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Teleios

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Teleios is a Greek word translated in Matthew 5:48 to “perfect,” originally meaning whole or complete. This thesis is a collection of poetry that mixes formal and free verse in order to convey the speaker’s spiritual journey in content as well as form as she seeks that definition of perfection. The work introduces a speaker who is deeply religious in a Christian tradition, and who expresses her spirituality in the form of sonnets as she adheres to certain principles of faith. The poems emerge from a speaker in a Christian tradition; many of the references are general, but some details specifically tie or allude to principles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, since that is the practice that informs my own view of Christianity. For instance, the use of “He” in reference to God stems from the Latter-day Saint belief regarding God as Heavenly Father (the capitalization of “He” denotes a certain degree of respect granted a deity). The use of form in the thesis is also significant as it represents the speaker's adherence to her religious principles while breaking form is breaking away from those principles since sonnets also adhere to certain structural principles in composition. The collection does not intend to place connotations of good or evil on sonnets, formal vs. free verse, or anything in between. Form is simply used for the speaker’s expression of faith.

From the beginning, the speaker seeks closeness with God, almost of a transcendental nature as she grapples with the consequences of living in a fallen and imperfect world. She is dissatisfied with the imperfections of the world, yet also struggles to disregard the temptations within it. As she seeks transcendental fulfillment, she explores the meaning of that fulfillment and what the world is outside of the structured principles of her life, which introduces her free

verse voice in the collection. She eventually returns to the structure, though not immediately back to the sonnet, as she has gone from almost an anxious adherence to now a more full perception of God that allows for joy and freedom in the structure. Through the work, the speaker experiences a shift from frustration with the world and its apparent obfuscation of God—and thus an obstacle to her ability to attain perfection—to a broader realization of God’s presence and the joy life brings that enables her to reach and hope for an exalted, whole state.

I view the speaker as someone living in the 21st century who is navigating what it means to be religious in a setting where that lifestyle can be seen as archaic or contradictory to current culture. Growing up religious and carrying that lifestyle into adulthood as she has almost seems impossible to those viewing it from the outside, given the world and society she lives in. But to people like the speaker who live it, it feels natural and comfortable, not to mention modern, because it is the common and current experience of religious people. From the beginning, she would not just say her faith is a huge part of her life but that it is her life; her beliefs and the ways she worships are involved in virtually everything she does. Seeing God in her life is normal—something she wants and even expects. However, she sees that to those who are not religious, much of that experience is foreign to them.

One theme that appears at various instances throughout the collection is the speaker’s relationship to rock and roll, specifically the Beatles, as she continues to discern God in her life. The speaker alludes to it in “(Pre)meditation,” as well as in the poem immediately following it, “Revolution 11 (and counting),” the latter of which is entirely composed of a mixture of Beatles lyrics. These instances convey the speaker’s belief that these outside voices or influences are acting contrary to her ability to perceive God; in “Pre(meditation), she says the sound “muffl[es]

all thought.” However, later in the thesis, the cento poem “Building on (a) Rock” uses lyrics from various rock songs to reflect how the speaker hears God in alternating stanza, showing how her relationship with music can actually enhance her relationship with God as she can identify Him in this and other aspects of her life.

Religion, or faith, comes with a form and structure in terms of its organization as well as the commandments religious people abide by as outlined by scripture. The speaker is exposed to the rhetoric commonly expressed in our day by those not affiliated with religion, which exhorts people to reject those structures seen as rigid or strict, which many would categorize religion as, in favor of a lifestyle of moral relativism in which one abides by the rules they set for themselves individually. The speaker ultimately tends not to see religion as strict or confining because she feels her faith gives her freedom, not in spite of but because of the structure—opposition, laws, the existence of right and wrong—it gives to her life. This thesis explores the idea of freedom in structure through religious themes and the formal structure of the poetry as the speaker navigates her relationship with faith.

New Formalism

Writing in traditional forms has been a long tradition in western poetry, especially religious poetry. The popularity of free verse has largely overshadowed formal verse in the past several decades, but certain poets have continued to emphasize the merits of formal poetry despite the voices of those who would consider it old-fashioned. During the 20th century, the Modernist movement emerged in the poetic world, which promoted a departure from form toward free verse. Essentially, the modernists’ argument was that formal poetry upheld an

authoritarian elitism in the literary world. “Both narrative and meter were considered at best out of date and at worst the instruments of bourgeois capitalism” (*Expansive Poetry*). The New Formalism movement arose in response to the modernists, with poets advocating a return to rhymed and metrical verse, or traditional forms. Some of the early new formalists included Mark Jarman and Robert McDowell, whose magazine *The Reaper* was established for the publication of formal poetry; Charles Martin; and Frederick Feirstein, who arranged the essay collection *Expansive Poetry*, which discusses the New Formalism movement.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the beginnings of this New Formalism movement, of which poet Dana Gioia was a part. In an article published at the time, he observes, “The new formalists put free verse poets in the ironic and unprepared position of being the status quo. Free verse, the creation of an older literary revolution, is now the long-established, ruling orthodoxy; formal poetry the unexpected challenge” (Gioia 395). In a way, the return to formal poetry has become a kind of counter culture as free verse has supplanted it as the established mode of the day. Gioia also says, “Form, we are told authoritatively, is artificial, elitist, retrogressive, right-wing, and (my favorite) un-American,” which he states in an effort to contradict the idea and show how poetry and poetic form may intertwine with politics but are not necessarily held to specific ideological standards simply based on fallacious categorizations (Gioia 396). Formal poetry, like formal religion, does not have to be bound to definitions that result from societal connotations. Formal poetry, like any poetry, can be used to explore and convey the poet’s observations of life, the world, human nature, and anything in between.

Gioia himself often writes in poetic form, such as in his poem “The Angel with the Broken Wing,” which uses rhymed iambic pentameter. The speaker in the piece is a statue

describing its own history and perspective of churchgoers past and present. The speaker describes revolutionaries who were once in the chapel and hit the statue accidentally:

“...almost apologetically

For even the godless feel something in a church.

A twinge of hope, fear? Who knows what it is?

A trembling unaccounted by their laws.

An ancient memory they can't dismiss” (“The Angel with the Broken Wing”).

Each stanza in this poem follows an ABCB rhyme scheme, and as previously stated, each line is in iambic pentameter for the most part. In the full stanza above, the first line breaks this meter, having extra syllables and departing from rhythm, but this is also relevant in terms of the content of the poem. First, it emphasizes what could be termed the climax of the poem since the extending or breaking of form is the most pronounced here after having built up to this point. And Gioia maintains the meter when the poem discusses religious themes, but here when he brings up “the godless” is where the form falls apart. These are similar techniques to the work of my thesis, in that I also explore religious themes in the poems and often use the form as a parallel to the speaker’s spirituality. Both Gioia and I deviate from metrical patterns to emphasize certain themes in a piece, particularly a departure from or opposition to God.

In my sonnet “Estranged,” for example, the devil speaks to an unnamed female narrator whom he refers to as “sister,” seeking to discourage and tempt her by emphasizing that kind of familial relationship they share. In the case of this poem, the form is intentionally inverted or broken in many places to convey the devil’s imperfect and accusatory nature. Instead of iambic pentameter, some lines are in trochaic pentameter, such as the second line: “Who deserves your

kindness? Are you even / kind?" In this way, such lines would seem to be spoken more forcefully as though attacking, hearkening to Satan's role as the accuser and acting opposite the perfect iambic line that would be spoken by narrators such as God, whom Lucifer opposes. Some rhymes are also imperfect to produce a similar "flawed" effect; for instance, the rhyme scheme in lines 5–8 changes from the traditional ABAB pattern of Shakespearean sonnets to an ABBA pattern. Other lines, such as "Remember who you're fighting while you work," align with the form in rhyme and meter to represent the devil's deceitful nature in presenting evil in the form of good.

Formal and Free Verse

From the New Formalists, there are many arguments in favor of traditional form in poetry. Like Gioia, poet Alan Shapiro also appears to be in favor of poetic form when he says, "Without some discernible recurrence of sound and structure, some norm of expectation, no surprise, no significant variation is possible" (Shapiro 205). In other words, similar to Robert Frost's analogy of playing tennis without a net, there must be some semblance of structure in writing to appeal to the reader's sense of logic and if nothing else, to provide a system of rules that can then be broken; a writer cannot break or manipulate form if a structure does not exist in the first place. However, Shapiro also says, "It's dangerous to think we have to choose exclusively between free verse and form. The wider the range of styles and forms that we avail ourselves of, the more enriched, more flexible and inclusive our expressive resources will be" (Shapiro 201). There is a place for both formal and free verse in the world of poetry since that variation of structure is what allows a broader range of readers to engage with the art.

My thesis mixes formal and free verse to create that variation, specifically to convey the speaker's spiritual journey in content as well as form. The narrator mainly speaks in sonnets in her effort to perceive God through that structure—and as previously mentioned, the devil mimics the form to create the appearance of goodness—but as she turns to other sources and relies on them for truth or fulfillment, the form essentially collapses into free verse and a mixture of other forms. In Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The Poet," he says, "It is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing" (Emerson 5). In other words, the form does not dictate the poem, but the poem instead finds its way into the form. The speaker in the collection finds this idea with faith as well as form; she tries to find God through the structure first—almost forcing it or at least keeping it rigid in order to build that spiritual connection—before discovering Him more naturally as she chooses Him instead of feeling compelled into familiarity. This echoes the scriptural concept from James 2:26, that "Faith without works is dead," meaning that a true Christian disciple does not simply believe without acting on that belief, and inversely does not simply go through the motions of discipleship without truly believing in God. The freedom the speaker experiences from discovering herself within the form aligns with that full concept of faith too, as well as Joseph Smith's teaching "I teach them correct principles and they govern themselves" (Taylor 339; see also Teachings 284). The form or structure does not control her; rather, knowing the reasons for the structure or the spirit of the law, as it were, gives her freedom.

When I first approached my thesis, I hadn't anticipated using much free verse, if any, since I was focused on exploring form. However, as I developed more of the work for the

collection, I concluded that free verse is actually integral to the speaker's journey or the plot of the entire work. There is no tension or motion within the form if there is not something to contradict the form, and the speaker has no journey if she does not know the formlessness of free verse to compare with the structure of formal verse. This coincides with the doctrine that opposition in all things is necessary; Doctrine and Covenants 29:39 states, "It must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves; for if they never should have bitter they could not know the sweet." Only by experiencing the bitterness of a separation from God and His presence can the speaker fully comprehend the sweetness of His presence in the structure as she returns with greater understanding.

Influences

My poems have been influenced by many poets, particularly those who explore religious themes and who write in formal verse to some extent. These influences range in time from Shakespeare to the New Formalists. One such influence on my work is William Blake's collection *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, which explores a dichotomy between devotional poems celebrating divinity in the "Innocence" section and, in the "Experience" section, poems that show the sorrows and corruptions of the mortal world. Similar to Gioia's example, Blake writes in metered verse to highlight first the innocent joys of life in relation to God then to turn those ideas on their heads, which is similar to part of the work of this thesis. However, Blake continues in meter from one section to the other, whereas my thesis uses the meter and form to complement the shift in the speaker's spiritual focus. For example, each of Blake's two sections has a poem titled "Nurse's Song." Here is the first stanza from the "Innocence" section:

When voices of children are heard on the green,
And laughing is heard on the hill
My heart is at rest within my breast,
And everything else is still (Blake).

Then its equivalent from the “Experience” half:

When the voices of children are heard on the green,
And whisperings are in the dale,
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale.

Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,
And the dews of night arise;
Your spring and your day are wasted in play,
And your winter and night in disguise (Blake).

Where the “Innocence” version of the poem highlights the children’s laughter distant on the hill and the nurse’s contentment therein, the “Experience” version instead turns to her further reflections on the concept of youth. From the first poem to the second, Blake shifts from the nurse’s joyful focus on children and childhood innocence to her contemplation of her own lack of youth and her focus on all of their eventual mortality, evidenced by the nurse’s illustration of life going from the light of “spring” and “day” to “winter” and “night,” a darker and more morose thought to settle on. These examples show how the poems in the “Experience” section lead the poet to deepen and alter the innocent faith expressed in the first section. The poems do

not take away that faith, but rather they show how the faith must change and deepen because of the human experience in this corrupt and disillusioning world.

The poems in my thesis incorporate similar elements in part because the poems show a departure from and return to God with the form. I also incorporate some echoing or mirroring, such as with the poems “(Pre)meditation” and “Pure Meditation,” which appear in the first and second halves of the collection respectively. “(Pre)meditation” reflects the speaker’s struggle to connect with God, along with a slight lack of effort to fully forge that connection since she is willing to “embrace distraction” and admits to being partially afraid of the direction she might receive if she gives her full attention. Conversely, “Pure Meditation” adopts a more hopeful tone and conveys the speaker’s more fully realized relationship with God as she has opened herself to the “source of wisdom” and is even “drawn to it,” showing she is willing and able to recognize Him in various aspects of her life.

The sonnets of John Donne are one of the main influences for my thesis because of his use of the sonnet, the religious focus of the poems, and the introspectiveness from each poem’s narrator, all of which align with themes I explore in the thesis poems. As with many of Donne’s sonnets, the conflict in my work lies in the questions the narrator poses, her contemplation of the works of God, and her place in relation to Him. Devotional poems are one type of religious poem included in my thesis, though even within those, they incorporate tension such as the kind Donne employs in his poem Holy Sonnet II. The concept of death itself carries a kind of tension, and the narrator of this sonnet reflects on the weight of the subject while simultaneously subverting it by commenting on death’s powerlessness in the face of God:

As due by many titles I resign
 My self to thee, O God, first I was made
 By thee, and for thee, and when I was decay'd
 Thy blood bought that, the which before was thine;
 I am thy sonne, made with thy self to shine,
 Thy servant, whose pains thou hast still repaid,
 Thy sheep, thine Image, and, till I betray'd
 My self, a temple of thy Spirit divine;
 Why doth the devil then usurp on me?
 Why doth he steal, nay ravish that's thy right?
 Except thou rise and for thine own work fight,
 Oh I shall soon despair, when I doe see
 That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt'not chuse me,
 And Satan hates me, yet is loth to lose me (Donne 259).

Here, the narrator ponders the grace and gifts of God as well as how our experience of temptation is balanced with our relationship to the divine. The work in my thesis explores similar themes and arcs; the narrator aspires to comprehend God's role in her life and struggles to resist the temptation to seek other paths to the same destination. In Donne's poem, particularly the last three lines, the speaker expresses the tension in his life's relation to God and the devil separately, fearing that although God loves him, he will ultimately not be good enough and that while the devil only seeks men's misery, the speaker will still end up bound to him as a result of his sinful life. The imagery of love and hatred is very intriguing here as the bonds of love and purity the

speaker seeks with God collide with the devil's bondage of hatred brought on by the speaker's falling short of that glory.

This sort of conflict appears in my thesis through pieces such as "Estranged," mentioned earlier, and "House for a Sonnet or The Architect's Apprentice is Approached by the Designer of the Great and Spacious Building." In the latter, the speaker's voice appears on the left side in iambic pentameter as she builds a house or a sonnet, while the voice of the adversary is right-justified in free verse, tempting the speaker to break free of the form. While the thesis as a whole explores the tension between formal and free verse as it parallels the structure of faith, this poem in particular confronts it more directly. The adversary attempts to depict the form as stifling, telling the speaker to break the design and "let some air in," and later asks, "Why keep yourself / so confined?" The speaker counters these notions, saying "The beauty's in the structure," going on to describe the goodness she sees in the lines and rhythm of the house. Like Donne's poem, the devil's voice here wants the speaker to break away from God not out of love for the speaker but out of hatred for God and mankind, so in attempting to break the structure under the guise of creating freedom, he would actually bring the speaker into bondage by cutting her off from the source of wisdom and divinity she craves.

Another poet whose work explores religious themes with the use of form is Gerard Manley Hopkins. He pays close attention to sound in his word choice, which helps to create rhyme and rhythm throughout in a way that enhances his exploration of a poem's theme. He has many devotional poems, including "God's Grandeur," included below, as well as some where the speaker struggles with finding God or wrestles with sin, such as "Peace" and "Carrion Comfort." As with Donne, Hopkins is able to combine religious devotion with a kind of opposition, which

is why I have often been drawn to his poems. The first half, or first stanza, of the poem emphasizes an almost industrial feeling focused on man where “all is seared with trade,” but the second half brings to light the divinity of nature inherent in our world that coexists with man, as shown in the ending lines “Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods” where God is still evident to the speaker amidst the industrial worldliness of the first half (Hopkins 27).

Through my thesis, I also explore tension in a variety of areas like this, where sometimes the conflict is in the structure of faith whereas at other times it is the speaker’s relation to the world itself.

In my work, I also aim to employ sounds purposefully and with careful attention as Hopkins does, especially to enhance my use of traditional forms as sound contributes to emphasis within or breaking of form. Hopkins was known for using sprung rhythm, which allows for an indeterminate number of unstressed syllables following a stressed syllable in a foot. In “God’s Grandeur,” we see this in the lines “It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil / Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?” where the syllables extend beyond the regular ten yet maintain a certain natural rhythm. The Poetry Foundation says, “According to Hopkins, [sprung rhythm’s] intended effect was to reflect the dynamic quality and variations of common speech” (“Sprung rhythm”). He felt it more natural than iambic pentameter or free verse and thus chose to use it above those forms and meters, which is interesting to consider since iambic pentameter has often been said to mimic the rhythm of natural speaking in English (“Sprung Rhythm”). This technique relates to my intention of maintaining a natural voice within the use of form; “breaking” the form by manipulating rhythm and meter within it can help make the voice

of the poem more natural in terms of reflecting everyday speech, as Hopkins does with his poems.

Conclusion

In the initial stages of my work, I did not envision my thesis in its current form. I was intrigued by the concept of form as a parallel for spirituality, but free verse was not nearly as prominent in my original plan for the collection until I kept writing and discovered the speaker had a voice in a variety of forms—structured forms outside of sonnets, but also the form of free verse. That alone has enhanced my abilities as a poet since it has helped me to comprehend a broader range of roles that form can play as the content drives the form. I was also surprised at the poems I wrote without intending them to be part of the thesis that ended up being relevant, like “Worth of a Woman,” or even crucial, in cases such as “Betrayal.” Perhaps one of the biggest realizations I had while writing the thesis was the speaker’s specific motivation to attain something beyond her mortal realm. That concept was present but not explicitly articulated to me until it was already there in multiple poems. The speaker’s spiritual journey parallels my own thoughts and experiences at times, but also differs from them, which has given me a certain connection to her but also an interesting insight into the experiences others might have in their spiritual journeys. Working on this thesis has expanded my range of poetic abilities, helped me envision each piece of any writing individually and in its role as part of a greater whole, and has even led me to ideas for other unrelated work, all of which has been fulfilling to experience.

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