

“I Wish I Were a Tree”: George Herbert and the Metamorphoses of Devotion

DEBRA K. RIENSTRA

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This article is the second entry in a debate on “George Herbert and Nature.” <http://www.connotations.de/debate/george-herbert-and-nature/>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de.

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Abstract

This article considers Herbert’s engagement with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in order to explain the speaker’s wish to turn into a tree in “Affliction (I)” and “Employment (II)”. I argue that, though Ovid’s presence in “The Church” is muted, it does irrupt especially at key moments of devotional crisis. Herbert “resorts” to Ovidian strategies as a subtle form of protest when the God of his poems seems most to resemble the gods in *Metamorphoses*. Further, viewing these moments through an Ovidian lens helps reveal an underlying aesthetic of transformation in the sequence and an emphasis on figuration as a devotional tool. From this point of view, the sequence as a whole becomes a kind of slow-motion metamorphosis in which the speaker—not unlike in Ovidian myth—undergoes a transformative fragmentation. For Herbert, paradoxically, this fragmentation, in which human subjectivity appears momentarily lost, enables the speaker to reach a deeper state of communion with God.

Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me
 None of my books will show.
 I reade, and sigh, and wish I were a tree.

These words, 57 lines deep into “Affliction (I),” rank among the more startling poetic maneuvers in “The Church.” A similar maneuver occurs in “Employment (II)” at line 21: “Oh that I were an Orenge-tree, / That busie plant!” Among the possible consummations devoutly to be wished, turning into a tree seems to have had its occasional appeal for Herbert. Herbert’s speakers also wish to become—or, in the grammar of the poem, *do* become—flowers, stones, singing birds, springs sprung from tears—all of it standard poetic fare, perhaps. There may be any number of reasons why a poetic speaker might wish to be a tree, and I will explore some of those reasons below. However, I will argue that previously proposed explanations for the tree wishes in “Affliction (I)” and “Employment (II)” leave out an important net of reference for Herbert. The tree sprouts in “Affliction (I)” at a moment of devotional impasse, when none of our speaker’s books would show what God would do with him. Momentarily stymied, for poetic instruction Herbert may have turned from his holier books to a thoroughly unholy book: Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Though Ovid’s presence in “The Church” is muted, it does irrupt especially at moments of devotional crisis. I propose that Herbert “resorts” to Ovidian strategies as a subtle form of protest when the God of his poems seems most to resemble the gods in *Metamorphoses*. Further, viewing certain of these moments through an Ovidian lens helps reveal an underlying aesthetic of transformation throughout the sequence, an emphasis on figuration as a devotional tool. From this point of view, the sequence as a whole becomes a kind of slow-motion metamorphosis in which the speaker—not unlike in Ovidian myth—undergoes a transformative fragmentation. For Herbert, paradoxically, this fragmentation, in which human subjectivity appears momentarily lost, enables the speaker to reach a deeper state of communion with God.

Ovid in the Early Modern Period

As all the essays in this debate on “Herbert and Nature” demonstrate, Herbert’s poems often engage thoughtfully with other texts, including texts of “scandalous pagan philosophy” (124), as Katie Calloway’s essay on Lucretius argues. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, with its scandalous behavior among gods and mortals and its ready transformations of humans, animals, plants, and gods into other things, might have been considered poor spiritual formation for early modern schoolboys, yet the text was a pillar of the early modern curriculum. According to Colin Burrow, Ovid was “drilled into schoolboys almost every day of their lives” (304) in the late Elizabethan and early Stuart periods, so George Herbert and his schoolmates at Westminster School and Trinity College could not help but have their imaginations formed at least in part by the shapeshifting gods and transforming mortals of *Metamorphoses*. While Herbert could easily read his Ovid in Latin, he would also have had available the popular 1567 translation by Arthur Golding, as well as the 1626 translation by George Sandys. Golding in particular attempts to square *Metamorphoses* with Christian virtues and a Christian-inflected ideology of created order. His 800-line introduction proves entertaining reading today, as Golding ties himself in knots trying to explain how good Christians can remain morally unscathed while reading this pagan work featuring perversions galore. The secret, based on Golding’s fourteener treatise, is to allegorize extensively, imagine that virtue is consistently rewarded and vice punished in Ovid’s tales (which is manifestly *not* the case), and remind oneself that, despite the constant boundary-crossings in Ovid, there are, in fact, clear metaphysical divisions among the categories of plants, animals, humans, and the divine.

Herbert’s Theology of Nature and Distinctions Among Orders of Being

Engaging with Ovid in a book of devotional poetry, then, entailed some challenges. A poetic moment in which a human speaker wishes to turn into

a tree may not constitute an offense against Christian metaphysical divisions; however, it is important to consider the ideological insistence at the time that, although the nonhuman created world could serve to reveal God, humans were created ontologically superior to the other creatures, a distinction that must be upheld. As Keith Thomas notes in his magisterial work on humans and nature in the period:

Wherever we look in early modern England, we find anxiety, latent or explicit, about any form of behavior which threatened to transgress the fragile boundaries between man and the animal creation. (38)

Golding's introductory gymnastics remind us that the abiding enthusiasm for Ovid's boundary-busting tales in this period jostles against prevailing ideologies that posit essential distinctions between divinity, humanity, and the other creatures. As the essays in this debate observe, Herbert himself was at least somewhat invested in expressing a theology of nature and in maintaining distinctions between ontological categories as part of that theology—and *how* he parsed those distinctions has inspired our collective analysis. Herbert's apparent overall assent to this principle of essential distinctions between God and humans and between humans and the other creatures makes the Ovidian tree moments even more curious.

As a telling example of Herbert's latent theology of nature and his understanding of essential distinctions among orders of being, each of the essays in the current debate focuses to some extent on the poem "Providence." "Providence" maintains essential distinctions while at the same time subtly questioning a simple view of human superiority. The opening of the poem echoes Psalm 104's catalog of creation, praising at length and in conventional terms the diversity, purposefulness, and orderliness of a world in which even poisons and thorns have their place. Also conventional is the declaration of human exceptionalism, specifically because of the human capacity for language:

Onely to Man thou hast made known thy wayes,
And put the penne alone into his hand,
And made him Secretarie of thy praise. (6-8)

However, as Angela Balla explains, the poem does not quite operate as a straightforward, consistent statement of Herbert's views. Instead, the poem subtly enacts a process through which the speaker's early statements of human superiority are eventually undercut. Balla argues that the "moral witness" of the creatures "provide[s] the speaker the near-moral guidance he needs to humble himself before God and his 'fellows.'" As the speaker follows this guidance, he allows Providence to tune him spiritually so that he will contribute fairly, that is, justly and beautifully, to the cosmos' mystical music" (311). Balla's argument strikes me not only as a persuasive reading but also fittingly reflective of Herbert's typical strategy for constructing a poem, in which the poem itself enacts a process of discovery. By the end of the poem, the speaker's initial self-assurance in his role as "the world's high Priest" is quietly set aside, receding into uncertainty concerning whether he can fulfill an even more tempered priestly role sufficiently. David Glimp, in his essay "Figuring Belief," posits a similar view of the poem's conclusion, noting that, by the end of the poem, the speaker does not so much speak on behalf of other creatures as receive their guidance in order to "augment" his own praise:

All things that are, though they have sev'rall wayes,
 Yet in their being joyn with one advise
 To honour thee: and so I give thee praise
 In all my other hymnes, but in this twice. (145-48)

Thus, Glimp writes, "[d]evotion originates not with mankind, but with the advice of the created world" (126).¹ This observation corresponds to Balla's contention that Herbert derived from Gerson a conviction that creatures provide a "moral witness" to the rational—but flawed—speaker.

Similarly, the poem "Man" begins by declaring human superiority and then subtly undercuts it. The poem at first rehearses the conventional idea that all creation is intended to serve humans, from humble herbs to highest stars. Humans are the pinnacle as well as microcosm of all creation: "Man is ev'ry thing, / And more." As both Paul Dyck and Sarah Crover show,

however, this arrogance is contextualized by a relationship of kinship that entails human stewardship and care toward nonhuman creation. I would suggest that “Man,” too, enacts its own questioning of human arrogance. Stanza 2 initially declares human superiority, but then coyly leaves some doubt: “[Man] is a tree, yet bears no fruit; / A beast, yet is, or should be more.” The “should be” in line 9 echoes the “Or can be” slipped into line 5. Intriguingly, Herbert altered line 8 from the Williams manuscript, which reads “He is a tree, yet bears *more* fruit” (emphasis added). This alteration deepens the doubt about human superiority subtly present in the poem’s triumphant opening gestures, and this slight fissure in the edifice of superiority gets cracked open a little wider in the poem’s last two stanzas. “More servants wait on Man, / Then he’ll take notice of,” declare lines 43-44, hinting that human superiority is not automatic. It can be taken for granted and thereby squandered. Thus, the palace of Man needs God to dwell in it, lest Man become mere witless arrogance.

A Pedagogy of Figures?

If nonhuman creatures can chasten human superiority, might Herbert’s tree-wishes constitute a pedagogy of figures? Indeed, this is one theory that has been posited to explain why Herbert might wish to be a tree: becoming more like a nonhuman creature might assist the poet in praising God better. As Dyck points out, “the characteristic Herbertian question” is “shall I write, / And not of thee?” (270; “Providence” 2-3) Insofar as the poems are efforts to praise, the creatures come into it partly because they provide assistance. In fact, Glimp’s central argument in his essay is that, in poems like “Providence” and “Man,” and indeed in the whole *Temple*, Herbert is deploying “meditation on the creatures,” a spiritual practice thought to offer the human devotee a “set of representational resources” through which one can understand and even adjust one’s sense of self before God—the creatures “teach” through metaphoric application (114). As Glimp ob-

serves—and as Balla’s essay confirms—the biblical psalms and other scriptures depict the creatures as sharing both a capacity and an obligation to praise. In fact, in some ways, as writers in the period noted,² other creatures’ praise is better than human praise because it remains uncomplicated, natural, automatic, entirely sincere. The non-human creatures exemplify a “mode of belief not routed through consciousness” (115) and are thus blessedly free of all the stormy weather that consciousness inevitably brings.

We might suppose, then, that when the speaker of “Affliction (I)” wishes to turn into a tree, this is primarily a poetic wish, a flourish of fancy, and Herbert may simply be drawing on the devotional tradition Glimp describes and acknowledging wistfully a creaturely model of unconscious praise. In reference to the orange tree in “Employment (II),” Glimp outlines this possible explanation:

life as a tree represents a minimal version of existence, one stripped of aspiration to any kind of autonomy, distinction, or capacity for purposive self-fashioning. To want to be a tree, to “grow / To fruit or shade,” is a way of giving up and letting go, an ascetic renunciation of one’s will in the face of a radical incapacity either to discern God’s plan or autonomously to assemble a viable life. (116)

To be a tree, in other words, is to sink into that uncompromised praise of God to which Herbert’s poems persistently aspire, and which is persistently complicated by the vagaries of life and devotion. Herbert therefore may simply be bolstering his own faltering human praise of God throughout “The Church” by drawing on images of trees, flowers, birds, and even stones to create “an augmented revenue stream of praise, human giddiness notwithstanding” (Glimp 131). Glimp thus proposes that ultimately the poems themselves *become* creatures, capable of offering praise absent the writer and therefore free of the human heart’s waverings.

While this is a convincing and elegant argument to explain many of Herbert’s images, I would note that, in the moments of arboreal wishing in “Affliction (I)” and “Employment (II),” the speaker is not wondering, “Oh dear, how can I praise thee better, O God?”³ He is, instead, thoroughly cross-biased by the mysteries of suffering, the puzzling sense that God is

tormenting him for no discernible reason. He is crying out: "Why is God hurting me?" Nor does the speaker, in those moments, settle comfortably into tree life and call it a day. So, the accumulation-of-praise theory is useful for explaining the purpose of many creaturely metaphors in the *Temple* as a whole, also laying the groundwork for the evocative idea of poems as creatures. But that approach does not fully explain the particular turn to tree-longing in moments of devotional impasse, nor the ambiguous resolutions of those moments.

Other Approaches to Explain Tree-Wishing

Other approaches relating to these moments add helpful nuance but also prove not entirely satisfying. Joseph Glaser suggests that the wish to be a tree in both "Affliction (I)" and "Employment (II)" is a wrong turn, a "patently false" way out of the difficulty. The desire to be "mindlessly righteous" (327) will not do, Glaser scolds. Heather Asals and others propose that in "Affliction (I)" the speaker needs to learn that he is already the tree of Psalm 1, rooted by the river of God's word (see Asals 45). Surely the scriptures are full of spiritually significant trees, but neither of the Herbert passages in question constitutes merely a wish for serenity in the word of God; instead, they are focused on an escape from suffering. Nor do these moments settle into resignation to God's benevolent pruning process, as we see in "Paradise" or even "Affliction (V)," another poem in which the poetic lines twine around the speaker, and indeed all humans, transforming them into trees: "We are the trees, whom shaking fastens more" ("Affliction (V)," l. 20). We have reached no such settled place in "Affliction (I)" or "Employment (II)." Perhaps a more pertinent model, then, comes from the biblical Job, a figure famously representing devotional impasse. Job also ponders the advantages of tree life in Job 14:7-9 when he laments that, while a man's life is "of few dayes and full of trouble," trees at least grow back when they get chopped: "For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut downe, that it will sprout againe, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease"

(Job 14:7). However, while Job wistfully ponders the advantages of botanical regeneration, he does not quite wish to become a tree. Instead, his focus remains on the distinction between the fortunate tree and the unfortunate human, helplessly unregenerative against the whims of an inscrutable God.⁴

Ovidian Patterns of Encounter and Devotional Impasse

Job comes close, but the question remains: in these moments of devotional impasse, why would Herbert's speaker long not merely to be *like* a tree in some salutary way, but to turn *into* a tree? Dwelling in kinship with creatures, receiving the devotional example of the creatures—this is not quite equivalent to poetically rejecting human distinctiveness from other creatures. What purpose is served by this poetic choice? In order to find a more persuasive, underlying dynamic for the tree moments in "Affliction (I)" and "Employment (II)" and other similar moments in "The Church," we need to consider figuration itself. In his tree-moments especially, Herbert pursues a devotional figuration something more akin to transformative fragmentation. To understand how this might work, we must reach beyond the bounds of Christian texts and theology and consult that master of poetic transformations: Ovid.

As Leonard Barkan writes about Ovid's poetic strategy, "metamorphosis simultaneously justifies belief in rigid categories of experience and demonstrates the sometimes glorious, sometimes terrifying occasions when the categories dissolve" (58). Herbert's poems present theological distinctions existing in useful paradox with poetic dissolutions, and further, in depicting moments of intense experience, particularly suffering, Herbert sometimes sets aside even the Bible (even the book of Job) and engages in Ovidian-style dissolutions. I would suggest that, when the God of his poems seems most to resemble the gods in *Metamorphoses*—capricious, torment-

ing, apparently indifferent to human suffering—Herbert “resorts” to Ovidian strategies as a subtle form of protest. In Ovid’s stories of encounter between gods and mortals, we notice a number of disconcerting—and instructive—patterns. The gods interfere with mortals sometimes to punish them for an outrageous offense such as cannibalism or incest or narcissism—Golding was right that sometimes offense *is* punished in Ovid. On other occasions, as with Arachne, the gods transform humans because the humans have recklessly challenged the gods’ superiority in some endeavor. Poor Actaeon models another option: he was merely in the wrong place at the right time, with the understandable audacity to peek at a naked goddess. Finally, with wearying frequency, Jove or Apollo spots a lovely young maiden and sets out to possess her, so that the encounter is motivated by nothing more than a god’s lust and dominance. Daphne, Io, and an assortment of nymphs have done nothing to bring about their suffering except to be lovely. The searing desire of the gods pursues these human unfortunates until their humanity is dissolved and they are left as laurel trees, birds, heifers, streams. Ovid is also interested in the moment of transformation itself, sometimes slowing it down into successive frames of description, like stop-action animation. We feel around inside the terror and sometimes relief of the transformed figure as their human subjectivity dissipates. Finally, Ovid is attentive to the post-metamorphosis speech situation. Actaeon can only “groan or weep” (3.190) once he has turned to a stag. Philomela as a nightingale cannot speak, but she can sing. Echo can only echo. Overall, Ovid portrays the gods as maintaining the god-human distinction—at least in terms of power—by blurring distinctions between humans and other creatures.

If we reconsider “Affliction (I)” from an Ovidian point of view, some of the poem’s elements come into better focus. The first line depicts a God in pursuit of the speaker: “When first thou didst entice to thee my heart.” This is a poem about the pain of divine seduction. As in Ovid, this seduction is characterized by deception, and we see Herbert’s speaker retrospectively noting that he at first “thought the service brave,” but, by line 23, the month

of May is over and his years with “sorrow did twist and grow.” There is a sense throughout the poem that God has lured the speaker in on false terms. Those verbs in l. 23 also reverberate with Ovid’s characteristic slow-motion descriptions of transformation. In fact, verbs throughout the poem, like “entwine” (l. 9), “twist and grow” (l. 23), and “entangled” (l. 41), subtly suggest that this speaker has been transforming into a botanical state from stanza 2 on. This was evidently deliberate on Herbert’s part: in the *W* manuscript, line 9 reads “Thy glorious houshold-stuff did mee *bewitch / Into thy family*” (emphasis added). Herbert revised the poem with the word “entwine” apparently in order to retain that sense of deceptiveness but also to press the botanical metaphor. Then, in lines 25-28, we have an especially vivid depiction of transformation:

My flesh began unto my soul in pain,
Sicknesses cleave my bones;
Consuming agues dwell in ev’ry vein,
And tune my breath to grones.

As in some of Ovid’s descriptions, we experience the pain of metamorphosis from the inside, with attention to the collapse of human speech into creaturely groans.⁵ By line 36 of “Affliction (I),” the speaker has moved on from groans to becoming increasingly tree-like, “blown through with ev’ry storm and winde.” By the time we arrive at line 57, when the speaker wishes to be a tree, we might not be so startled after all. Having read Ovid, too, we know that the crisis of divine pursuit inevitably leads to metamorphosis. At this crisis moment, while lamenting that none of his books will show what God will do with him, Herbert’s speaker does not say, “So I look out the window at the garden and wish I were a tree.” He says, “I *reade*, and sigh, and wish I were a tree” (emphasis added). Has the speaker picked up a different book now, a scandalously pagan one with different patterns of electric encounter between gods and mortals?

In the *Metamorphoses*, once a god’s victim is fully transformed into a tree—or flower or bird—there is a kind of relief. Daphne, to take the most pertinent example, loses her humanity when she becomes a laurel. But at

least the metamorphosis ends the torment of Apollo's relentless pursuit. It is striking that in Ovid mortals who, for whatever reason, catch the eye of a god have no means of escape. Once pursuit begins, they are trapped. Whatever relief might come about through metamorphosis, they are still trapped. Apollo does not love Daphne, he merely desires her, wishes to possess her. After she becomes a laurel, he still claims her as his own. She *becomes* poetry, a figure of Apollo's domain. Similarly, the tree-wish in "Affliction (I)" leads directly into the final stanza, where we do not find a pleased, settled, or trusting speaker, reveling in non-cognitive praise. Instead, we find a speaker who is still resistant and still trapped by this inscrutable God.⁶ And notably still speaking. The very last lines underscore a crucial distinction between Herbert's poem and Ovid's tales: in Herbert's poem, the mortal *loves* the God. In *Metamorphoses*, mortals do not love the gods. Even Europa only gets tangled up with bull-Jove because she has been manipulated into desiring him in his bovine form. If they are wise, mortals in Ovid's world will offer sacrifices to the gods as obliged and otherwise lay low. What makes the final lines of "Affliction (I)" so searing, then, is that this speaker's post-quasi-metamorphic persistence is rooted, if you will, in a profound act of human subjectivity: love. Though the speaker is clean forgot, reduced for a glimmering poetic moment to arboreal anonymity, he still loves God, or more precisely, desires to love God, or even more precisely, does *not* desire *not* to love God: "Let me not love thee, if I love thee not."

To bring us to the orange-tree moment in "Employment (II)," we work through a somewhat different devotional impasse. In both "Employment" poems, the speaker is in a dark mood, frustrated by his own apparent uselessness. "Employment (I)" begins with the wish to be like a flower that at least would bloom before it dies. However, the speaker laments that he is neither a flower, nor the bee evoked in line 18, but only a weed. The poem concludes with the thought that a weed can become a reed and thus join a consort, a thought Herbert may be drawing from the Ovidian story of Pan and Syrinx. In this tale, parallel to the Apollo/Daphne myth, Pan pursues

the nymph Syrinx. To escape Pan's pursuit, Syrinx is turned into reeds, out of which Pan makes a pipe. Similarly, in "Employment (I)" the desired metamorphoses are presented as potential compensations for divine ill treatment. The poem ends with the speaker resolved into reed-metamorphosis, but unresolved in the desire for a meaningful quasi-speech act, a strain in the consort—even while the poem itself, of course, becomes a strain, perhaps in both the musical and effortful senses of that word. By the time we reach "Employment (II)," the mood is darker, the frustration more extreme. Man is a "quick coal / Of mortall fire" (ll. 6-7), the speaker notes, easily reduced to ashes without careful tending. "Life is a businesse, not good cheer; / Ever in warres" (ll. 16-17), he goes on, sounding a bit like Hamlet in his "thousand natural shocks" mood (3.1.63). In the *W* manuscript, the poem takes a sharp turn at line 20 and the speaker wishes to be a "laden" bee, dropping blessings on men. The orange-tree wish is the revision, the on-second-thought version. An orange tree is a "busie plant," the speaker notes, and thus he would always be laden with "fruit for him that dressed me" (l. 25). This time, the metamorphic wish remains in the subjunctive mood, followed by a "but no" gesture in the final stanza. The poem ends in frustration, which Herbert intensified in revision. The *W* manuscript ends with "Thus we creep on," while the *B* version ends with "So we *freeze* on, / Untill the grave increase our cold" (emphasis added).

Ovidian Figuration and Devotion

What might be the difference between Ovid's tales, where unfortunate mortals, in the world of the story, actually do become a tree (or some other creature), and Herbert's poems, whose tree-wishes leave the speaker in an ambiguous half-state? To pursue that question, we must consider the role of figuration in both Ovid and "The Church." As Leonard Barkan observes in his reading of the Actaeon, Narcissus, and Echo sequences, the slippage between human and creature in Ovid creates a mirror state for the characters involved:

Metamorphosis becomes a means of creating self-consciousness because it establishes a tension between identity and form, and through this tension the individual is compelled to look in the mirror. (46)

For Herbert's speakers, *figura* operates similarly. Evoking bees and coals and trees, the speaker is engaged in a "tension between identity and form" as part of a process of self-examination before God. In those shimmering moments, as the speaker appears to waver between form-states, the work of devotional transformation happens, or at least is attempted. Through figuration, the speaker seeks understanding and strives through stages for some fixed state beyond the vicissitudes of devotional effort. That figurative freezing at the end of "Employment (II)," then, is a dark version of a settled resolution that the speaker does ultimately desire. The poems in the sequence tumble on, working through a series of transformations toward some longed-for resolution. Again we can look to Barkan, this time in his reading of the horrific stories of Philomela and Myrrha: "For all its emphasis upon the blurring of clear categories, metamorphosis is as much concerned with reduction and fixity as with variability or complexity" (66). Tormented mortals, suffering either because of their own transgressive passions or someone else's, find beyond their transformative trauma a state of fixity—or at least we readers experience that fixity as Ovid's tumble of tales leaves the transformed figure and moves on to the next story. There is, perhaps, some comfort in that literary fixity, because even though the characters are left in a state of diminishment by human standards, at least there is beauty—of song or leaf or petal—and a place in a story. Herbert's poems work similarly, since even when the poem ends in tension, it still ends, and the sequence moves on. As with Keats's Grecian urn, the poems create fixity by freezing a point in a process for our meditation: a paradox that art enables.

We might accordingly think of the entire sequence of poems in "The Church" as a kind of slow-motion metamorphosis in which the speaker is, one might say, torn into figurative fragments both by the divine pursuer

and his own desire, while longing for some state of fixity beyond the struggle. With that premise in mind, we can perceive the transformative process writ small in several sequences of poems throughout "The Church." The speaker finds himself in a place of suffering, works to understand that suffering through the mirroring process of figuration, and at last reaches some kind of momentary resolution or at least resignation. The long opening sequence of "The Church," for example, could be seen to follow this pattern in a more dilute way. From "The Thanksgiving" through "Easter," the speaker is not so much suffering as grappling with the agonizing question of how to reckon with Christ's passion, that strange "art of love" that the speaker struggles to "turn back on thee" in line 47 of "The Thanksgiving"—making a sly reference to Ovid's *ars amatoria*. However, as the speaker temporarily concludes in "The Reprisall," "There is no dealing with thy mighty passion" (l. 2). The poet persists in vexing this question from several angles through numerous poems, hinting along the way that the purported, more theological question may be masking the speaker's personal suffering after all ("I am all ague" in "The Sinner"; "not thriving" in "Redemption"). Finally, we reach "Easter Wings," where we witness a kind of Ovidian resolution. We are so familiar with the poem that we do not often appreciate the oddity of the speaker turning into a bird in its very form. The metamorphic process in the poem is squeezed, in both stanzas, through the narrow passage of affliction, beyond which the speaker prays to take flight, duly impeded with Christ's wing, and then, like a lark ascending, to sing.⁷ How delightful that, along with the speaker, the poem itself turns into a bird. After spending some time with Ovid, however, this metamorphic process comes as an altogether unsurprising outcome of an encounter with divine mystery.

Much later in "The Church," three poems just before "The Flower"—"The Search," "Grief," and "The Crosse"—grapple more directly with suffering and God's purpose. "The Crosse" gathers the concerns of "The Search" and "Grief" to depict the crux of the matter (if you will), recalling "Affliction (I)" with lines like "Taking me up to throw me down" (l. 22)

and ending with the image of the speaker languishing as a weed even in Paradise, recalling that same image from "Employment (I)." Then, in "The Flower," we have the culmination of this mini-sequence with gestures at once more resigned, more weary, and more confident than Herbert's previous resolution poems.⁸ Interestingly, "The Flower" turns on that paradox of mutability and fixity. Stanza 1 evokes the spring metamorphoses of flowers, and, by stanza 2, the speaker's heart *is* the flower, recovering greenness after being dead to the world underground. In stanza 3, God is portrayed as the god of sudden metamorphosis: "Killing and quickning, bringing down to hell / And up to heaven in an houre." With all this metamorphosis going on, the speaker suggests, how are we supposed to know what things actually *are*? "We say amisse, / This or that is." Things are as God declares them to be, and humans are left to puzzle about this: "Thy word is all, if we could spell." That line, of course, explodes with interpretive possibility.⁹ But if we focus on the question of ontology and metamorphosis, the line serves as a kind of declaration that being is mutable and God is the ultimate definer of what a thing *is* in any given moment. Fixed ontological categories are actually contingent on God's ongoing defining will.

The next line, in response to the killings and quickenings and orthographic confusions, craves stability: "O that I once past changing were, / Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!" The speaker longs for that Ovidian moment of post-metamorphic fixity, relief after the electric encounter with a pursuing, tormenting god. At this point in Herbert's poem, it is as if we are entering the psychology of the post-metamorphic flower. What does the flower think *after* it has become a flower? In Ovid, we never know. But in truth, flowers do not actually enjoy a state of fixity. They are constantly changing, too, in fact serving as standard figures for mutability in virtually every poetic tradition. In the next section of the poem, then, lines 24-42 reflect on the mutability of an ordinary flower. That leads to the moment of resignation, tinged, as Helen Gardner notes (see

Wilcox 566-67), by a pungently paradoxical mixture of resentment and wonder:

These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
To make us see we are but flowers that glide.

This resignation to the beauty of changeability as a wonder constitutes an aestheticization of the vicissitudes of life. We are—we helpless flowers—beautiful. Fixity is an illusion, but as compensation we have a place in a story. And we might wonder that the line does not read, “we *are like* flowers that glide.” Here the speaker and the figure are one, a humble identity of terms: “we *are but* flowers that glide” (emphasis added). The Paradise evoked in the next lines, a Paradise earlier presented (l. 23) as the place past changing, is depicted here—corrected, we might say—as a state of humility and acceptance in which to bide. *That* is Paradise. Striving through stages for some fixed state beyond the vicissitudes of devotional effort leads instead to loving the strife. The beloved strife, moreover, leaves an aesthetic remainder: the poem, the song.

Richard Lanham, in his study of eloquence in the Renaissance, notes that in Ovid’s Narcissus story “the moment of metamorphosis as the moment of most intense wishing clearly allegorizes the poetic imagination and its transformational possibilities” (59). Herbert’s poems are full of intense wishing, most acutely in those moments of devotional impasse when God’s actions are most painful and inexplicable. It is the speaker’s longing for God that makes God’s Ovidian moods more painful. And thus, especially at those moments, Herbert reaches beyond biblical precedents or philosophical niceties into a wilder discourse, pushing the figurative operation of poetry to its limits. Herbert needs not only to *use* figures but to *inhabit* them. After all, Christianity is fundamentally about transformation. The center of the faith is a divinity taking on humanity—not as a temporary ploy, but eternally—in order to pursue, not dominance and possession, but a holy reconciliation with creatures. The Christian, in response, hopes to undergo a metamorphosis, through conversion and sanctification, which leads to one being, like Christ, “raised imperishable.”

Thus, the crisis of divine pursuit inevitably leads to a searing metamorphosis in the Christian universe, too. This conviction renders the poetic figure not merely decorative or instructive but indeed revelatory, a reflection of a true and harrowing mutability. The distinctions break down, the human subject diminishes into fragments as the figures multiply through the tumble of poems. Yet in this case—by grace, Herbert would say—the process leads not to final diminishment but to communion. The state of fixity reached at last, beyond the fragmenting transformations, is one in which “all things [are] more ours by being his,” as “The Holdfast” professes (l. 12), and in which a restless soul can at last surrender, sit, and eat. Along the way, the pain of transformation leaves its traces in song, art, beauty. Thus, Herbert’s poetic fragmenting into a tree—or flower or bird—is precisely the kind of shaping fantasy that grows to great constancy, strange and admirable.

Calvin University
Grand Rapids, MI

NOTES

¹Helen Wilcox, in her edition of Herbert’s English poems, summarizes the critical debate on why the last two stanzas of the poem seem to be either two drafts or an intentional doubling of ideas (see 415-16).

²Glimp mentions, for example, Godfrey Goodman’s 1622 pamphlet, *The Creatures Praying God* (see 119-20).

³Perhaps a point of interesting comparison: In “Gratefulnesse,” the poem in which Herbert most pointedly asks this very question—how can I praise God better?—no such Ovidian metamorphosis takes place.

⁴I am not aware of anyone who has previously noted Job 14:7-9 in connection with l. 57 of “Affliction (I).” However, Helen Wilcox in her edition does suggest that Job along with the Psalms of affliction are sources for the poem (see 160) and catalogs numerous specific references to Job elsewhere in *The Temple* (cf. 723).

⁵In fact, Herbert’s several poems featuring groaning—“Sighs and Groans,” “Affliction (IV),” and “Longing”—read quite poignantly when imagined as coming from Ovid’s victims.

⁶For a different reading, see Leimberg. My own reading is rooted in Herbert’s dependence on the sonnet tradition, in which concluding a poem in painful impasse is a common strategy. See Rienstra, “‘Let Wits Contest’: George Herbert and the English Sonnet Sequence.”

⁷The subjunctive mood in “Easter Wings” turns to indicative in “The Banquet.” In that later poem, we see the transformation of the speaker realized through another metamorphic phenomenon: the Eucharist. God, in merciful condescension, transforms into the elements (ll. 22-35). The speaker welcomes the familiar sweetness of the wine and bread and is enabled to rise up to God: “Wine becomes a wing at last” (42). The poem “sweetly” figures Calvin’s view of the Eucharist—in which partakers are raised into the real presence of Christ.

⁸For a more extensive examination of Herbert’s resolutions, see Rienstra, “‘Mend My Rhyme’: Resolutions in Psalms, Sonnets, and Herbert’s ‘The Church.’”

⁹Helen Wilcox, in her edition, offers a brief summary of critical commentary on this line (see 152).

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