The Value of Religious Poetry: George Herbert and His Poetry

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Why should students read religious poetry? What can religious poetry offer students at a secular school? Arguably, it offers students a different way of looking at poetry and looking at humanity. When people think of poetry, they might often think of love poetry. But there is another aspect of love: love of God. Whether students are religious or not, spiritual poetry allows them to see the reflection of love between Him and a soul. It often illustrates a soul’s longing for fulfillment and self-actualization, which for some people is only found in God. While his language is challenging, St. Augustine’s Confessions can illustrate the concept of a soul longing for fulfillment and love, but not finding fulfillment in material pleasures:

To Carthage I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves. I loved not yet, yet I loved to love, and out of a deep-seated want, I hated myself for wanting not. I sought what I might love, in love with loving, and safety I hated, and a way without snares. For within me was a famine of that inward food, Thyself, my God... For this cause my soul was sickly and full of sores, it miserably cast itself forth, desiring to be scraped by the touch of objects of sense (Augustine 30).

For I bore about a shattered and bleeding soul, impatient of being borne by me, yet where to repose it, I found not. Not in calm groves, not in games and music, nor in fragrant spots, nor in curious banqueting, nor in the pleasures of the bed and the couch; nor (finally) in books of poesy, found it repose... To Thee, O Lord, it ought to have been raised, for Thee to lighten; I knew it; but neither could nor would; the more, since, when I thought of Thee, Thou wert not to me any solid or substantial thing (Augustine 52).

For Christians and non-Christians, religious poetry has much to offer, even if it is based on different ideas. Even T.S. Eliot supports the study of George Herbert: “It would, however, be a gross error to assume that Herbert’s poems are of value only for Christians. These poems form a record of spiritual struggle which should touch the feeling, and enlarge the understanding of those readers also who hold no religious belief and find themselves unmoved by religious emotion” (19). As Mark Taylor writes, love poetry is a reflection of divine poetry (20). He explains this concept: “Therefore, in the original Platonic terms, secular love poetry is somehow an imitation of divine poetry, or the subject of secular love poetry is somehow an imitation of God, and not an entity of a different order entirely” (Taylor 20). The question this essay poses is this: if the world’s pleasures do not bring happiness, can God bring happiness? This is a question that might be answered by studying religious poetry.

In the seventeenth century, more scientific theories were coming into view, although old views were not yet thrown out, a factor influencing writers of the time (“Literature and Culture,” 1349). During this time, there was a shift in poetry, so that poems were likely to be “short, concentrated, often witty poems,” with a move towards “jagged rhythms of colloquial speech” (“Literature and Culture,” 1355). One text stipulates that, “Johnson, Donne, and Herbert led this shift and also promoted a variety of ‘new’ genres...” (“Literature and Culture,” 1355). Donne and Herbert are Metaphysical Poets, along with Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughn (“A Brief Guide to Metaphysical Poets”). According to the Academy of American Poets, “This group of writers established meditation—based on the union of thought and feeling sought after in Jesuit Ignatian meditation—as a poetic mode” (“A Brief Guide to Metaphysical Poets”).

Diana Benet noted, “Until fairly recently, most critics regarded George Herbert as John Donne’s disciple and inferior” (133). But Herbert is actually important: “[...few would deny that the author of The Temple is one of the major poets of the seventeenth century]” (Benet 133). But T.S. Eliot points out the fact that “[...even in anthologies he has for the most part been underrated (15).]” Eliot also states: “The exquisite variations of form in the other poems of The Temple show a resourcefulness of invention which seems inexhaustible, and for which I know no parallel in English poetry” (31).

George Herbert was born in 1593 (Waugh vii). His father died in 1596, and already in college Herbert had poor health (Eliot 3-4). One interesting connection is that John Donne and Herbert’s mother were friends (Eliot 7). At Trinity College Cambridge, Herbert was made a Fellow, which also required him to “take holy orders in the Church of England within 7 years,” or else give up the fellowship (Eliot 9). He was interested in a government or court career (Eliot 9). But his court ambitions were effectively snuffed out by the deaths of two potential patrons and the death of King James I (Eliot 9). He was a member of Parliament for a short time (“George Herbert,” 1706). Herbert was ordained a deacon in 1626 (Summers 34). The exact nature of his whereabouts from 1627 to 1629 is a bit shaky (Summers 34). He suffered poor health from 1626 to 1629 and was “tortured by the lack of purpose and meaning in his life” (Summers 45). In 1629, Herbert married Jane Danvers (Eliot 11). There are some gaps about his entrance into the priesthood (Benet 6). He had some hesitations, but in 1630 he was ordained a priest and tended to a small country parish in Bemerton, Wiltshire (George Herbert 1706). The next three years were full of charitable duties,
duties to his parish, and literary endeavors (Summers 35). Unfortunately, he died of consumption (Tuberculosis) when he was 40 years old (Eliot 11).

When releasing his poems to be sent to his friend Nicholas Ferrar, Herbert described his poetry as “a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed 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” (Kershaw; Waugh v). He also instructed Ferrar to burn the poems if he did not believe they would be helpful to “some dejected poor soul” (Summers 84). Herbert also wrote A Priest to the Temple, Or The Countrey [sic] Parson His Character and Rule of Holy Life (Fish 14). He was down-to-earth, believing in sermons directed to his congregation that applied to all members (Eliot 13). Eliot stated: “That he was an exemplary parish priest, strict in his own observances and a loving and generous shepherd of his flock, there is ample testimony” (11).

When The Temple was published, it was popular, but in the 18th century it wasn’t as highly valued, and Cowper called it “gothick [sic] and uncouth” (Eliot 10). Samuel Taylor Coleridge helped promote the estimation of Herbert, as seen in two of his personal letters (Eliot 10). Coleridge was “the first important critic who praised The Temple on literary grounds,” although his letter and posthumous writings placed emphasis on the need for religious inclination to fully appreciate Herbert’s poetry, which of course is not true (Summers 20-21). American author Ralph Waldo Emerson also said of Herbert’s poetry: “So much piety was never married to so much wit” (qtd. in Summers 22). Moreover, his poems also influenced poets Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins (Summers 23).

Much literary criticism paints Herbert as a saintly person, at peace with his situation, but more contemporary criticism has come to see his poetry showing “restlessness” and as representative of a “poet of change and surprise” (Fish 1-5). However, Stanley Fish indicates that his poetry is “restless and secure at the same time”(5). T.S. Eliot makes note of his presumed saintliness:

“We are not to presume, however, that George Herbert was naturally of a meek and mild disposition. He was, on the contrary, somewhat haughty; proud of his decent and social position; and, like others of his family, of a quick temper. In his poems we can find ample evidence of his spiritual struggles, of self-examination and self-criticism, and of the cost at which he acquired godliness.” (13)

Naturally, if someone dies and leaves a manuscript behind, there is a significant amount of mystery and interpretations. But readers cannot judge his poems autobiographically: “...it is impossible to know how closely the experiences of the speaker parallel Herbert’s own, these interpretations amount only to a theory” (Benet 198). Also, his poems are not in chronological order (Eliot 15). The idea that his poetry was based on “catechistical models” has also been proposed (Fish 52). Mark Taylor wrote: “All the poems in The Temple can be viewed as Herbert’s attempts to make his own words approach the Word of God” (Taylor 2). Diana Benet said of his collection of poems: “The Temple is a symbolic record of the life of a Christian engaged in an intimate and personal relationship with God (32). She also maintains that Herbert’s poems aren’t “private” poems but serve a didactic function to readers (Benet 34-35). Whatever type of poems, they relay “the speaker’s particular experience all praise God and enlighten the reader, encouraging him to turn to God in the different attitudes or for the different reasons indicated by the poems” (Benet 39). Finally, it was stated, “His poetry is a paraphrase for the soul, and beyond that, for the soul’s union with God” (Taylor 117).

Eliot really stresses the importance of religion and religious ideals on Herbert’s work, and even goes so far as to say that the only poet since Herbert’s time to be so dedicated to God is Gerard Hopkins (19). When talking about Herbert’s relation to Donne, one source noted: “Herbert’s verse is the religious experience, not merely a vehicle that could be switched arbitrarily to other kinds of pursuit” (Taylor 10).

Eliot’s words serve as a good disclaimer for readers of this essay: “We cannot judge Herbert, or savor fully his genius and his art, by any selection to be found in an anthology; we must study The Temple as a whole” (Eliot 15). Benet also maintained: “It is a commonplace that Herbert’s poems complement one another . . . Only when these poems are linked with others and read together do their full meanings emerge” (70). Nevertheless, this essay will still try to do Herbert some justice even though only some of his poems are explored here.

The first poem for review is “The Altar” (Herbert 1707). The poem is shaped like an altar: “Herbert was profoundly influenced by the genre of the emblem, which typically associated mysterious but meaningful pictures and mottoes with explanatory text” (“George Herbert” 1707). Another source called this poem an example of a “hieroglyph,” and the source quoted the definition as “a figure, device, or sign having some hidden meaning; a secret or enigmatical symbol; an emblem’” (Summers 123). “The Altar” is one of his poems with the “paradox that, as the works of a Christian poet, his poems ought to give fit praise to God but cannot possibly do so . . .” (“George Herbert” 1707). This of course is an emblem poem that looks like an altar. It shows the reason the poems have been published, and it also illustrates how “God has commanded a continual sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving made from the broken and contrite heart (Summers 142). This poem portrays a speaker that wants to love and honor God although he is unworthy. He’s offering “A broken ALTAR.../ Made of a heart, and
cemented with tears…” (Herbert 1707, lines 2-3). The poet says that God has made this and that not man, but only God could form a heart (Herbert 1707, lines 3-8). The poet praises God with his whole heart and says the heart will still praise God even if he fails to (Herbert 1707, lines 9-14). Still, he must ask for acceptance and blessings for this offering: “Oh let thy blessed sacrifice be mine / And sanctify this altar to be thine” (Herbert 1707, lines 15-16). The poem is comprised of sets of ten beats, then eight beats, then four beats, then eight beats, and then ten beats, all of which parallel the technical building and proportions of an altar. The poem also has some obscure Biblical allusions (“George Herbert” 1707). Looking at other interpretations, Benet said the heart “was an altar . . . only if God sanctified it for his use or habitation . . .” (Benet 45). Mark Taylor sees “‘The Altar’ as an altar of words, reflecting the Word that has superseded altars of stone” (35). He later notes: “‘The Altar,’ which argues for the Christian supplantation of altars of stone with altars of human heart, is itself an altar of words, corresponding to the revelation in the flesh of the word” (Taylor 62).

Another poem is “Redemption,” which gives a new view on the Death of Christ (Herbert 1708). T.S. Eliot stated this is “one of the poems known to all readers of anthologies” (28). With the help of the footnotes supplied in the text, readers learn that the poem is a sonnet with the poet seeing himself as an unhappy tenant and God as a landlord, and the poet wants a new lease, which refers to the New Testament replacing the Old Testament (Herbert 1708). So the poet wants a new lease and goes to heaven, where he’s told that the tenant is on earth acquiring land he purchased for no little cost (Herbert 1708, lines 1-8). Knowing of God’s greatness, the poet looks for God on earth in great places, such as cities, gardens, and courts (Herbert 1708, lines 9-11). But then he finds him in an unexpected place--among “thieves and murderers” (Herbert 1708, line 12). God says, “your suit is granted” and then dies (Herbert 1708, line 14). This poem is interesting in the sense that it gives a more legalistic metaphor for the Redemption. In addition, the shortness of the poem provides a sense of journey; a journey to seek God and the implied shock of finding him with criminals, having a wish granted by him, and seeing him die.

In the full collection of his poetry, there is a long poem called “The Sacrifice,” which tells Christ’s perspective of His Passion from the Agony in the Garden up to His death. The poem is powerful and structured; with four lines to a stanza and repetition in each stanza of the question “Was grief ever like Mine?” except for twice when Herbert switches to the declaration, “Never was grief like mine” (“The Sacrifice”). Again, Herbert reminds readers of connections they might miss otherwise, for example, in Judas’ hypocrisy:

For thrite [sic] pence he did My death devise  
Who at three hundred did the ointment prize,  
Not half so sweet as My sweet sacrifice:  
Was grief ever like Mine? (“The Sacrifice”)  

Herbert also points out the irony of Jesus’ treatment: “Behold, they spit on Me in scornfull [sic] wise, / Who by My spittle gave the blinde [sic] man eies” (sic, “The Sacrifice”). Herbert also offers Jesus’ reflection of those who mocked him to save himself, when Jesus says: “In healing not Myself there doth consist / All that salvation which ye now resist” (“The Sacrifice”). The poem is meant “to move the reader by showing human guilt and divine love in their clearest connection” (Benet 108-109).

Finally, the poem “Love (3)” really illustrates the unworthiness a soul may feel because of sin, and feelings of inadequacy. God forgives and accepts the sinner. Eliot states it “indicates the serenity finally attained by this proud and humble man” (34). It is one of Herbert’s best-known poems, and it’s “generally interpreted as picturing the soul’s welcome to the Communion or to salvation on earth” (Summers 88). Still another thinks it’s about the soul’s acceptance into heaven (George Ryley, qtd. in Summers 89). Summers said, “. . . it gains immensely in richness when we recognize the relationships it establishes between this world and the next, between abstracted and incarnate Love” (89). Stanley Fish interpreted it as showing how the speaker “must approach and taste if his soul is to receive its proper food; but if he approaches in a state of sin he will eat and drink damnation (132). It also shows the speaker isn’t worthy or unworthy but “declared worthy” (Fish 132). Finally, “The exercise of preparing to become worthy does not end in becoming worthy, but in the realization (stumbled upon again and again) that you never can be” (Fish 136). The poem shows a loving God and longing for love, the type of poem that one could imagine showing St. Augustine.

Thus it is evident that Herbert was very dedicated to his vocation and his poetry, which, although it is religious, offers us much to think about. We see a soul in search of God and struggling with acceptance. Again, this essay poses the question: if the world’s pleasures do not bring happiness, can God bring happiness? For Herbert or people like St. Augustine, it seems like their happiness and peace are found in God. One source said: “. . . when we read his greatest poems we can only recognize with Rilke the immediate imperative of the greatest art: ‘you must change your life.’” Religious poetry can give readers new ways of looking at their lives and searching for fulfillment. As a final thought, this essay concludes with a stanza from Herbert’s poem “Discipline,” which expresses what could be a universal truth of both divine and human love:

Then let wrath remove;  
Love will do the deed:  
For with love  
Stony hearts will bleed. (Herbert 1724, 17-20)
Works Cited


