

Edward Taylor

(c.1642-1729)

Preface, *God's Determinations Touching His Elect* (c.1682)

Infinity, when all things it beheld
In nothing, and of nothing all did build--
Upon what base was fixed the lath wherein
He turned this globe and rigged it so trim?
Who blew the bellows of His furnace vast?
Or held the mould wherein the world was cast?
Who laid its corner-stone? Or whose command?
Where stand the pillars upon which it stands?
Who laced and filleted the earth so fine
With rivers like green ribbons smaragdine?
Who made the seas its selvage, and its locks
Like a quilt ball within a silver box?
Who spread its canopy? Or curtains spun?
Who in this bowling alley bowled the sun?
Who made it always when it rises set:
To go at once both down and up to get?
Who the curtain rods made for this tapestry?
Who hung the twinkling lanthorns in the sky?
Who? Who did this? Or who is He? Why, know
It's only Might Almighty this did do.

His hand hath made this noble work which stands
His glorious handiwork not made by hands.
Who spake all things for nothing--and with ease
Can speak all things to nothing, if He please.
Whose little finger at His pleasure can
Out-mete ten thousand worlds with half a span;
Whose Might Almighty can by half a look
Root up the rocks and the hills by the roots,
Can take this mighty world up in His hand,
And shake it like a squitchen or a wand.
Whose single frown will make the heavens shake
Like an aspen leaf the wind makes quake.
Oh! What a might is this! whose single frown
Doth shake the world as it would shake it down!
Which all from nothing fet, from nothing all:
Hath all on nothing set, lets nothing fall.
Gave all to nothing-man indeed, whereby
Through nothing, man-all might Him glorify.
In nothing is embossed the brightest gem,
More precious than all preciousness in them.
But nothing-man did throw down all by sin,
And darkened that lightsome gem in him
That now his brightest diamond is grown,
Darker by far than any coalpit stone.

ANALYSIS

The first stanza of the “Preface” is an argument for the existence of God that is not didactic in the style of a conventional Puritan sermon but interrogatory: it proceeds through a series of challenging rhetorical questions put as though by a prosecutor making a case against Atheism to a jury. The stanza concludes with the ever more obvious answer to all 17 questions and is structured like a single periodic sentence, making it more dramatic and compelling than mere assertion.

Citing evidence, Taylor argues logically, making the traditional argument that the universe is manifestly the product of intelligent design, building authority and tension with each of his 17 questions, 9 of them beginning with the word *Who* and all culminating in a series of three short questions in one line: “Who? Who did this? Or who is He?” The repetition and the shortening give a rhetorical force to what seems to be pure logic: Something beyond human comprehension—“Infinity” or “Might Almighty”—obviously created the universe: “It’s only Might Almighty this would do.” Taylor personifies the almighty as God, a figurative representation of the ineffable, like his own poems. His boldest lines emphasize the power and ease with which God determines celestial events, as if He created the universe merely as a pastime: “Who in this bowling alley bowled the sun?” The cosmic scale of his Puritan allegory is comparable to the influential classic *Paradise Lost* (1667) by John Milton, published just fifteen years before Taylor is thought to have composed his epic.

Taylor’s questions compare modest human creation--woodworking, masonry, spinning, hanging tapestry--with the creation of the universe, a difference in magnitude that induces awe and glorifies God the almighty creator of All. As an argument, the stanza expresses a rational, puritan, vertical mode of consciousness. At the same time, from the opening lines the emotional rhetoric and figurative language transcend the logic of the argument, expressing paradox, mystery and wonder: “Infinity, when all things it beheld / In nothing, and of nothing all did build--” The last image in the stanza, at the climax, is the stars—“lanthorns” are lanterns--in the Sky, the archetypal space of transcendence, representing the culmination of the individuation process, or salvation.

The second stanza dramatizes several Calvinist doctrines: (1) the absolute sovereignty of God; (2) predestination; (3) the total depravity of the human race. Man is nothing and God is almighty: “Whose little finger at His pleasure can / Out-mete ten thousand worlds with half a span.” The word *nothing* occurs twice in the first stanza and 10 times in the second stanza, emphasizing that man is nothing and God is All. Nature, the creation of God, is not fallen: His handiwork is “glorious” and “noble.” He “gave all to nothing-man,” including a soul more precious than any gem, “But nothing-man did throw down all by sin,” turning his soul “Darker by far than any coalpit stone.” The “Preface” ends with this image of total depravity, the hopeless condition of nothing-man before the advent of Christ. Hence, Taylor gives supreme importance to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the ritual enacting salvation through Christ.

Michael Hollister (2015)