On the Wings of Poetry

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George Herbert's shaped poem "Easter Wings" initially received criticism for the "false wit" behind the typographical shape that reflects the subject of his poetry. Perhaps his critics felt the shape was trivial, distracting, or too constricting of the poetry in each verse. Although the poem's shape does make an immediate visual impact on the reader, we can look through the superficial veneer and find poetry that is just as inspirationally wing-like as its visual shape. Herbert created the winged shape of "Easter Wings" to augment the poetic movement and mysterious meanings of the poem and thereby create an expression of visual art that is inseparable from its linguistic statement.

The poem begins with a broad line that appropriately reflects its grand subject: "Lord, who created man in wealth and store" (1). Herbert addresses the Creator who freely and abundantly gives man all things. In contrast, the description of man begins a downward, diminishing spiral that shows the height from which he fell. From "wealth and store" (1) to "most poor" (5), man "foolishly ... lost" (2) all that God provided him. Each subsequent line shrinks in size to reflect the "decaying" (3) of man, whose tragic fall put distance between God and himself. The tone of this five-line stanza is heightened by the visual cue of the shrinking lines. The wings appear broad and strong at the beginning and diminish into weak, folded limbs at the end. Man, who was created wealthy, falls in sin to impoverished decay.

The thought "with thee" (6) quickly changes the mood of the poem as the speaker remembers his Lord in the second stanza. Once again, the lines extend as if the broken wings of the fallen man are fully restored. The speaker rises up to exalt the grandeur of the Creator: "O let me rise / As larks, harmoniously, / And sing this day thy victories" (7-9). The lines increase in breadth, and the poetic thought passes from man's depravity to Christ's victory. The song of Christ's victory lifts the sinner from his fallen state and puts the wind back under his wings, causing him to soar. Just as a bird gains speed as he falls in the air, so does this "fall further the flight in" (10) the sinner who recognizes his Lord. Herbert is speaking of how Christ's mercies save man from his fall and restore him once again to flight. The shape of the poem, which first decreases and then once again restores its breadth, symbolizes this idea.

As the poem progresses, so does time in the speaker's life as he, under the weights of "sicknesses and shame" (12), begins his downward path of sorrow and despair. The poetic lines of the third stanza shorten again as if the wings of the sinner have become "most thin" (15) under God's punishment for sin. We can visualize this depletion of strength as the shape of the poem wearily decreases. The visual guides within the lines carry us to the image of frailty.

Stanza four brings us to thoughts of the Creator again, and we find a glimmer of hope in the repeated remembrance "with thee" (16). The speaker turns his eyes toward God and is strengthened by the gaze. The speaker realizes in "For, if l imp my wing on thine" (19) that he must graft the broken wings of his life onto the strong and loving arms of Christ. In this unification with the ultimate source of strength, the sinner is able to "feel this day of victory" (17). The realization of sin and Christ's victory was present in the first two stanzas of the poem, but in the third stanza the speaker quickly collapses under life's burdens. Only here in the fourth stanza does he find true unification with Christ and experience complete restoration. Relying on Christ's strength instead of his own, the sinner realizes that "affliction shall advance the flight in" (20) him, and he can now triumphantly overcome life's difficulties. Herbert declares
that it is only through a true union with Christ that a sinner can be restored and lifted back up to the soaring heights of a relationship with God. The shape of the poem, which fell under man's sins and the human inability to endure life separate from God, now stretches back to its original breadth and portrays a victorious reunion with the Creator.

The shape of the poem and the title, "Easter Wings," create a mystery within the poem that demands a more profound interpretation. A superficial understanding of the poem is easy, but the word "Easter" in the title hints at the evidence of a symbolic portrayal of Jesus Christ.

Surely, the first stanza of the poem speaks of the fall of man and his resulting depravity and separation from God as discussed above. The second stanza's request to "let me rise, / . . . / And sing this day thy victories" (7, 9), however, may also represent Christ's willingness to rise up as the final sacrifice and leave his kingdom to come to earth on a rescue mission for man. His selfless sacrifice results in a glorious resurrection from the dead. By offering man salvation from depravity, Christ will be exalted by those he saves. Thus, "Then shall [man's] fall further the flight in me" (10).

The third stanza presents a clear picture of the crucified Christ who, at the "tender age" (11) of thirty-three, took on "sorrow" (11) and endured the "sicknesses and shame" (12) of the cross to bear God's punishment for man's sin. It is as though Christ himself speaks in the lines that read, "Thou didst so punish sin, / That I became! Most thin" (13-15). He was reduced to his weakest state on the torturing cross for the sake of mankind.

In the fourth stanza, Christ appears united with the power of the Holy Spirit and raised from the dead: "With thee / Let me combine" (16-17). The message of the poem lies within this last stanza as sinners graft themselves into the power of Christ's resurrection and "feel this day . . . [Christ's] victory" (13). With salvation, "Affliction shall advance the flight in" (20) all sinners who are fully restored. Because Christ rose from the dead on Easter morning, we now have the saving grace that lifts us above our sin and life's infirmities.

Within this more reflective interpretation, we find that the movement of the shape of the poem exemplifies the significance of the language. During strong points of the poem, the lines are broad and strong. But when the tone begins to fall and the strength of the situation falters, the lines reflect the same diminishing quality. The visual shape guides our understanding of the intensity of the words. The two are so artistically and dependently entwined that the full impact of the poetry relies on their union. To take the shape away from the language would destroy the beauty and the influence of the poem.

"Easter Wings" creates a complete view of the resurrection of Christ and its influence on the life of man. The artistic shape beautifully communicates the poetic subject's intensity of emotion and weight of significance. Through both a superficial and a profound interpretation of the text, readers can better understand the shape of the poem. One can truly appreciate Herbert's artistry through both his linguistic and visual expressions.