

## The Flower

*By George Herbert*



How fresh, oh Lord, how sweet and clean  
Are thy returns! even 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 shriveled heart  
Could have recovered greenness? 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 quickening, bringing down to hell  
And up to heaven in an hour;  
Making a chiming of a passing-bell.  
We say amiss  
This or that is:  
Thy word is all, if we could spell.

Oh that I once past changing were,  
Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!  
Many a spring I shoot up fair,  
Offering at heaven, growing and groaning thither;  
Nor doth my flower  
Want a spring shower,  
My sins and I joining together.

But while I grow in a straight line,  
Still upwards bent, as if heaven were mine own,  
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. Oh, my only light,  
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,  
Thou hast a garden for us where to bide;  
Who would be more,  
Swelling through store,  
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

## **Restored in Love: A Close Reading of George Herbert's "The Flower"**

*Paul Chin*

In his influential essay on the metaphysical poets, T.S. Eliot points out that Herbert's simplicity of language is a "simplicity emulated without success by numerous modern poets." This simplicity of Herbert's, the lucidity of his verse but also the exactness of his expressions, has invited legions of imitators not only in his own day but in the centuries to come. Perhaps one of the reasons why so many were "without success" was because Herbert's poetry was really not simple at all. Though the literal meaning of each word may have been readily understood, their meticulous construction into an intricate whole is what makes Herbert's poetry highly intellectual and therefore, in one sense, metaphysical. Eliot elaborates on Herbert's deceptive simplicity further in his essay by contending that not only are "The structure of [Herbert's] sentences... far from simple," but they contain an immense "fidelity to thought and feeling." This fidelity to thought, the determined sensitivity to the true nature of one's own feelings and emotional and psychological interior, is one of Herbert's distinctive qualities, allowing even devotional poems to be appreciated by the non-religious. After all, how does one describe, let alone write a poem about, the universal experiences of shame, or the desperate need for redemption, the fleetingness of life, the joy of acceptance? To capture the vicissitudes of the soul's existence would seem to require expression superseding human language; that Herbert did so in poetry is nothing short of miraculous, if not evidence of literary genius.

Eliot's esteem of the likes of Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, and others has done much to revive the reputation of the metaphysical poets who were at one time regarded as, as the Samuel Johnson once declared, "Epicurean deities making remarks on the actions of men...without interest and without emotion." Since the renewed interest and scholarship concerning the metaphysical poets in the 20th century, after Eliot, few scholars have championed Herbert more than the eminent poetry critic Helen Vendler, whose insistence that Herbert be ranked higher than Donne – the poster child of the metaphysical poets – is as controversial as it is telling. In Vendler's introduction to her book on Herbert, she makes the case that Herbert has often been read superficially without attention to aesthetic motives, in addition to his formal innovations, and to prove her point, opens the book with a detailed reading of one of Herbert's most famous poems: "Vertue." In the introduction to the chapter, she also notes parenthetically that "I could as easily have begun with the readings of 'Love (III)' or 'Heaven' or 'The Flower'." In this paper, I affirm this assertion, that the depth of Herbert's poetry plumbed through an analysis of "Vertue" may just as well have been attained through "The Flower," where again Herbert's simple language masks complex structure.

Featured in his landmark collection of poems, *The Temple*, in "The Flower," Herbert describes what it is like to first lose and then be restored to God's favor by comparing himself to a flower which decays to death in the winter (it seems) but eventually revives in the spring. The language of the poem generally depicts simple nature (flowers, gardens) and Biblical images (Heaven and Hell); there are no extensions of language or far-reaching conceits as Donne might employ. And yet the poem's inner workings are surprisingly complex. Take the poem's form, for instance. "The Flower" contains seven seven-line stanzas where the first four lines alternate between tetrameter and pentameter, rhyming ABAB, which is followed by dimeter rhyming couplets, and then ends with a tetrameter line (rhyming with B). The initial tension in each stanza between tetrameter and pentameter mirrors a strain felt in the poem as the flower (and speaker) strive to attain restoration. The stanza's structure depicts this eventual "restoration" by leading up to the resolving tetrameter line through the two dimeter couplets, which, if added together, also contain four metrical feet. The number seven, a perfect number in the Bible, used twice by Herbert in both the number of lines and the number of stanzas, reinforces this sense of fulfillment in the poem despite the varying lengths and rhymes within each stanza.



In addition to the poem's formal structure, Herbert has also structured the narration to accommodate the poem's thematic aims. For example, although the only speaker of the poem appears to be the writer himself, Herbert nonetheless shifts, *stanza by stanza*, between an outward extolment of the wonders of God, and an inward sigh of self-reflection, creating a kind of implicit dialogue between him and God.

This pattern is discerned by observing Herbert's varied use of pronouns and his change of focus throughout the poem. In the first stanza, for example, he begins by describing the fresh returns of the Lord without any reference to self. But when we reach the second stanza, we find that his gaze has turned momentarily inwards as he now reflects on a past moment of despair, only to redirect his focus, in the third stanza, upwards, to another observation of the Lord, this time of His power.

The pattern sustains throughout the poem, moving from a meditation on who God is, to introspection, and then finally, in the last stanza, to a conclusion on the true nature of God's love. But each time the pattern is repeated, the details are never exactly the same, and this creates the drama of the poem which leads to its climax in the sixth stanza where the speaker experiences, in the making of the poem itself, restoration.

Caught between the subtle conversation between God and man is the audience who Herbert brings into the picture at various points to emphasize the universality of God's intended restoration – “We say amiss / This or that is” (lines 19-20) or “To make **us** see we are but flowers that glide” (Line 44). Thus, though Herbert possesses a “complete perception of his own moods,” he has not, like David or Augustine to whom he must inevitably be compared, lost his sense of connection to the invisible God and to the world around him.

The felicity of the Lord's restoration sets the initial theme with its corresponding natural metaphors: “How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean / Are thy returns! Ev'n as the flowers in spring;” (Lines 1-2). Although we don't arrive at the “spring flowers” implied by the title until the second half of the second line, we find that the language which Herbert uses in describing the Lord's returns are still steeped in natural associations. In particular, that the Lord's returns are “fresh,” “sweet,” and “clean” remind us of the attributes of water – the rain, the rivers – which we might readily associate with cleansing and renewal, just as the bitter water made sweet at Marah rejuvenated the Israelites on their post-Exodus journey (Exodus 15:22-27). The joy of the Lord's returns water the earth, giving life to spring flowers.





But what are the returns of the Lord? Is it the *strength* that the Lord gives which restores us back to life, or is it literally the returning of the Lord *himself*. Most likely the former, but the suspended phrase: “Ev’n as the flowers in spring;” which lacks a verb and thus remains incomplete as a sentence, allows for a brief superposition of these two ideas. The rest of the stanza then builds upon the incomplete description of the Lord’s returns, the comparison developing like the flowers themselves unfurling at winter’s end. The “late-passed frosts” of winter bring “tributes of pleasure” to its mastering season, spring, and the grief of snow which annihilates by its blanketing white, “melts away...As if there were no such cold thing.” The restoration, the allowed returning to life of the Lord, is so complete that present warmth erases memory of past cold.

The focus shifts both inward and into the past in the second stanza which begins with a question: “Who would have thought my shriveled heart / Could have recovered greenness?” The word “shriveled,” in describing the state of his heart, is again deliberate as it readily applies to nature. We are no longer in the May of the first stanza, but sometime in mid-winter, perhaps January, when the leaves of the trees and the flowers of the field have wizened to nothing. And just as it seemed impossible for “no such cold” to have existed in May, now in the heart’s winter, it seems impossible that deadened nature might ever “recover greenness.” The rhetorical nature of the question implies the understanding that all mankind might share this sentiment of despair. “Who” – *among all living beings*, we may insert – “would have thought my shriveled heart could have recovered greenness?” Implicitly then, only God, who transcends the mortal, is capable of imagining restoration after the bleakness of winter, emphasizing our dependence on the supernatural for salvation. The next lines in the stanza further the comparison of man to flower: “... It was gone / Quite underground; as flowers depart / To see their mother-root when they have blown;” except now we see not the flowers’ resuscitative aspect as in stanza one, but its descent to the underworld. Yet here is a rather surprising description in which Herbert imagines the flowers to travel to their birthplace, “their mother-root.../ where they together/ all the hard weather, / Dead to the world, keep house unknown.” The flowers may be dead to the world, but since they are sojourning to a different world, an unknown place, they must, it seems, eventually return; that is, they only appear to be dead to those above ground. In comparing his own shriveled heart to the departed flowers, Herbert, while admitting that life seems impossibly dead on the surface, also intimates that the disappearance of life is more mysterious than final. After the “hard weather,” might it be possible for flowers to reemerge from their “house unknown?”

As part of the poem’s drama, the answer is not provided immediately; we’ll have to wait until the sixth stanza (“And now in age I bud again”) before witnessing the rebirth of the flower. Instead, in the stanza immediately following the second, we turn our focus back to the Lord. However, the tone of the speaker in the third stanza, and the corresponding descriptions, strike strangely. The language has become more severe. In contrast to the first stanza, Herbert meditates not so much on the Lord’s goodness and mercy, the thematic anchor of the poem, but on the awesomeness of his power: “These are thy wonders, Lord of **power**, / Killing and quick’ning, bring down to hell / And up to heaven in an hour;” The God we see here is terrifying in his inscrutable power. The ground may open up beneath us in an instant, sending sinners to Sheol, as happened in Korah’s rebellion (Numbers 16); or, in an act of unexpected mercy, man may be resurrected, as the widow’s son was by Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24). The range of Herbert’s religious imagery has also broadened to express God’s cosmic reach and the regions of heaven and hell. Nature or flower imagery, germane only to the physical earth, have no mention here, and the abstractness of the last line of the stanza: “Thy word is all, if we could spell” matches the theological tenor of the preceding images. All of this is mirrored in the prosody of the third stanza which contrasts the steady iambic rhythm of the previous stanzas. In the first line, for example, dactylic then trochaic rhythms appear for the first time: “**These** are thy **wonders**, **Lord** of **power**” (the bold being the unit of stress) which interrupts the poem’s brisk iambic rhythm, seen clearly in the poem’s opening line: “How **fresh**, O **Lord**, how **sweet** and **clean**.” Additionally, the caesura in both the first and second line slow the verse even more, emphasizing the range of God’s power. In describing the reason for Herbert’s description of God’s might, his ability to dispatch puny man in an instant, eludes us for now, and won’t be resolved until the last stanza when the first line pertaining to the wonders of God is repeated with a modification. If we are to remember the “quick’ning” of the Lord, we must first also remember his “killing” – in that order, the most anomalous and unsettling of the stanzas.



The poem returns to its iambic form and metaphor of the flower in the next two stanzas. In the fourth stanza, we turn specifically to the life of the speaker, in keeping with the structure of the poem, but this time, the speaker recalls his life *before* its decay described in the second stanza. The speaker reminisces how “many a spring I shot up fair, / Off’ring at heav’n, growing and groaning thither.” There used to be a time of great vivacity. In the description, the growing of the flower makes sense to the reader, but the groaning does not, like the queer “angry and brave” hue of the sweet rose in “Virtue.” The groaning is in part informed by the first line of stanza four which starts with an exclamatory “Oh,” which is, in a sense, a sort of groan: “Oh that I once past changing were.” The flower may grow, as does one’s faith or heart during times of prosperity, but the consciousness of its own mortality, or the limitations of its own purity, or as we’ll see in the next stanza, God’s wrath, causes the soul (the flower) to groan, that is to yearn for heaven where “no flower can whither!”

The flower’s groan for paradise echoes Apostle Paul’s own yearning for deliverance from his corrupting flesh expressed in his epistle to the Romans: “For we know that the whole creation has been **groaning** together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Romans 8:22). The groan for immortality, for paradise, for the shedding of the sinful self (“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver from this body of death”) is a universal sentiment felt among all believers striving for an eternal steadfastness. There is a self-confidence, though, in the poem’s speaker, that would lead one to think such security is attainable by a force of will. The self-confidence is evident in the fact that the initial growth of the flower is promising and “fair.” In fact, the flower declares that there is no need of “a spring shower” for nourishment. Somehow, the antithetical sin and self have joined forces to reach the heavens: “My sins and I joining together.”

However, the “But” of the fifth stanza immediately undermines the enthusiasm of the young flower, exposing its presumption in supposing that “heav’n were mine own.” And then a description of God’s wrath appears: “Thy anger comes, and I decline” which marks the beginning of the flower’s descent into disfavor. The frosts here are not “late-passed” as they were in the first stanza; their icy grip is just beginning to punish the flower in its overconfidence. And now everywhere, it seems, is God’s wrath: “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?” The rhetorical questioning of whether a place on earth might exist where God’s judgment remains unanswered. So severe is God’s punishment, that everywhere one turns, only the frown of disfavor is perceived. The rapid succession of questions in the fifth stanza imbues a sense of urgency and despair that must be resolved later in the poem. It is a kind of despair which we have already seen in the second stanza where the speaker had previously asked, also rhetorically, whether his shriveled heart “could have recovered greenness?” In the judgment of the Lord in the fifth stanza, this question of redemption still remains unanswered. Surely we know from stanza three that the Lord is powerful, that he is capable of resurrecting us, so the question is not whether God can restore us but if He *will*. As God says to Moses, “And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (Exodus 33:19).

Thus we reach the crux of the poem in stanza six. And what greater sigh of relief can be heard than in the line “And now in age I bud again.” Yes, the soul can and *will* live again, but it is not until many deaths have occurred that he has learned this fact. These are the seasoned words of man who has weathered many ages of life, who reflects with melancholy on his past sufferings, but still lives on, by God’s grace, to appreciate the sensation of life, symbolized in the smell of rain. In even this small detail of the “dew and rain,” we find that the speaker no longer identifies with the flower of stanza four who has no want for a spring shower. The valleys of life have wrought a deeper appreciation for life, and there is an enduring sense of wonder at one’s own survival – “It cannot be / That I am he / On whom thy tempests fell all night.”

The revival has also led the speaker to once again take up his pen and “relish versing.” This is not only a return to profession, but the writing also refers to creation of the poem itself. That is, the poem’s very confession could not have been written if the poet first had not been restored. Thus, in the sixth stanza, we discover, extraordinarily, that the poem’s very existence proves God’s miraculous restoring power.

The chastisement and subsequent restoration which has brought upon a renewed sense of self has also wrought a new perception of God, and this is where the poem ends. The first line of the seventh and final stanza, "These are thy wonders, Lord of love," exactly matches the first line of the third stanza, "These are they wonders, Lord of power," except now the Lord's wonders are perceived not as an act of power but of love. This represents a fundamental change in the speaker's perspective. In the third stanza, the raising up and the bringing down "in an hour" appeared to be acts of an inscrutable God; our attempts to discern his will were futile: "We say amiss / this or that is." But now the speaker realizes that the experiences of shriveling and judgment were acts of God's love for us, "To make us see we are but flowers that glide," that is, for us to acknowledge that we are not flowers who can attain to heavens by our own strength. Thus the lesson of suffering and restoration, symbolized by the flower's death and rebirth, is ultimately a lesson in humility. Once we are rooted, literally, in humility, then we discover and come to accept that God "hast a garden for us," an ordained place for us "to bide." There is no need to strain for heaven; the garden which God chooses for us to live in is His will for us on earth. And as the last three lines show, he who could want anything more than to thrive in the garden into which God has placed him, to resist "blooming where planted," would be foolish, and "forfeit their paradise by their pride."

Through the description of the life cycle of a flower, Herbert has expressed how the heart experiences renewal by God's mercy. But unlike the cycle of a flower's rebirth which restores the flower to merely its past glory, the restoration of man to God leaves him changed. "The Flower" is not merely about restoration, as a cursory read may lead one to believe, but transformation. The speaker learns, through the course of the poem, that the fearsome power of God to strike down and raise up is really an act of love meant to teach us to rely on His power and not on our own "stores." The various ways in which "The Flower" achieves its effect, either through its form, apostrophic dialogue, or internal referencing, makes it a wonderfully complex poem belied by the simplicity of its title and language. Above all, "The Flower" is a poem that demands, as the best of Herbert's poems will, an extended close reading, but which then promises, for those attentive to his whispers and subtle turns of thought, a partaking in the same renewal Herbert himself once experienced in the poem's creation: evidence, once again, for the profound moving power in George Hebert's poetry.

#### References

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