

## Variety in the Religious Poetry of George Herbert

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with George Herbert's (1593-1633) religious poetry. George Herbert is considered to be one of the most prominent religious poets ever. His collection of religious poetry, *The Temple*, has been influenced some poets. He utilizes a language so that he can illustrate the relationship between man and God. He deals with religion in this collection. However, a sort of variety can be seen in these poems. In this paper, three poems are selected from *The Temple*: "Easter Wing", "Virtue", and "The Pilgrimage". First, George Herbert is introduced. Moreover, what makes him different from Donne is argued. Then, the above-mentioned poems are discussed. Although all the three poems are religious, each poem covers one aspect of religion.

**Key words:** George Herbert; Religious Poetry; Variety; "Easter Wing"; "Virtue"; "The Pilgrimage"

### INTRODUCTION

George Herbert is one of the metaphysical poets. He tries to depict the relationship between human being and God in his poetry. He is well remembered today for his collection of religious poems, called *The Temple*. From this collection, "Easter Wings" and "The Alter" are the most striking, which, according to Greenblatt, "present image and picture at once" (1606). It is true to say that "the vast majority of his poems are short lyrics written in the first person, the kind of poetic voice normally used for love poetry in the Renaissance". What can be found in Herbert's poetry is "his debt to John Donne, pioneer of the metaphysical movement. However, Herbert made the form his own with a simplicity of diction and metaphor. Presenting ideas with logical persuasion, Herbert finds metaphors in everyday experience, using commonplace imagery as opposed to the sophisticated language of other metaphysical writers" (Hacht 779).

Herbert's poetry is easy to grasp. It is not as challenging as Donne's. As mentioned by Greenblatt, the poems in *The Temple* "reflect Herbert's struggle to define his relationship to God" (1605). In contrast with Donne's poetry, Herbert "will end a poem with two lines that resolve the argument without addressing each specific point raised in the poem" (Hacht 779). It can be said that "unlike Donne's poems, Herbert's poems do not voice anxious fears about his salvation or about his desperate sins and helplessness" (Greenblatt 1606). Religion, religious ideas, and the Bible matter to Herbert. It is true to say that "Herbert finds God in everyday life, even in the most mundane tasks" (Hacht 780). Moreover, he is always grateful to God; he never complains. No doubt is found in his poetry. Instead, submission is felt throughout his verse. He is against ambiguity. He employs plain or simple language. What he seeks is to

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discover the greatness of God. He owns strong faith. Heavenly love is best shown in his poetry. Love in Herbert's poetry is love for God. He attempts to devote his life and poetry to God.

What makes him well known is also his concrete poetry. For instance, his "Easter Wings" might be called one of the most celebrated examples of concrete poetry. In effect, "in the Renaissance and seventeenth century, a number of poets composed such patterned forms, in which the lines vary in length in such a way that their printed shape outlines the subject of the poem" (Abrams 45). Herbert's *The Temple* has been influential. As Helen Wilcox observes, "Herbert is probably the greatest religious poet in the English language" (1007). This paper examines religious poetry of George Herbert.

## RELIGION AS VOICED IN HERBERT'S POETRY

"Easter Wings" is a concrete poem. It can also be called a shape poem, or a pattern poem. That is to say, form and structure imply the content of the poem. By considering the form of it, one can find two pairs of wings. Thus, two stanzas are found which are related to one another. There is a contrast between two stanzas. The poet expresses the question of the deterioration of man's power, and goodness. What the poet asks for is sublimation, soaring, and ascending.

In the first stanza, the poet is hopeless. This stanza deals with man's miserable state. But what is seen at the end of the second stanza is the poet's hopefulness, for it argues the man's hope to fly or ascend. The title of the poem and its content are religious. They have to do with the concept of flight, ascending, or going up. Moreover, the idea of resurrection is inferred.

The opening line of the poem depicts the creation of man. But the next line shows man's falling. Man is favored by God, but is not thankful. He loses all the blessings. It can be said that man's state has deteriorated since the fall of the man:

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,  
Though foolishly he lost the same,  
Decaying more and more,  
Till he became  
Most poor (1. 1-5)

Later, the poet invokes a power. The poet addresses God or Christ, and asks for help, mainly because he likes to fly or ascend. He wants to fly like larks, birds of heaven. He believes that his flight depends on his first fall:

O let me rise  
As larks, harmoniously,  
And sing this day thy victories:  
Then shall the fall further the flight in me. (1. 6-10)

At the beginning of the second stanza, the poet is still moaning. He says that he is miserable. He notes that all miseries began when Adam was banished from heaven, and came to this world, owing to his sin, eating that forbidden fruit. Now he suffers from that mutual misery. He is the result of that sin:

My tender age in sorrow did begin.  
And still with sickness and shame  
Thou didst so punish sin,  
That I became  
Most thin. (2. 11-15)

Another invocation is in lines 16 and 17, where the poet is hopeful. What he really needs is to connect his wings to God or Christ's wings so that he can fly:

With thee  
Let me combine  
And feel this day thy victory:  
For if I imp my wing on thine,  
Affliction shall advance the flight in me. (2. 16-20)

In "virtue" Herbert argues that everything is passing, and the only immortal thing is virtue. The poem comprises four stanzas. The relationship among the first three stanzas would be the point that everything is passing. The last stanza is in contrast with the first three stanzas. It talks over the immortality of virtue.

The first stanza refers to a "sweet day" which is temporary. It does not last forever. It is doomed to death:

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky:  
The dew shall weep thy fall tonight;  
For thou must die. (1. 1-4)

"Sweet rose" is what the next stanza discusses. It surprises all who gaze at it. It is beautiful and lovely. But it has got a short life:

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave,  
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye:  
Thy root is ever in its grave,  
And thou must die. (2. 5-8)

The third stanza argues the short life of the Spring. In the Spring, one can find roses and sweet days. In other words, all sweet things are packed and put together in this season. But it is not everlasting or permanent:

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,  
A box where sweets compacted lie;  
My music shows ye have your closes,  
And all must die. (3. 9-12)

The final stanza notes that "sweet and virtuous soul" will last for a long time. It will never surrender or accept death:

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,  
Like seasoned timber, never gives;  
But though the whole world turn to coal,  
Then chiefly lives. (4. 13-16)

Another poem by Herbert is "The Pilgrimage" in which he poet utilizes allegory in order to compare life to a journey. It deals with a man's journey throughout his life and his hopelessness, but this hopelessness should be overcome. Also, pride should be defeated. The title implies a holy destination.

As the poem opens, the poet is hopeless and desperate. He finds the road tough to be taken to reach his expectation. He puts aside desperation and pride so that he can keep moving:

I travelled on, seeing the hill, where lay

My expectation.

A long it was and weary way.

The gloomy cave of desperation

I left on th' one, and on the other side

The rock of pride. (1. 1-6)

Then he gets to "Fancy's meadow strowed with many a flower". He likes to stay there to enjoy its beauty, but cannot, mainly because he has got no time. He leaves there and comes to "care's copse" and passes that with difficulty. In stanza 3 the poet gets to "the wild of passion" which is sometimes good and sometimes bad for him. He is robbed. His precious things are stolen, except for a golden coin provided by God or Christ:

Here I was robbed of all my gold

Save one good angel, which a friend had tied

Close to my side. (3. 16-18)

Finally, he gets to that cheerful hill, the hill of happiness and hope:

Where lay my heart; and, climbing still,

When I had gained the brow and top,

A lake of brackish waters on the ground

Was all I found. (4. 21-24)

In the fifth stanza the poet fears. He realizes that he has been deceived, for both "the way and end" are associated with sadness. This denotes the vanity of human wishes:

With that abashed, and struck with many a sting

Of swarming fears,

I fell, and cried, "Alas my King!

Can both the way and end be tears?"

Yet taking heart I rose, and then perceived

I was deceived (5. 25-30)

But the poet has more expectations. He wants to achieve his goals. He moves away from the hill. Suddenly, he hears a cry that talks about death. The voice says that the way the poet wants to choose leads him to death. The poet accepts death, and finds it fair after such a long and weary journey:

My hill was further; so I flung away,

Yet heard a cry

Just as I went: *None goes that way*

*And lives: "If that be all," said I,*

"After so foul a journey, death is fair,

And but a chair. (6. 31-36)

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, Herbert deals with religion in his poetry. He writes in a simple way. His poetry is not as complicated as Donne's poetry. He highlights the relationship of man to God. An organic unity is found

in "Easter Wings", in that form and content are connected, and cannot be separated. They both denote the idea of flight.

As can be seen in "Virtue", the final term of the first three stanzas is "die", but the last stanza ends with "lives". Accordingly, in man's life the only thing which is enduring would be virtue. Other things are subjects to decay.

Herbert in "The Pilgrimage" talks about the vanity of human wishes, and the idea of death which is a road to man's expectations and goals. The poet realizes that in order to reach his goals, he needs to take another road, or set off a new journey. This journey is associated with his death. In dealing with religious ideas, George Herbert is a very successful poet.

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