



Virtue: A critical estimate

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Abstract

This article tries to critically analyse Herbert's much-acclaimed poem Virtue. It tries to understand the core metaphysical and religious contexts used by analysing the poem's main concepts. The article focuses on the meanings and interpretations and stylistic aspect of the poem.

Keywords: virtue, soul, critical analysis, done

Introduction

“But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Me thought I heard one calling, child:
And I replied, My Lord.”

Herbert (The Collar)

Herbert was greatly influenced by Donne and his style shows a kinship with that of Donne. His imagery, like Donne's, functions not through the senses but through the intellect. In his poetry, we find a similar development of thought in a logical order as is found in the poetry of Donne. But here the similarities end and the differences begin. Herbert was chiefly influenced by Donne's technique but not by the elder poet's choice of themes for he never wrote secular poetry. He is more comparable with Ben Jonson in his courtly – vocabulary the musical texture of his poetry and the suave grace. He is also simpler than Donne and the range of his experience is narrower. The typical metaphysical wit or the use of the metaphysical device is absent from his poetry. He draws upon the ordinary experience and common affairs of our daily life. And this trait gives him a distinctive position in seventeenth-century English poetry. In “*The Collar*” he shows a colloquial vigour; “*Holy Baptism*” surprises us with an abruptly striking note – “the growth of flesh is but a blister.”

Herbert's stylistic grace and restraint reflect his firm religious feeling. Excepting a few of didactic poems embodying the ritual of the church, the whole body of Herbert's verse, has been described as his spiritual autobiography. A great majority of his poems also show that he did not arrive at his religious faith without any conflict or suffering. In some of his poems like “*Affliction*”, we may also trace the metaphysical poet's obsession with quaint imagery. The following lines from “*Affliction*” show one such image and a typical metaphysical dramatization of a moment or a feeling.

“My mirth and edge was lost / A blunted knife/ were of

more use them I.”

But a simplicity and grace apparently belie his concentration on the structural integrity in his poetry. He was keenly attentive to present his theme in a most suitable form. Form in his poetry is as meaningful as the theme itself. It shows the origin and development of his thought in a logical but simple way. His lyrical gift emphasized more because of the simple appeal of his poetry gives him a unique position among the metaphysical. All these qualities may be found in his short lyrical poem “Virtue”.

“Virtue” considers the difference between those things of the world that will inevitably die and the immortality of the “Virtuous soul”. Every component of structure works harmoniously in this poem to organize the images in a logical progression and to underscore the difference between things that “must die” and that one thing that “chiefly lives”. The organization “sweet” sow and the rest of creation through the skilful use of line groupings, rhyme scheme, and repeated words.

“Virtue” is a lyric of four quatrains each containing three lines of iambic tetrameter and a final line of iambic dimeter. This shift line of each quatrain great impact. Each stanza also follows the same basic pattern. Since some rhyme sounds and words are repeated throughout the first three stanzas. However, the structural analysis of the poem may be formulated as 4a 4b 4a 2b, 4c 4b 4c 2b, 4d 4b 4d 2b, 4e 4f 4e 2f.

The stanzaic structure of the lyric provides a pattern of organization, for the images of the poem and simultaneous underscores the logic of the ideas. The first stanza focuses on the image of the “sweet day”; it compares the day to “the bridal of the earth and sky” and asserts that the day inevitably “must die”. Similarly, the second stanza focuses exclusively on the image of the “sweet rose” and concludes that it two “must die”. The third stanza shifts to the image of the “sweet spring”. Here the poet combines the images of the first two stanzas into the third by noting that the “sweet spring” is full of sweet days and roses. The stanza concludes that all “must

die". In this way, the third stanza becomes the climax of both the images used up to this point and the idea of a universal mortality. The last stanza introduces a totally new image – “a sweet and virtuous soul” – and an assertion which is the opposite of the ideas expressed in the previous three. Although, the day, the rose and the spring “must die” the sour “never gives” and “chiefly lives” even though “the whole world turn to coal”. The separate stanza presents the logical conclusion of the argument and the key image of the poem – the “virtuous soul”. The pattern of organization of the lyric form allows this key image of the one thing that lives to be separated structurally from the images of things that die. The structural organization of images and ideas is repeated and reinforced by several other techniques that help establish the poem’s overall form. The rhyme scheme, for example, contributes significantly to the linkage among the first three stanzas and the isolation of the fourth. The first three quatrains repeat the “o” rhyme at the ends of the second and fourth lines, rhyming ab ab, cb cb and db db. In the fourth stanza, however, the “b” rhyme is replaced by an “f” line. The rhyme scheme thus produces effects parallel to the grouping of images and the logic of the ideas. The final stanza is separated and isolated from the rest of the poem by the deletion of the “b” rhyme and the introduction of “f” rhyme.

F. E. Hutchinson paraphrases the meaning thus: "While the day and the rose and the spring come to a natural end, virtue alone survives the general conflagration at the end of the world, which reduces all else to 'coal' (i.e. cinder, ashes)." Several anthologists supplement this usual gloss of "coal" with a citation of II Peter 3:10, which reads in the King James Version.

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which, the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

"Coal" is sometimes amplified to "glowing coal" or "red-hot coal" or attention is called to man as "a quick coal / of mortall fire" in Herbert's "Employment."

"Season'd timber" too has come in for a share of special attention, most frequently as a unit in the artistic structure, as for example a confined resemblance that becomes a wide-ranging metaphor or as "an arbitrary symbol" in contrast to the images of the other stanzas. In the most fully developed study of the poem, Arnold Stein reads "season'd timber" as a natural object that "achieves its purpose after death-not as a tree but as wood"; for him it is a deliberate illustrative comparison, a simile, a product of human creation, in contrast to the symbols of the earlier stanzas, but a notably limited comparison which will barely allow us to stretch our imaginations to include the possibility that "seasoned timber burns well and has a kind of second life in its coals." Such glosses on the final stanza do not allow the full meaning and thus the full shape of the poem to emerge. In the words of Helen Vendler, "The real question is not what accommodations we can make *post-hoc* to the image but what made Herbert think of seasoned timber in the first place, and what effect this note, sounded at this point in

the poem, has on the poem as a whole."

Also, the repetition of keywords and phrases further emphasizes both the connection of the images and ideas of the first three stanzas and their isolation from the last. Each of the first three stanzas begins with "Sweet" and ends with "must die". The repetition of "must die" drives home the idea that death is universal. In the last stanza, however, this pattern of repetition is abandoned. The initial note that characterized the first three stanzas is replaced with "chiefly lives". Both substitutions create a striking separation between this final stanza and the three previous stanzas. More important the shift in the verbal pattern exhibits the conceptual transition from death to the immortality of the "virtuous soul".

We have seen that the lyric form of Herbert's virtue provides an organizational pattern for the poem's images and ideas. At the same time through the pattern of stanzas and the rhyme scheme as well as the set images allow the poet to draw a vivid structural distinction between the corruptible world and the immortal soul. Form in this poem is not arbitrary or incidental; it becomes another way of asserting the singularity of the key image, the "sweet and virtuous soul".

We can conclude our essay with the memorable words of David Daiches observes "Perhaps no religious poet in English has so effectively combined the strong individual with the general and exemplary. His poetry shows a craftsmanship geared so perfectly both to the sensibility at work and to the theme being presented that one is tempted to see in it the perfect blending of art & religion. The 'metaphysical' mode, as well as traditions of Christian devotional literature, helped him to do this but the art and sensibility are his own".

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