver becomes the gift in a relation of *mutual fulfillment*.



NOTES

1] “Walton’s Life,” in *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin (Penguin, 1991), 311.

2] In the 1633 edition of *The Temple*, the poem is printed with the lines beginning from the top of the page and extending down, vertically, as in the illustration for the lecture.

3] “Superliminare,” l. 4, in *Complete English Poems*, 22.

4] The Biblical Contexts for “Love (III)” are the 3rd image for this lecture.