ON GEORGE HERBERT'S "HUMILITY"

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All of the poems that make up George Herbert's *The Temple* are unique in their form. They generally express a religious sentiment or commentary on Christian theology and sometimes include an interlocutor or dialogue. "Humility," [1] however, is unlike the others. It is allegorical and fabular with no direct reference to the Godhead. The poem opens with the Virtues seated on an "azure" throne. Herbert specifically mentions the virtues of Mansuetude, Fortitude, Temperance, Justice, and Humility; and we imagine them sitting on that throne in a manner like Botticelli's *Fortitude* (1470). A parade of animals comes to offer "tokens of submission" to the Virtues in a ceremonial gesture. Herbert places Humility at the lowest of all the Virtues, "bent to the ground"[2] and "subjecting itself to others,"[3] counting up the presents the animals have brought to the Virtues and handing them out accordingly.

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The second stanza describes a few animals, and their transactions, in more detail; the animals seem genuinely perturbed when giving away something that is theirs. One of the animals also happens to be dead, “kill’d in the way by chance.” At first this “by chance” remark seems inoffensive, if only heartless, but it is greatly problematic for the animals as a group.

Let us look more closely at this second stanza to see where the conflict in the poem is headed. First, we have an angry Lion that gives away its paw. When we consider how anger is portrayed in theological literature, we find that anger is often an expression of envy. Anger only becomes less vicious when it is inspired by an experience of injustice. In the sequence of this stanza, anger looks like anger before a sense of justice: the Lion is giving away that which makes it the most powerful of beasts, and thus this sacrifice has the ability to take away its position in that hierarchy. Humility then offers the paw to Mansuetude. This first transition from animal to Virtue establishes the scheme that each animal's gift will go to the Virtue that is most opposed to whatever quality that animal embodies. Herbert's depiction of the Lion's paw recalls the taming of fierce beasts in Isaiah 11:6, and a reflection on theological virtues: "The effect of anger is opposed to meekness."[4] That said, Mansuetude is not a cardinal nor theological virtue. From the perspectives of Augustine and Aquinas,[5] Mansuetude enables piety (and we understand piety as an expression of Charity).[6] The Lion's anger suggests, in the context of virtue ethics, that the lion does not recognize that sacrificing that part of itself enables a greater good (the good in this case being a virtue that will remove obstacles to acts of piety).[7]

The second animal in the parade is a Hare. Herbert describes the animal as "fearful," and this feature bears similarity to the drove of hares in Aesop's "The Hares and the Frogs." The hares in the fable are so afraid of other beasts that they want to kill themselves. As they travel to the place where they will do this deed, they frighten frogs in a pond. The gesture in the fable seems to be the following: to instill fear is power; to succumb to fear is death. Although fear is not explicitly political, the two lines devoted to the Hare begin to point Herbert's poem in the direction of a political maneuver: "The fearful Hare her ears, which by their law / Humility did reach to Fortitude." Much like the Lion's paw, here the Hare's ears — its most remarkable physical quality — are given over to Humility and then to Fortitude. What is curious is the question of the ears' law, the law of the ears, which may suggest the connection of fear with Fortitude in theological virtue ethics: Fortitude is about curbing fear,[8] and strengthens

the soul against fear.[9] Fortitude is also seen as the firmness of mind, to be able to withstand those things that are difficult to be firm.[10] Thus the Hare gives away one of its attributes, which is most characteristic of itself, not only to overcome fear but also to be able to stand with firmness of mind before those things it is afraid of.

The third animal in the parade is a jealous Turkey. Jealousy, much like anger, is an expression of envy as "sorrow for another's good."[11] And in this state of envy, the Turkey offers up its coral-chain that Humility hands over to Temperance. Jealousy and envy are not philosophically or theologically opposed to Temperance in the same kind of contrary agreement as Fear is to Fortitude. But to understand the Turkey's jealousy we may consider the gift it has brought: the coral-chain. Herbert's euphemism "coral-chain" for the turkey's rather hideous wattle suggests how coral was prized in the Early Modern period for its beauty, for its ability to ward off evil spirits, and for its health benefits as a charm or amulet.[12] The Turkey brings forward its apparent adornment, to become naked as the other animals, and to turn itself uglier than it already is. It surrenders the good it has to Temperance, with its qualities of honor and beauty,[13] which is in every way the Turkey's opposite.

The second stanza ends with a problem, or perhaps *the* problem: "On justice was bestow'd the Fox's brain, / Kill'd in the way by chance." To better consider this, we should look at the structure of the poem as a whole: it has four stanzas, each with five lines in pentameter, one line in trimeter, one line in pentameter, and one line in trimeter. The trimeter draws in the reader's eye, hinting that the poem can be rewritten with only these lines; note also how the final stanza in trimeter emphasizes the circular movement of the poem: the act of sacrifice repeats itself.

> [...]
>
> To execute their call, / [...]
>
> gave them about to all.
>
> [...]

That went to Temperance / [...]

Kill'd in the way by chance.

[...]

They leapt upon the throne; / [...]

They had depos'd each one.

[...]

They drive them soon away; / [...]

At the next session day.

When the poem is in this truncated form, the death of the Fox seems worse because here Temperance is killed by suggestion. It calls attention to the way we may feel when observing an occurrence of chance in nature, and we imagine the apathy animals may feel before a fallen Virtue. The whole thing is heinous, a horror show dressed in subdued language: a land without Temperance.

Let us look more closely at the Fox. In popular literature, the fox is known for its cunning;[14] and guile is something directed only to evil.[15] The fox is brilliant in its deception of others. In this way, the gesture of handing over its brain to Justice is analogous to the earlier transactions: it gives unto that Virtue its most defining feature as a representation of that Virtue's opposite. Although in this case, it looks more like reconciliation with one's enemy than a symbolic this-for-that exchange. It is curious, nevertheless, that the other animals bring forward a material part as a sacrifice to the Virtues (a paw, ears, a coral-chain). The Fox's brain is also a material thing, but what it implies is an ability to reason (if only for evil ends). The brain is also critical to the functioning of the creature; it cannot survive without it to be evil or good.[16] By handing over its entire brain, it suggests the complete overhaul of its reasoning to favor Justice. But this act is not

realized because the Fox is dead at the start — a haphazard fate that illustrates injustice among the animals.

The third stanza suggests a second problem in the form of a Peacock's feather. And the Peacock does not bring its own sacrifice. For this reason, we have a sacrificial act by proxy: "at length" the Crow shows up with the feather. There is irony here: the all-black Crow appears with the multicolored and fabulous feather. This is perhaps the Crow's duty, to bring the "brave gift" to the sacrificial table. The Crow in Aesop is gullible and industrious,[17] and we start thinking that maybe it was the Peacock's vanity that kept it from bringing the feather on its own. Hypothetically, had the Peacock come along, the act of offering up its feathers (sacrificing the beauty that keeps it from flying like the other birds)[18] could have impressed the Virtues and the animals. The Peacock's extravagance of vanity might have been rendered up as a sacrifice to Prudence. But the ceremonial turning over of goods to a Virtue did not occur with the Peacock; the "grace" of the Peacock's feather was so great that the *Virtues* fell over each other in order to grasp it as theirs.

The (living) animals noticed this scrambling and organized a *coup d'état*: "They leapt upon the throne; / And if the Fox had lived to rule their side, / They had depos'd each one." The animals grab their places on the throne, thereby turning it momentarily into a throne of Vice. The problem for the animals now is, once again, that the Fox is dead; the animals have no Justice, and no foundation for their ability to rule. Without the Fox's brain, they have no basis for their new community — a political space where animality and vice rule alongside the sovereignty of guile. What we find is a powerful sense of vanity affected the Virtues to the extent that they gave up their seats. The peacock problem reflects the strength of vanity as a vice. The warning expressed here is of finding such grace in the material world that it blinds us from seeing what true grace is.

In the final stanza, Humility is left alone to resolve the disorder. Humility is generally considered to be a "special virtue" outside of the cardinal and theological virtues. But the Christian theology behind the importance of Humility brings the poem closer to the tenor of *The Temple*. As the

other Virtues fight among each other for that material grace, Humility holds the feather in its hand and weeps. Humility then utters the only speech in the poem: "*Here it is / for which ye wrangle.*" This expression turns the Virtues back to their throne and they throw the animals off. Humility's words emphasize the materiality of the conflict — "Here it is" — as though Humility could be holding up a gold coin or a stone. The Virtues look so perfectly steadfast in artistic representations and in philosophical literature that we would be hard-pressed to imagine them haggling over a material object. Herbert turns that notion on its head by showing how a theological "special virtue" has the ability to supersede the others, even when it is considered to be the lowest, while laboring in a task of handing out goods without receiving a gift itself.

The last two lines of the poem express a punishment or fine: Humility "amerced" the animals, and they must bring "double gifts" next time to make up for the error and chaos. The brutality of the entire scene, to end with a fine of "double gifts," suggests that the poem is probably not about animals handing over their body parts in an act of sacrifice. Let us imagine that is the case: the Lion can presumably survive with only one paw; the Hare gave away both ears in the first round, and the animal probably has little chance for survival without ears (and it has to bring *double* the next time); maybe the Turkey's wattle *looks* like an adornment, but the Turkey only has one of those; and the Fox cannot survive without a brain in the first place (so if it wasn't dead on arrival, it would be dead once they took its brain out and gave it to Justice the first time). The emphasis on animal parts takes away from the vision of a creature as a whole.

Let us look again at the Lion's paw. The paw is a lion's way of showing strength. When we consider one of our own hands, we see it has similar properties: we can hold our hand in a fist in a gesture of conflict, to harm or to maim, to overcome strife through violence. We may be *angry* at circumstances and use our hand to write a testament with language that is so powerful it can be censored or lauded as a work of ingenuity with the ability to inspire violence or vanity. But instead of these actions, we may give our hand over to Humility for Humility to decide where that talent is

best employed. This exercise can play all the way down: the Hare's ears are a defining feature that alert it to danger and make it fearful of that danger; our own ears may hear words that inspire fear, and these words bring us to act in a ridiculous way. Humility instructs us to offer up our ears to Fortitude and to firmness of the will. The Fox's brain perhaps illustrates this dichotomy in the poem best, spelling out the difference between the Virtues in the heavens and the things down here. The Fox's brain shows the worst of human reasoning: of reasoning toward evil, of being able to reason and turn that result into an action that benefits one and not the many. The Fox's brain is the greatest expression of human intellect at its worst and was bestowed on Justice as the thing that is most opposed to it. When we look at our living body in a perspective of sacrifice, each member has the ability to be imperfectly reconciled with virtue to do the work of virtue. As a thinking-thing we may approximate to Justice only when Humility grants it, and we must bend to the ground to enforce it.

[1] George Herbert, "Humility" in *The Temple* [1633], [London]: Penguin Classics, 2017, pp. 100-101. The quotations follow the language modernization as printed in the Penguin Classics version.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1911-1925), II-II, Q. 161, Art. 1, ad. 1.

[3] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* II-II, Q. 161, Art. 1, ad. 5.

[4] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* II-II, Q. 170, Art. 2, co.

[5] Augustine writes "piety is becoming to the meek" (De Serm. Dom. In Monte i), see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 121, Art. 2., s. c.

[6] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* II-II, Q. 101, Art. 3, ad. 1.

[7] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 121, Art. 2., co.

[8] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 123, Art. 3 co.

[9] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 161, Art. 2, ad. 3.

[10] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 123, Art. 2, co.

[11] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 36, Art. 2, co.

[12] Sasha Handley, *Sleep in Early Modern England,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016, pp. 98-99.

[13] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 141, Art. 8, ad. 1.

[14] See Aesop's fable "The Fox and the Crow."

[15] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 47, Art. 13, ad. 3.

[16] The other animals' sacrifices can be seen in a similar light as the individual who sacrifices one eye that acts in a vicious way because "it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not *that* thy whole body should be cast into hell" (Matthew 5:29 [AV]). The Fox's brain and the Peacock's feather challenge this reading.

[17] See Aesop's fables "The Fox and the Crow" and "The Crow and the Pitcher."

[18] See Aesop's fable "The Peacock and Juno."