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.*”

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 it 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.
What does the poem look like?
How does it move?

Here’s how it looked when it was first printed:

* * * * *

Both the shape of the poem, rising and falling, and its movement, expanding and contracting, enact/embody Herbert’s idea of THE FORTUNATE FALL as a spiritual reality in the life of every soul, dying in order to live.

Other poems express conflict more openly; the struggle to achieve resolution is more apparent, as in “Affliction (I),” 1st of 5 poems with this title: (B 1609-11)

When first thou didst entice to thee my heart,
   I thought the service brave:
So many joyes I writ down for my part,
   Besides what I might have
Out of my stock of naturall delights,
   5
Augmented with thy gracious benefits.

* * * * *
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,  
Sicknesses cleave my bones;  
Consuming agues dwell in ev’ry vein,  
And tune my breath to grones.
Sorrow was all my soul; I scarce beleaved,  
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.

* * * * *
Yet, though thou troublest me, I must be meek;
   In weaknesse must be stout.
Well, I will change the service, and go seek
   Some other master out.
Ah my deare God! though I am clean forgot,
Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.

How would you paraphrase those last two lines?

This poem ends in something near despair—
it is not unresolved, exactly,
but its resolution remains merely implicit:
the poet must learn to love God whole-heartedly.

A later poem in *The Temple* represents a major advance
in developing Herbert’s Art of Love:

*The Flower*  
(B 1621-22)

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut downe, that it will
sprout againe, and that the tender branch thereof will not
cease. Though the roote thereof waxe old in the earth, and
the stocke thereof die in the ground: *Yet* through the sent of
water it will bud, and bring forth boughes like a plant. But
man dyeth, and wasteth away; yea, man giueth vp the ghost,
and where is hee?  
(Job 14:7-10)
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
  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
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,
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:
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,
Offring 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?

   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,
       It cannot be 40
       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,
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.”

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.
Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
  Guiltie of dust and sinne.
But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
  From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
  If I lack’d any thing.

A guest, I answer’d, worthy to be here:
  Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
  I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
  Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr’d them: let my shame
  Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
  My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
  So I did sit and eat.
NOTES


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.


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