Flawed Poetry as Perfect Worship: George Herbert’s ‘Life’

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George Herbert’s poem “Life” comes into conflict with its early modern Christian context in its form and content. The content and the form each possess their own unity, but they present separate theses that become problematic once they are taken to their full conclusions. Through a combination of close reading, research into secondary criticism, and consideration of the historical context, it may be seen that these difficulties actually interact to propel the poem as a work of Christian narration.

George Herbert’s poem “Life” appeared in the collection The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations. Herbert, as a priest, believed that through formal unity a work of art could become a type of worship. The poem describes the death of a handful of flowers and how they inspire the speaker to reflect upon his own mortality. This narrative seems fairly straightforward when read prosaically. However, the form and style of “Life” present ideas that undermine this cursory reading, making necessary another level of interpretation. Herbert’s noted commitment to unity suggests there is perhaps another way in which his style could be said to match the content, one which would not necessarily establish a typical type of unity.

According to the critic Joseph Summers, George Herbert’s emphasis on form strays from the typical Protestant ideology of his time, for it focuses the poetry upon earthly images with its beauty. In the Augustinian mindset that influenced the Protestants, attention to anything should always lead towards God. Herbert, however, believed in formal beauty because, as Summers writes, “God should be worshipped in ‘the beauty of holiness, and He had shown...that the arrangement of ‘objects of the senses’ (whether things or words) into a pattern symbolic of divine order was the method of worship which pleased Him.” Formal beauty through aesthetic and ethical ordering could reflect the beauty of God. Let us examine the formal elements of “Life” to see how they carry out this project.

The basic formal unit of “Life” is the three line stanza, which repeats six times. For each stanza, the first two lines are parallel in metrical length and end rhymes, while the third line is spatially decentered, does not rhyme with the previous two lines, and has a separate metrical length. This asymmetry seems to frustrate a typical reading of the poem; the parallel first and second lines establish the beginnings of a flow only so that the third line will cut it off abruptly. Each stanza also forces a pause during reading, as the scanning pattern of the eyes will be interrupted as they are forced to jump across the page. The last line also veers off past the space occupied by the first lines, sending the reader into the margins. This does not mean, however, that the breakdown in form gives the poetry freedom, for the ruptures only stutter the momentum. The critic Vendler writes that the syntax of “Life” portrays a series of “dying falls,” suggesting a termination at the end of each stanza, rather than movement outside of the verse. Form is not an element of constraint, but the core of the poetry itself, and its breakage affects not only the structure but disrupts the flow of the poetry as a whole.

This seems to partially emulate the subject matter of the poem. Each “dying fall” is an instance of humble death and the repetition suggests a bouquet of flowers perishing one by one. Almost every third line also concerns some disappointment or type of decay: “And withered in my hand,” “Time’s gentle admonition,” “Yet sug’ring the suspicion,” “and after death for cures,” and “it be as short as yours.” The narrative, however, meditates upon the nature of time and ends optimistically, with the speaker at peace. This aspect of the content clashes with the violent disintegration of form. Although the “dying fall” structure fits the subject of the second and last stanzas, it seems inappropriate for the intermediary stanzas. Finally, the poem describes an intellectual movement across the dimension of time, while the form
repetitively acts out the cessation of progress. The formal aspects of “Life,” then, do not seem to reflect the “beauty of holiness” at all.

This irresolution in form and its disunity with the content strains the Christian mindset behind the work, which focuses upon the afterlife as the ultimate meaning of bodily death. In the form of “Life,” each stanza unit fails to point towards anything beyond itself, with only repetition of the same pattern. This would particularly have been inconsistent with Herbert’s project of evangelization as a minister. Herbert believed that worship should be rational, meaning that every part needed to be understandable. Worship through comprehensible rituals could be a way to obtain grace; the ritualistic repetition of “Life” and unexplained inconsistencies, however, casts doubt upon grace itself.

Another problematic “argument” is the elevation of Herbert through his poetry, which contradicts the call for humility in his piece A Priest to the Temple. The first line of “Life” conflates the imagery of the poem with its manufacture: “I made a posie.” “Posie” could be both taken as a flower and “poesy,” which is further suggested by the ambiguity of “made,” implying artful manufacture. The movement of the word “hand” spatially on the page also conflates the poetry with the speaker: “And withered in my hand. / My hand was next to them, and then my heart.” When “my hand” appears in the “dying fall” of the previous stanza, it receives the metaphorical dying flowers. It then moves inward toward the mind (or “heart”) of the poet. “My hand” literally draws the death of the flower to the self, or across the page while writing the poetry. The subject of the poem is its own writing and the personality behind it.

This focus on Herbert’s presence within the poem seems problematic for the Christian context of the poetry, as “Life” does not point towards God, but revels in closed poetic satisfaction. James White believes that the poem presents a self-delusory speaker who is too accepting of the flowers’ sweetness and their role as a mirror of his own salvation. He argues that the reader would not necessarily be led to further reflection, for the poetry depends on a “view of the self as unitary or coherent, which Herbert perpetually undermines.” White claims that the contradictions within the poem stall interpretation. The content, then, is just as fatal to reading as the form on its own.

Close analysis of the content reveals several inconsistencies in the seemingly straightforward vision of comfort in death. The position of the flowers is spatially confused, as they are “within this band,” the object of “time,” “by,” “away,” and “in.” The distorted sense of time collapses the poem chronologically and the only linearity seems to be supplied by the process of reading. In addition, the speaker personalizes the dying flowers “without more thinking,” implying that the metaphor works only through willing blindness. The apogee of the flowers’ lives before they become a metaphor in death is their “smell and ornament,” suggesting a frivolity to the “scent” that the speaker finds comforting in the final stanza.

Nevertheless, the faults of the verse could be seen as reflective of the theological thought behind the poetry. There has been a critical debate about whether Herbert intended for his poems to possess a spirituality in themselves or if they instead are meant to represent a certain type of spirituality or theology. This reflects the Protestant discussion about transubstantiation and consubstantiation of the Eucharist. The critic Asals argues “the Eucharistic sacrifice in The Temple...is the sacrifice of language itself: the poetry is Eucharistic because it consecrates the ‘creature’ of language as the ontological bridge to the divine.” So far, we have encountered two visions within the poetry that defy Christian spirituality in the form and content. Both of these forces only not only make assertions opposed to Christianity, but to one another. This quote suggests, however, that there is a way in which the problematic aspects could assert Christian beliefs. The inconsistencies actually open up the poetry from closed completeness.

According to Stanley Fish, inconsistency is a poetic gesture in itself; he describes the poems of Herbert as “self-consuming artifacts,” meaning that they undo the interpretations of the audience and undermine their own meaningfulness. Fish writes, “The tension between the two visions in Herbert’s poetry—one dividing and specifying, the other resolving and unifying—is a tension between the ‘I’ of the speaker and reader and the ‘all’ of God.” He then speaks of the tension dissolving the divide between the two. In “Life,” the inconsistency offered by the poetry becomes an instrument for releasing the work from its closed form and content, and for impinging upon this tension. The contrast between the saccharine metaphor of flowers and the nihilism of the form breaks open the poetry to the scrutiny of the reader which, as Fish suggests, could lead the reader to a spiritual vision.

The disagreement between form and content actually seems to imply a certain type of narrative. Julia Guernsey writes: “Two poetics are at work...: a poetics of mortification, which represents the...self as broken, decaying, thing-like, and a poetics of quickening, which represents the...self as whole and alive in relation to God.” Perhaps, then, the pattern of dying falls works as a positive formal aspect against the content. Herbert does not try to impose balance upon the subject by offering a resolution in each stanza. Instead, he captures the instability through repetition, suggesting a deliberate disorderliness to the poetry. The narrative flow turns the deformity into a type of rhythm. These dying falls also reach out to one
another not only through the pattern, but in their end rhymes. This dissolves the independence of each stanza as a formal unit. Instead, each stanza is united by the form that undoes them, hinting at a coherency to the pattern of death. Thus, the “dying falls” are not defects, but a spiritual argument associated with Guernsey’s “poetics of mortification.” The ideas put forward by the form could be seen as a thesis that engages the problematic content; the death inherent in the form engages the saccharine logic and over-full narrator. It would seem that the verses are too weak to make such a powerful counter argument. However, it is through the deficiencies that their true strength comes forth.

This is because the inconsistencies require the reader to approach the poem in a certain way to regain coherency after the style and content come into conflict. Wolfgang Iser argues that the reader will manufacture a coherency in a text to compensate for the gaps. These gaps, however, are not completely open for the intended audience, as they are guided by certain expectations. For Iser, these gaps are also filled in by appropriately by the “implied reader.” In order to see how the distance between the form and the content is filled in and how the inconsistency is handled, let us examine the possible implied reader. While the poem itself does not spell out the comfort behind death, besides aestheticizing it as a symbol, the Christian audiences would expect a grace beyond the end of the poem. The reader must extend the Protestant reading to other aspects as well. For instance, Herbert implying that he failed to grasp the lesson of flowers completely (“I took without more thinking, in good part, / Time’s gentle admonition”), could be admission of humility rather than as an endorsement of haphazard exegesis.

The reader can either find redemption in the poem or redeem its inconsistencies. Returning to the repetition of the “dying falls,” this trope could be seen not as a nihilistic imitation of decay, but as evocative of Christian thought. According to Barbara Lewalski, the Protestants had a unique sense of typology that expanded upon that of medieval scholarship. Lewalski writes, “This emphasis permitted Protestants...to regard history as a continuum rather than as two eras of time divided by the incarnation of Christ.” The notion of a type, then, combines repetition and history, both of which occur in the repetition of the “dying falls” across the verses. Previously, I had mentioned that the forms of stanzas had interfered with the momentum of reading. However, it may be seen that at the same time, the form of the stanzas actually generates a thematic momentum, or “continuum,” in its interaction with the content.

This momentum of the form propels the logic of the poetry beyond the final line and the reader is invited to join into the action of the poem. In the final line, Herbert wishes that he could have a “scent” like the flowers; this same quality in prior lines was what had attracted Herbert to them aesthetically. This is a critical moment in the inconsistency of the poem, for Herbert desires what he had just admitted as frivolous and the possibly problematic identity of the poet is at stake. The sweetness that Herbert desires as his own could be seen as requiring another party to sense. If Herbert shifts his role to that of the flower, then another interpreter needs to take his place. This positions the reader in the same sort of relationship to Herbert as Herbert to the flowers. In the same way that Herbert blurs the distinction between “making” the flower and plucking it, the reader is likewise cast into the position of admiring the poem or remaking it through interpretation. At the same time, the typology of the style extends beyond the last line towards the reader herself.

Instead of submitting to the same deficiencies of the poem, the implied reader, importing the Christian narrative of typology, will introduce the subtext of grace and redemption. The ending implied by typology redefines the interpretation of the poem. Guernsey writes, “through dependence on an Other who knows and understands all the pieces, the Herbertian self comes together as a whole and viable person.” Thus, the poem is incomplete so that it can be assembled from the outside or by the gaze of the “Other” belonging to the reader that Herbert preaches to. This particular reading of “scent,” then, will become a spiritual beauty. For although the speaker does seem sentimental enough to hope for a redemption through beauty, the reader, placed into the perspective of the interpreter, will be free to apply a Christian narrative to the ending so that the poem becomes formally whole.

In this way, the distance between the style and the content can be closed through certain hermeneutic sutures. The dark irony of the title “Life” becomes absolved in the context of the poem because the Christian narrative will make it sincere as the reward of the speaker. Likewise, the reader will continue the pattern of “dying falls” as a type, but these formal faults cease to be problematic. Instead of seeing the stops in momentum as a sort of cessation of the life of the poem, the reader might see these opportunities for interpretation at each stage of reading.

This external building in itself is the affect of the poetry. Through this ordering of the poetry, by filling in the gaps with a Christian narrative, the reader actually takes part in the worship. Thus, the poem could be seen as not an ‘ordering’ of aspects of God’s creation, but a presentation of their pieces with instructions as to how they may be arranged to reflect God’s holiness. In this way, the poem avoids veering into idolatry and becomes instead a device for instruction and worship for the questioning reader.
Endnotes
8  Iser, Wolfgang. The Act of Reading and The Implied Reader.
11  Fish writes, “Herbert’s poetry... shares with the catechistical practice of his parson a shape and a goal: the goal is the involvement of the reader in his own edification...and the shape is the bringing of the reader ‘by questions well ordered’ to ‘that which he knows not.’” (Fish, Stanley. The Living Temple. p. 27.)

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