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Sacramental Aesthetics

A Herbertian Reading of John Dewey

Hayley Langton

George Herbert's devotional poetry is well-known for inviting active engagement and interpretation from its readers, for its sometimes-contradictory elements, and for its emphasis on textuality. Yet despite the clear parallels these qualities present between the structure and experience of Herbert's poetry in *The Temple* and the aesthetics of John Dewey, the characteristics shared between sacramental poetry and Dewey's theory have thus far been overlooked. I argue that a Herbertian reading of Dewey's aesthetics reveals its underlying sacramentality and, in turn, provides a new framework for studying the functions of Herbert's rhetoric. In addition, the sacramental qualities of Dewey's philosophy make a compelling argument for further postsecular interpretations.

Sacramental Poetics

The primary purpose of a sacrament is a sign that points to something beyond itself through images, sound, time, or language (Schwartz 4). According to Regina Schwartz, in the pre-Reformation Eucharist this "pointing beyond itself" was so complete it constituted transubstantiation. It was a *signa*

naturalia, a sign that bridged beings and the divine through the will of God. While sign-making played a role in pre-Reformation sacraments (particularly the Eucharist) in this way, my argument chiefly concerns post-Reformation sacraments. Schwartz claims that as the Eucharist was dismantled during the Reformation the reformers were left with a nostalgic thirst for Christ's material presence, as is often evident in the work of Donne, Herbert, Shakespeare, Milton, and other seventeenth-century poets. Kimberly Johnson adds to this when she states that following the sixteenth-century Reformation, "the lyric poem becomes a primary cultural site for investigating the capacity of language to manifest presence" (6). These poems draw attention to the text as corporeal artifacts that embody the Eucharistic anxiety over signification and how it operates.

Herbert's poetry offers a prime example of this anxiety, as his readers "[become] radically aware of the experience of encountering signs" (Johnson, 30). The forms and structure of Herbert's poetry continually draw the reader's attention back to its textuality and thus to its signification. There are many ways in which Herbert accomplishes this, but here I focus only on one: the dialectic between speaker and poem (the latter referring to both text and form), as identified by Stanley Fish.¹ Herbert's poem "Love-joy" clearly illustrates this dialectic:

AS on a window late I cast mine eye,
I saw a vine drop grapes with *J* and *C*
Anneal'd on every bunch. One standing by
Ask'd what it meant. I, who am never loth
To spend my judgement, said, It seem'd to me
To be the bodie and the letters both
Of *Joy* and *Charitie*. Sir, you have not miss'd,
The man reply'd; It figures *JESUS CHRIST*. (413)

In "Love-joy" the speaker is first identified as an interpreter—one who views a scene through a window and must assign meaning to it (Johnson 47). The speaker sees the letters (or signs) "*J* and *C*" and is asked explicitly to render them meaningful. The reader, of course, is also an interpreter looking through a

1 Fish explains that many of phrases in Herbert's poetry reprise the Socratic method by presenting deliberately naive assertions "that function as questions because they invite the reader to supply either what is missing or what is deficient" (195). In turn, this changes the experience of the reader as he or she discovers truth through the "dialectic" (or statement/revision pattern) this creates.

lens (the text) and is assigned the same task. As Fish explains, the reader readily recognizes the obvious answer: Jesus Christ (195). This answer is held until line seven, when the reader questions the speaker's response of "*Joy and Charitie.*" The reader questions again when the narrator is supposed to be correct ("Sir, you have not miss'd,") and then a final time when the reader's initial assumption is confirmed ("it figures *JESUS CHRIST*"). At the final line, the reader finds the answer—the understanding that the multiple meanings of *J* and *C* imply each other (Fish 195).

Even then, the poem cannot quite be tied up so neatly. With this poem Herbert draws attention to the instability of the sign. Is it the means, the ends, or both? As Johnson points out, by emphasizing "*JESUS CHRIST*" visually, Herbert also draws attention to the words' textuality; as he destabilizes the meaning (or signification) of the words themselves, the reader also becomes more aware of the words as artifact (49). In addition, through the dialectic described above the reader has actually reenacted the action in the poem. Like the speaker, the reader steps into an interpretative role and attempts to render signs meaningful. He or she continually experiences the instability of the text all while discovering Jesus Christ as the ultimate meaning—but Jesus Christ is never clearly identified as the signifier, the signified, or the means to either. Herbert's poetry becomes clearly sacramental as he draws out the anxiety in the operation and experience of the Eucharist not merely through structure or narrative, but by requiring the reader to take part in the experience along with the speaker.

Dewey's Aesthetics

This experience gestures towards the aesthetics of John Dewey, but before going further it is necessary to understand what both "aesthetics" and "experience" mean in this context. Aesthetics is a broad term that is easily abused. Borrowing from Bence Nanay, "aesthetics" does not mean defining what is beautiful and what is not, and it does not refer to the philosophy of art; it is the experience that takes place when one is fully engaged in any form of art, be it jazz, an ocean sunset, a Picasso, or simply the way light filters through a kitchen window (4, 7). Dewey is interested in the experience that engagement creates—what must take place for it to happen, what it is exactly, and how and why such experiences are universally meaningful.

Aesthetic experience, for Dewey, is the “culminating meaning of overcoming resistance” (Stroud 35). This resistance can take several forms. Frequently it may simply be the tendency to be distracted by the mundane, to resist surprise. Other times it may be physical, such as climbing a mountain before being able to enjoy the view. Or, the resistance may be the struggle to actively engage—to identify the various aspects of the artistic object and find cohesive meaning in them.²

Dewey is known for the sharp distinction he makes between “experience” and having *an Experience* (distinguished in this paper by a capitalized E, a convention Dewey himself did not practice). Experience is composed or made; it is always aesthetic and expresses what takes place in the attentive viewer’s encounter with the aesthetic object. It is reliant on the relationship between the two and can be determined by a number of different factors, but the most crucial are that an experience must have a creative component, it must have a coming together of distinct parts (which Dewey calls “consummation”), and it must include growth or progress—that is, there must be a sense of movement and a form of resistance that is overcome (Dewey 17). These factors (among others) consummate to form a cohesive experience, creating new meaning through an experience of growth that cannot be articulated singularly.

Due to its sacramentality, or its intentional and overt tension between sign and signified, Herbert’s poetry exemplifies each of these necessary components. This does not mean that every reader of Herbert’s poetry is moved to have an Experience, but does suggest that for the willing and attentive reader, Herbert’s poetry is particularly suited for *inviting* an Experience as Dewey defines it. Thus through Herbert, I argue that each of these factors are also a fundamental part of sacramental experience.

For instance, by consistently drawing the reader’s attention to the artifice of his poems, the creative component of the artistic object (in this case, the text) is made clear. And as shown previously in “Love-joy,” the attentive reader actively navigates the anxiety between sign and signified, taking part in the creation of the aesthetic Experience as he or she responds to the corrections, questions, and surprises inherent in the text. Such navigation is a hallmark of Herbert’s poetry and is even recognized in the whole work of *The Temple* itself, as the reader is brought to the entrance of “*The Temple*” at “The Altar” and

2 The value of aesthetic experiences is considered to be self-evident. See George Herbert Mead’s “The Nature of Aesthetic Experience” and Scott R. Stroud’s “The Art of Experience: Dewey on the Aesthetic.”

concludes by partaking of the Host in “Love (III)” (658). This careful structure evokes a sense of progression, sacredness, and meaning to which the poetry gestures. Within his work the separate “parts” of sign and signified or text and meaning—as well as many unmentioned such as rhyme scheme, ornamental language, poetic structure, and so on—consummate into one whole: the poem as a text as well as a culminating meaning, such as Jesus Christ. And yet each part remains clearly distinct, due again to the sacramental elements of Herbert’s poetry which emphasize textuality as sign.

In addition, Herbert readily provides “resistance to be overcome.” Allowing oneself to be surprised and corrected through the dialectic is certainly one form of resistance; another is navigating the instability of the text. The instability—which never fully resolves—does not deter the Experience, but aids in its creation by providing movement and growth. The instability of the sign requires the reader to dwell on the movement between sign and signified and the new meaning that results. In fact, rendering the sign as meaningful is a compelling example of what Dewey calls the “continuous consummating” of the distinct parts. Sign and signified must be continuously consummated, or brought together as one in ongoing process, because their instability requires the act of coming together again and again as meaning fluctuates through “play” (Derrida 278). This coming together recalls the Eucharistic experience, bringing together the spiritual and material while emphasizing the anxiety between them.

Quality of Attention

Unsurprisingly, the agency of the viewer plays a crucial part in each of these factors of an Experience. According to Dewey, the viewer must deliberately engage with the artistic object, but not too deliberately because whatever else an experience may be, it is not something that can be forced. The viewer must be receptive and open to surprises and new considerations, but not too receptive, or he or she will likely become distracted or bored. Having an Experience requires a certain quality of attention: attention that is distributed between multiple aspects of the subject of study, but that especially focuses on the relationship between viewer and object (Nanay 39).

Herbert’s poetry directs the reader’s attention in just this way; the dialectic is one example. It requires open-ended attention; rather than firmly holding one conclusion in mind, the reader is compelled to consider different interpretations by attending to multiple features of the poem—as when correcting the initial answer of “Jesus Christ” to “Joy and Charitie,” and then

to “Jesus Christ” again but with additional meaning. Approaching the text with a predetermined focus or refusing to be open to variant interpretations is supremely difficult if the poem is to be comprehended at all, even at its most literal level. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, Herbert’s emphasis on drawing out the textuality of his poetry ensures that the reader is constantly aware of both the sacramental sign as well as the effectual meaning to which it points; Herbert does not allow his readers to see only one thing.

“The Altar” is particularly effective in this way:

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,
 Made of a heart and cemented with tears:
 Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
 No workman’s tool hath touch’d the same.
 A HEART alone
 Is such a stone,
 As nothing but
 Thy pow’r doth cut.
 Wherefore each part
 Of my hard heart
 Meets in this frame,
 To praise thy name:
 That if I chance to hold my peace,
 These stones to praise thee may not cease.
 Oh, let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
 And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine. (89)

The poem’s striking shape (whether a traditional altar, the letter *I*, or something else entirely) as well as the capitalization continually remind the reader of the poem as a text or artifact as well as the act of interpretation. The two aspects—interpretation or meaning-making, and the sign or artistic object—remain distinct and are in fact *emphasized* as distinct as the reader’s attention jumps between both, but are integrated into one cohesive experience as the poem is read.

The content of the poem also invites the reader to keep a distributed, yet focused, attention, as it begins with a broken altar (contrasted with the shape of a whole altar the poem appears to make) made by the speaker and yet ends with a sanctified altar that, apparently, has been untouched by “workman’s tool[s]” and belongs to the Lord. In addition, the narrator, who begins the poem by addressing God, appears to cancel out his own voice by ending with the

suggestion that there is no need to say anything.³³ These contrasting elements invite and almost compel the engaged reader to constantly interpret between them. And because Herbert's poetry is "radically invested in promoting its own surface," the reader is especially cognizant of this act of interpretation itself (Johnson 43).

The emphasis on text-as-sign, as well as content-driven structures such as the dialectic, once again invites the reader to consider his or her relationship with the aesthetic object (being the text, the narrator, or both together). While the reader may read and interpret other works all in one act with little thought, in Herbert's poetry the reader does so only self-consciously. The consummation and growth that takes place in Herbert's poetry is not simply stated but becomes the actual textual experience as the text directs the reader's attention to the relationship between him or herself and the poem.

Restoring Continuity

Dewey especially emphasizes creating aesthetic experiences out of the normal, everyday, or mundane. For Dewey, virtually any act or object can become aesthetic. His self-proclaimed task is to "restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings" (3). Bringing aesthetic experiences from "high art" down to everyday events is not convenient, it's necessary; the ability to unite the two is a core part of what an Experience is. For Dewey, this is where aesthetics meets pragmatism: in rendering everyday experience more meaningful (Hildebrand). This is exactly what Herbert's sacramental poetics set out to do: if not to render everyday experience more meaningful, then to render everyday signs more meaningful. A Herbertian reading of Dewey reveals that Dewey accomplishes his aim by rendering everyday experience sacramental, by drawing out signs (artistic objects) and directing focus to one's relationship to them despite—and perhaps because of—their resistance and instability.

The close similarities between Herbert's poetry and Dewey's aesthetic theory make clear the sacramental qualities of the latter. Both an Experience and a sacramental experience involve an element of creation—first through

3 See Fish, Stanley. *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972.

the creation of the aesthetic object or sacrament (text, art, or Eucharistic elements such as bread, wine, and setting) and second as the viewer actively participates in creating the Experience. Distinct parts of the aesthetic (various artistic features as well as the relationship between sign and signified) come together in “consummation” to develop a cohesive, meaningful experience. This experience first required wading through the resistance of instability and cannot be found, identified, or understood in any other way.

This last point is crucial. All text, and arguably all experience, is reliant on making meaning from signs. But in post-Reformation Eucharistic experience and in a “Dewey” Experience, the growth, the progress, the actual *meaningfulness* is in the act of creating and having the experience itself.⁴ It is both the means and the ends, and it is reliant on the instability of the sign. Consequently, it is a meaning that cannot be identified or articulated in any other way. This is why Dewey claims that an artist is in the act of completion at every stage. George Herbert Mead explains aesthetics similarly when he argues that an aesthetic experience is recovering the sense of the final outcome before it is achieved, and this sense is, meanwhile, what continues to spur the act of creation (386).

This is why, for Dewey, an Experience is or ought to be part of every “normally complete” everyday experience . . . it is not an “intruder from without” (46). An Experience portrays the same efficacy of sign-making as has been felt since the post-Reformation period—it renders mundane bread meaningful. Just as Johnson states, “the sacramental presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements relies on the operation of a figure,” the meaningfulness of artistic objects and everyday experience continues to rely on the operation of signification (13). Like Herbert, Dewey’s theory constantly reminds the viewer of the signs, or artistic objects, that render the Experience. In fact, an Experience is dependent on that very thing.

4 It hardly needs stating that “creating” is an act that requires the agency of the creator. What is unique to both Herbert and the Eucharist is that the distinct “calling out” of the sign compels even the moderately attentive reader/auditor to participate with it, even if that participation is via rejection. While one may walk by a work of art without a glance, one cannot partake of the Eucharist or truly read Herbert without responding to the sign in some way. However, rendering that sign meaningful does require the active creation of an Experience, and thus is subject to the agency of the reader/auditor. In “Love (III),” the guest cannot avoid a transaction with the Host—but first declines and then chooses to “sit and eat” (658). Similarly, sacramental experience and an Experience as I am defining it does require a “choosing” in order to be effective, although participation with it is inherent.

Implications for Further Study

Once Dewey's aesthetics are accepted as sacramental, his theory becomes a useful lens for understanding *how* sacramental poetics function. More than just pointing to Eucharistic references and motifs in seventeenth-century poetry, Dewey's theory offers an in-depth explanation of how and why the text becomes sacramental and explicates what must take place in the text—as well as what is required of the reader—to create what may be considered a truly sacramental experience. This lens begs new questions of Herbert's poetry: Which structures and forms invite an Experience, and how do they do so? How does Herbert create "resistance" through the text? And how does the act of creation (what Dewey would call the artistic element) of Herbert, speaker, and reader reconcile with the self-consuming qualities of his poems and his declaration that "[even] if I chance to hold my peace, these stones to praise thee may not cease" (89)? Aspects of these questions have been explored in part under different labels, but Dewey's theory offers multiple avenues for further discovery. Similarly, recognizing that Dewey's aesthetics parallel the post-Reformation eucharistic experience adds countless works (in genres ranging from philosophy to theology to lyric poetry) to the aesthetic field of study.

Thus, the sacramental qualities of Dewey's aesthetics broadens the boundaries of his discipline, reaffirming the role of literature in aesthetic experience and also suggesting a postsecular interpretation of his work. A Herbertian reading of Dewey becomes a compelling argument that the boundaries between the secular and religious are blurred; postsecular criticism explores the artificiality of these boundaries and their impact on the humanities, encouraging "openness [to] religious and spiritual experience" (Branch and Knight 503). Indeed, Dewey's definition of an Experience as full engagement between viewer and object where meaning is signified aptly illustrates the "heightened attention to religious feeling as well as to religious practices" that postsecularism values (Wickman 327). To be clear, I do not argue that Dewey's aesthetic theory is covertly religious, or that this reading ought to "bring back" interest in religious influence (postsecularism strongly protests the idea of such religious

“returns”).⁵ But it does illustrate the subtle and far-reaching permeability of Eucharistic anxiety, and at least as importantly, offers a position from which to recognize and critique Dewey’s master narrative.

This master narrative follows what Michael Kaufmann calls the “fortunate fall”; it’s a narrative that tells of a “laudable change from a ‘religious’ past to a ‘secular’ present—[it] underwrites a professional identity based on progress and progressive values” (620). Dewey is well-known for his lecture “A Common Faith,” in which he explains just that—that conventional religion regarding the supernatural will become a thing of the past, and “religious” belief will continue in the form of progressive, secular ideals that are followed with a religious fervor despite setbacks (Hildebrand). Reading Dewey’s aesthetics as sacramental underscores the postsecular view that such narratives supporting the secularization thesis are constructed and artificial. That is, it shows that progression from the religious and the secular is not linear, if it even exists at all, and instead reveals his progressive and secular proposals as the *labels* that they are. In turn this revelation questions the function and purpose of such labels and asks why they were constructed in the first place. I do not attempt such an investigation here; rather, I argue that a Herbertian reading of Dewey allows it to happen.

Re-reading John Dewey through Herbert’s sacramental poetry reveals Dewey’s aesthetics as sacramental. His theory of aesthetics brings forth the necessary signification of figures to create meaningfulness from everyday experience and relies on the anxiety between sign and signified—inherent in the Eucharist—as an indispensable dynamic that makes the creation of such meaning possible. Like the dialectic found in Herbert’s poetry, Dewey requires the subject to take an active part in the Experience with an artistic object, or sign, and requires a distinct yet simultaneous recognition of its sign-making features with their effectual meaning, which he calls consummation. Likewise, re-reading Herbert through Dewey’s aesthetics offers an explanation of how sacramental poetics function. Given the parallelism of Herbert’s sacramental poetics and Dewey’s aesthetics, the latter’s theory becomes a compelling subject of interest within postsecular studies and offers promising potential for both aesthetic theory and sacramental poetry at large.

5 See Branch, Lori. “Postsecular Studies.” *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*, edited by Mark Knight. Routledge, 2016, pp. 91–101.

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