

The Perennial Herbert

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In the language of horticulture, a flower that is planted from seed, grows in favorable weather, and survives storms (but not freezing cold) to bloom for its natural cycle that ends in frost, is called an “annual,” while a flower that, either begun from seed or from the planting of a root, grows in varied weather until late frost, when its life retreats into its root underground to overwinter until spring, is termed a “perennial.” George Herbert, whose poetry everywhere shows deep delight in growing things and their bloom, portrays himself in his powerful poem “The Flower” as both an annual and a perennial, responding to the vagaries of God’s favor and disfavor in an ordeal that he hopes will lead ultimately to salvation.

The poet begins by describing his joy in God’s “returns” of favor as the “tributes of pleasure” brought in early spring to flowers after frost:

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns; even as the flowers in spring,
To which, besides their own demesne,
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.
(1–14)¹

The term “returns” has an important biblical resonance, recalling not only the repeated calls of God in the Old Testament to his people to “return” to him,² but also God’s promise to “turn” toward his people if they “turn” toward him (Malachi 3:7, 18).³ The Poet’s heart has as a result “recovered” its “greenness,” after a period “underground” like that of a perennial in winter after it has “blown,” or bloomed. The “return” of God here, however, is not dependent on the poet’s “turn” toward him, as in Malachi; it is a gift of grace, not necessarily merited by man. As Helen Vendler has noted in her sensitive study, though these opening two stanzas seem to represent a “natural process . . . [w]e shall discover in the course of the poem how untrue these statements—about the cyclical absence of God and the obliteration of grief—are.”⁴

God’s rapid alternating of his disfavor and favor toward man is then revealed in the following stanza, where the flower metaphor is temporarily abandoned:

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.
(15–21)

¹Herbert, “The Flower,” in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 165; all quotations from “The Flower” are from this edition. In the first stanza, “desmesne” means “demean”; in the second stanza, “blown” means “bloomed.”

²Numbers 32:22; Deuteronomy 30:8; Psalms 6:10; Jeremiah 3:22, 4:1; cf. 2 Chronicles 6:24.

³“Return unto me, and I will return unto you.”

⁴Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 49. She finds the underground housekeeping “cosy.”

God's return is a "quickenings" of a dead or nearly dead thing, and a foretaste of "heaven." The poet accordingly wishes in a further stanza for an abrupt surprise, a transplanting upward:

O that I once past changing were,
Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither. . . .
(22–23)⁵

And now he reveals that he constantly seeks heaven in his upward growth, paradoxically watered, not by God's favor, but by his sinful tears:

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.
(24–28)

But this attempt to turn literally to God is thwarted as presumptuous:

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?
(29–35)

The flower's growth, purposefully "in a straight line" but unnaturally and ironically "upwards bent, as if heaven were mine owne," brings God's disfavor, "and I decline." God's "turn," not away from but angrily toward him, brings frost and heat at once in his "least frown."

⁵Vendler's view of these two stanzas seems a bit severe: that "with the admission that we cannot spell and that God's word is arbitrary and incomprehensible, Herbert's resentment of his earthly condition has gained the ascendancy, and he repudiates wholly the endless emotional cycles of mortal life" (p. 50).

The poet, however, suddenly finds recovery and renewal over time, in a stanza that is a marvelous reprise of motifs:

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.
(36–42)⁶

The rain, seemingly gentle but also the residue of past tempests, charms him “once more”—in a turn of relief—to “relish versing”: the piquant phrase, echoing “smell” and “rain” and substituting “versing” for the more formal “writing poetry,” also plays upon the Latin and French root meaning of “verse” as “turn.”⁷ At last in the poem the speaker can identify himself as one who finds reward and fulfillment in being able to “write.”

And so he exclaims in conclusion, in an apostrophe to—a sudden *turning toward*—a God who conveys a certain kind of “love”:

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;

⁶Vendler finds a “tentative sexuality” in “bud,” “shoot up,” and later “swelling” (p. 51), but I must demur at a stronger suggestion that the poem conveys the rises and falls of tumescence as in another, clearly more sexual poem of Herbert’s, “Sinnes round” (Hutchinson, p. 22). See Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert’s Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 296–297, and Michael Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 242–244. Strier finds an “earthly paradise” in the poem, while Schoenfeldt locates paradise only in heaven (*Prayer and Power*, p. 152).

⁷Cf. “Prayer [I]”: “Gods breath in man returning to his birth” and “reversed thunder” (Hutchinson, p. 122). As my colleague Matthew Proser reminds me, the phoneme on “glide” tends in pronunciation to slide into a diphthong (aye/ee).

Who would be more,
 Swelling through store,
 Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.
 (43–49)

God's ministrations of "power" and "love" bring an acceptance of mortality, that flowers must "glide" or die,⁸ with a hope of growing in the greater, and higher, "garden" of paradise. But the warning paradox, recalling the presumptuous earlier attempts of the flower to grow toward heaven, is by implication that humility and not "pride" will bring transplanting. Even the poet's "versing" is only a temporary and provisional foretaste of the true garden of paradise.

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⁸Hutchinson neatly glosses "glide" as "slip away gently and imperceptibly" (p. 535). Stanley Fish, in a stimulating but finally extreme reading, finds in the poem, after several changes of view, a self-effacement and "surrender not only of a way of seeing, but of initiative, will, and finally of being" (*Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972], p. 157). See Vendler's reservations (p. 285n.).