

# The Self-Ironic Nature of George Herbert's "Jordan (I)" and "Jordan (II)"

John Wolfgang Roberts

*The Temple*, by George Herbert is described as "deceptively simple and graceful" (Logan 1605). The editors of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century/ The Early Seventeenth Century* continue to describe Herbert's style, and the poetic nature of *The Temple*, as "marked by self-irony [, and Herbert, himself as] struggl[ing] to define his relationship to God" (1605). This essay investigates these ideas, of formal self-irony and a conflicted relationship with God, and traces the tensions within, and between, Herbert's "Jordan (I)" (hereby "I") and "Jordan (II)" (hereby "II"). The formal and spiritual dilemma oscillating between these two poems is, generally speaking, due to the difficulty of trying to *portray* the Christian Truth through the creation of art (in this case, poetry written to represent that truth).

The irony of Herbert's poetry, particularly in "I" and "II", which are found within *The Temple*, is that "I" calls for the internalization of the Christian Truth through poetic invention and interpretation (fictionalizing), and "II" calls against excessive poetic invention and interpretation, since the pure Christian Truth has already been written in the *Bible* and need not be muddled by the readership's subjective interpretations/invention. In other words, both of these poems have differing aesthetic claims as to the role of art to the concept of an ultimate Truth. Whereas "I" sees art as a positive way to celebrate the Truth, "II" sees art as a negative way to diminish the purity of that Truth.

In this essay, the poet's invention (poetry), and the reader's interpretation (reading) are understood as identical since both are subjective individual engagements upon the perceived Christian Truth addressed by these particular poems. That is, while

a poet interprets the Truth by creating art, the reader interprets the Truth in relation to the art. What is necessary to understand here are not the differences between these two acts, but the similarity in that they are both interpretive acts. This idea is important because it hints towards an understanding that true objectivity is unknowable, since to know something is to behold that knowledge subjectively.

The two "Jordan" poems are characteristic of the self-irony that is not only representative of Herbert's internal conflict between the Christian Truth of the *Bible* and the Fictional truths of poetic invention, but are themselves a meta-commentary on the blurred boundary between Truth and Fiction. The word, Fiction, is used here to mean an artificial representation of reality. In this way, "I" and "II", as poems, are fictionalizations of aspects of an ultimate Truth—not as genre, but as approximations of a certain Reality, that is, God. It would seem through these poems that Truth cannot escape fictionalizations, and Fictions cannot escape reductionist truth-claims when they are being interpreted. This is the self-irony and poetic dilemma in constant tension *within* each of the "Jordan" poems, as well as *between* the two "Jordan" poems. In other words, as a set, "I" and "II" comment on the elusiveness of concretely defining Truth and Fiction by not just disagreeing with each other, but by also demonstrating the ways in which there is a constant pull on the poet or reader between the poles of Truth and Fiction, never fully realizing one nor the other.

George Herbert's poetry, part of a larger religious and literary movement, is reflective of the play between Truth and Fiction, demonstrating that the boundary between Truth and Fiction go hand in hand and are not separate entities. In this essay, "Truth" is taken to mean the Christian word of God as it is written in the *Bible*, and "Fiction" is to mean an individual's personal interpretation of that Biblical Truth, as already mentioned. Additionally, it is imperative that the art of poetry is to be understood as an artifactual consequence of individual interpretive endeavors upon the *Bible*, in the context of this essay. I will begin by illustrating the historical climate of the Protestant Reformation and literary Renaissance in England, and show how this

context instilled a sense of the necessity of individual interpretations of the *Bible*. Then utilizing Herbert's poems, "Jordan (I)" and "Jordan (II)", I will show the inescapability of that duality, thus showing them as false dichotomies and revealing a metaphysical aesthetic to Herbert's self-irony, which requires Fiction as much as it does Truth.

Understanding the self-irony between the two poems first requires an understanding of the religious climate between the Catholics, and the Protestants, during the Reformation. George Herbert was a devoted Anglican (Loewenstein 12). His Protestant faith, at the time of religious tensions between the Catholics and Protestants, provides an interesting cultural context for understanding the self-irony in the "Jordan" poems regarding Truth and Fiction. As a Protestant, Herbert would not only have been familiar with "Sola Scriptura", but would have practiced it. "Sola Scriptura" can be defined as the primacy of the Scripture as the purest form of the Truth. This is an inherently ironic concept in itself for three reasons: first, it relegates the metaphysical Truth to a textual artifact; second, as a text, the metaphysical Truth can only be known through an individual's subjective (Fictional) reading (Interpretation and Invention), and thus rendering that Truth no longer objective; and third, as a practice, it blurs any strict separation between subjectivity and objectivity. The "Jordan" poems considered together are a meta-commentary on what could be seen as the struggle between the inherent ironies of "Sola Scriptura".

Fr. John Whiteford, at the *Orthodox Christian Information Center* offers three general assumptions that help understand "Sola Scriptura" from an institutional, rather than individual perspective, and thus illuminates fundamental paradoxes that will be used to later explicate the "Jordan" poems. First, "[t]he Bible was intended to be the last word on faith, piety, and worship" (Whiteford) in the Protestant faiths. Here we see the primacy of the *Bible* as both subjective artifact and objective Truth. The second assumption is, "[t]he Scriptures were the basis of the early Church, whereas Tradition is simply a "human corruption" that came much later" (Whiteford). This shows the tension and reluctance in "Sola Scriptura" to embrace interpretation, or any other manifestation

in faith or practice through outside elements such as a cultural tradition. This second assumption however, is nullified by the very premise of the first assumption, which relegates the Truth to artifact. Additionally, this second assumption is the proverbial boundary between the first assumption and the third assumption, which is: “[a]nyone can interpret the Scriptures for himself or herself without the aid of the Church” (Whiteford). Again, these assumptions are from an institutional perspective, but the point is made, that “Sola Scriptura”, despite relegating Truth to artifact, and trying to maintain that artifactual truth as still objective, maintains in the third assumption that “anyone” can reach that objective knowledge through subjective interpretations of that objective text, the *Bible*. This is to say that “Sola Scriptura”, a key philosophy of the Protestant Reformation, was more generally a literary revolution, guaranteeing that the English Renaissance was a particularly literary one. In “Sola Scriptura” the devout become storytellers in as much as they have been readers, of the Truth.

Barbara Leah Harman pinpoints this tension in the “Jordan” poems, and writes,

These two poems have a common theme as well as a common form: they enlist the traditional language of literary experience only to dismiss it in the end...Both poems in addition point to the dangers inherent in practicing the verbal arts: one risks getting lost in language, losing one’s self or one’s purpose or both. (865)

Particularly, in “I”, the literary experience in question is the need for poetic invention, for the purpose of internalizing a particular Christian Truth and establishing a personal relationship with that Truth. The poem (Herbert 1611) begins, “Who says that fictions only and false hair/ Become a verse? Is there in truth no beauty?” (1-2). Here Herbert poses the question as to whether we are able to find beauty in Truth. The implied question then becomes, if there is beauty in Truth, then can we not represent that beauty in verse? This is the central poetic crisis of the poem: can the poet perpetuate such Truths through her inventions?

The second stanza provides a series of “thought-experiments” along the lines of the

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above posed questions. Herbert writes, "Must purling streams refresh a lover's loves?/  
Must all be veiled, while he that reads, divines," (8-9). Herbert here asks, can a purely good emotion like true love, be inspired and perpetuated by something outside itself, like rippling streams that somehow poetically inspire the love-struck observer into a newer and purer understanding of his love for his Love? Along these lines, then, can the poet create a verse that exists outside the Scripture, but which accurately portrays, enlivens and inspires the Truth of the Scripture, which it represents?

The third stanza answers this in two contradictory ways. First, there is an emphatic stance on the power of poetic invention to inspire, and second, there is the stance that objective Truth may not be so inspirational after all. The final stanza reads,

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing;  
Riddle who list, for me, and pull for prime;  
I envy no man's nightingale or spring;  
Nor let them punish me with loss of rhyme,  
Who plainly say, *My God, My King*. (11-15)

The line, "I envy no man's nightingale or spring;" (13) suggests that it is also not enough to rely on other people's poetic invention, but to formulate one's own internal proverbial verse in order to truly understand the beautiful Truth. In this way, there is a very Protestant message in the vain of "Sola Scriptura" here, in that one's own interpretation is necessary to reach the higher levels of understanding God. The final two lines make a similar argument, but warns that if we just reduce the Truth to it's purest message, such as "*My God, My King*" (15), it loses all poetic value, and in many ways is no longer poetry since it becomes dogmatic and resists interpretation. In this way, a non-poetic focus on Scripture (an opposition to "Solo Scriptura"), would do a disservice to the Scripture since it is not enough to simply hear the Truth, but one must internalize the Truth by forming deeper interpretive connections with it. "I" thus argues that subjectivity is a necessary component for truly knowing objective Truth,

and poetry and the poet are in the business, so to speak, to help realize that Truth.

"II" contains the same circular reasoning, but from the opposite starting point. That is, instead of starting from Truth and arguing for poetic invention, "II" starts from poetic invention, and argues that Truth is more difficult to know through poetic invention. Instead of a call for subjective interpretations, "II" is a call, or rather, a warning, against poetic obfuscation of the pure Truths already penned in the *Bible*. As Helen Wilcox writes,

'Jordan (II)' is a poem about words getting out of hand. The opening sets the poet's own 'lines' alongside 'heav'nly joys', and already by the second line it is not entirely clear whether the 'lustre' and 'excelling' belong to the 'joys' or to the 'lines' themselves, which already threaten to displace heaven as the poem's focus. (Wilcox 193).

An example from "II"'s first stanza (Herbert 192) reads,

When first my lines of heav'nly joys made mention  
Such was their lustre, they did so excel,  
That I sought out quaint words, and trim invention;  
My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,  
Curling with metaphors a plain intention,  
Decking the sense, as if it were to sell. (1-6)

Here Herbert's speaker expresses the "marketability" of poetry to convey the "plain intention" (5). In other words, poetry is seen here not as a type of rhetorical invention, but instead, a form of rhetorical persuasion. Wilcox explains:

...in its early draft the poem had another title—'Invention'—and this, too, helps us to understand the aesthetic of devotional writing suggested by 'Jordan (II)'. 'Invention' can so easily be taken to mean poetic ingenuity, those very 'trim' ideas

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referred to in the first stanza [and in *Jordan (I)*], but the original meaning of *inventio* in rhetoric was discovery; the poet's invention was not to originate but to uncover or reveal meanings" (195).

"II" reflects this process of discovery, as in the second stanza the speaker begins to second-guess the appropriateness of his metaphors to reflect the objective of the Truth (of which the speaker is not yet certain which Truth he is striving for). The second stanza contains lines such as "thousands of notions in my brain did runne" (7); "I often blotted what I had begunne;/ This was not quick enough, and that was dead. (9-10) (Herbert 193). Here then, the speaker raises metaphysical questions that the speaker, and the reader, must work out. The first question is as to whether the inventive process can reveal such Truths, and the second question is to whether the inventive process also obscures the Truths. The answer to both questions is answered in the affirmative in Herbert's final stanza. He writes (193),

As flames do work and winde, when they ascend,  
So did I weave my self into the sense.  
But while I bustled, I might heare a friend  
Whisper, *How wide is all this long pretence!*  
*There is in love a sweetness readie penn'd:*  
*Copie out only that, and save expense.* (13-18)

"II" is at once reflective of the very process of invention, which it calls for, and is also a warning against relying too much on invention. The italicized final lines of the last stanza can be read as the speaker's conscience, at the moment of epiphany, after toiling with the poetic rhetoric of metaphor and linguistic approximations of the Truth he seeks, who tells the speaker where to find the Truth he is looking for. It is therefore useless to continue with the poetic invention, now that this Truth is known. The final italicized lines suggest that there comes a point where too much poetic invention is

damaging.

While “I” argues for the necessity for poetic invention in order to personally understand the Truth, “II” argues for the primacy of the Truth which can be reached through poetic invention up to a point, at which time if the poet continues, is engaged in a futile endeavor, and a damaging one as well, since any further interpretation and invention would be muddling the intuitive Truth.

The message from “I” and “II”, thus far, seem to be able to cohere into a unified aesthetic. The reader of both poems may derive a metaphysical aesthetic of unification, in that Truth (the Real) and Fiction (Invention) are not necessarily polar opposites, but represent the ebb and flow of human understanding, the balance of that scale between Truth and Fiction being the ultimate goal. Adam B. Marshall (2012) argues for the “via media”, or middle way. In his explication on “I”, he writes, “[w]hile the obfuscation of pastoral allegory should not be so preferred that the poet is ‘punish[ed]...with loss of rhyme’ (14) by those who prefer stark doctrinal formulae” (Marshall 116). This message is also true of “II” in that there’s no use in inventing once the inner voice epiphanies the Truth.

However, when both the “Jordan” poems are considered together, we become aware of the fact that as much as the reader fancies themselves navigating towards the middle way from the extremities of the poles of Truth and Fiction, it is those very poles that tip against our endeavors, like a scale that forces us from one extremity to the other. This is to say, that once we have our doctrinal Truth, as in “II”, there is then the problem of language, which tosses us back into the realm of Invention (“I”). There, we may better internalize the meaning or nuances of that Truth, till we have our epiphany, which grounded in language, brings us back again to Invention. Wilcox makes the case on “II”’s ending:

[t]his is no easy conclusion; it came out of poetic crisis, but in many ways begins another. What is this ‘love’ which must be copied? If it is Christ himself, then this



is a recipe for living the Christian life, not for writing successful devotional poetry. If it is the life of Christ as recorded in the Bible, then the poet's task is simply to echo it—but then this is no poem, unless as in 'Jordan (I)' [...] Herbert writes an entire poem about paring his poetry down to a plain biblical phrase ...and we are back to the dilemma of 'Jordan (II)'. (194)

So it is not only that both "Jordan" poems in their own way subvert their original endeavors—"I", against doctrinal plainness, and "II", against over-poetic ornamentation—but so too, are they both representing the endless struggle and circularity of the "devotional inventor". That is, because the Truth (*Bible*) is relegated to text, it cannot exist outside any particular linguistic context. Therefore, there is a primacy in language, as our unfortunate but celebratory lens, from which we come to approach the Truth. However, because of the elusiveness of subjective language to try and convey a sense of true meaning, what seems to be an ebb-and-flow between extremes, can quite often be a jarring reversal from any understanding or appreciation of an ultimate Truth. That is, one risks overthinking the Truth (too much invention), or diminishing the poetic ornamentation (purifying the Truth). In yet another irony, or paradox, it is this subtle, but sometimes violent back-and-forth, that gives George Herbert, and in particular, the "Jordan" poems, their devotional, yet metaphysical "unitary sensibilities" (Lecture Notes, Unit Two). Wilcox offers an explanation that can be applied to this recursive process of the "Jordan" poems, and of Herbert's poetry,

[t]he process of all the lyrics of *The Temple* is (re)discovery: of perceptions beyond ordinary description, of the mystery of affliction, of the simplicity to be wrung from the most perplexing narrative corners and, above all, of the discovery of God's love in the most surprising places. (195)

There is indeed a utility to the recursive nature of this poetry, namely, that it forces the poet or reader onto different avenues of introspection as they try to find important

Truths and appropriate interpretations. Or to put it another way, the recursivity creates an ongoing process of creating more art to represent deeper truths, which can be obtained through contemplating existing art. In this way, the “Jordan” poems are individually representative, and a meta-commentary upon the processes of either extreme (Truth and Fiction), utilizing self-irony between content and form; and on the other hand, when brought together, represent the larger self-irony of an inescapable process that includes us, the readers, as they hold up a proverbial mirror to our own relationships between our Truths and Fictions.

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