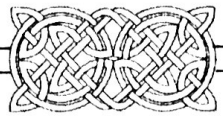

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GEORGE HERBERT
1593–1633

Unlike the learned and witty style of the work of his friend John Donne, Herbert's style in his single volume of religious poetry, *The Temple*, is deceptively simple, marked by ease and grace. But it is also marked by self-irony, a remarkable intellectual and emotional range, and a highly conscious artistry that is evident in the poems' tight construction, exact diction, perfect control of tone, and great variety of stanzaic forms and rhythmic patterns. As well, these poems reflect Herbert's struggle to define his relationship to God through biblical metaphors that are also invested with the tensions and anxieties those relationships held in his own society: king and subject, lord and courtier, master and servant, father and child, bridegroom and bride, friend to friend of inferior status. None of Herbert's secular English poems survives, so his reputation rests on this single volume, published posthumously. *The Temple* contains a long prefatory poem, *The Church-Porch*, and a long concluding poem, *Church Militant*, which together enclose a collection of 177 short lyrics entitled *The Church*, among which are sonnets, songs, hymns, laments, meditative poems, dialogue poems, acrostic poems, emblematic poems, and more. Herbert's own description of the collection is apt: "a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul." Izaak Walton reports that Herbert gave the manuscript to his friend Nicholas Farrar, head of a quasi-monastic community at Little Gidding, with instructions to publish it if he thought it would "turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul" and otherwise to burn it. Fortunately, Farrar chose to publish, and *The Temple* became the major influence on the religious lyric poets of the Caroline age: Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw, Thomas Traherne, and even Edward Taylor, the American colonial poet.

The fifth son of an eminent Welsh family, Herbert's upbringing and that of his

nine siblings was carefully monitored by his mother, Magdalen Herbert, patron and friend of Donne and several other scholars and poets. Herbert was educated at Westminster School and at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he subsequently held a fellowship and wrote Latin poetry: elegies on the death of Prince Henry (1612), witty epigrams, poems on Christ's passion and death, and poems defending the rites of the English Church. In 1620 he was appointed "public orator," the official spokesman and correspondent for the university; this was a step toward a career at court or in public service, as was his election as Member of Parliament from Montgomery in 1624. But that route was closed off by the death of influential patrons and the change of monarchs. Like Donne, Herbert hesitated for some years before being ordained, but in 1630 he took up pastoral duties in the small country parish at Bemerton in Wiltshire. Whereas Donne preached to monarchs and statesmen, Herbert ministered to a few cottagers and none of his sermons survive. His small book on the duties of his new life, *A Priest to the Temple; or, The Country Parson*, testifies to the earnestness and joy (but also to the aristocratic uneasiness) with which he embraced that role. In chronic bad health he lived only three more years—performing pastoral duties assiduously, writing and revising his poems, playing music, and listening to organ and choir at nearby Salisbury cathedral.

Herbert locates himself in the church through many poems that treat church liturgy, architecture, and art—e.g., *Church Monuments* and *The Windows*—but his primary emphasis is always on the soul's inner architecture. Unlike Donne's poems, Herbert's poems do not voice anxious fears about his salvation or about his desperate sins and helplessness; his anxieties center rather on his relationship with Christ, most often represented as that of friend with friend. Many poems register the speaker's distress over the vacillations and regressions in this relationship, over his lack of "fruition" in God's service, and over the instability in his own nature, purposes, and temperament. In several dialogic poems the speaker's difficulties and anxieties are alleviated or resolved by the voice of a divine friend heard within or recalled through a scripture text (as in *The Collar*). In poem after poem he resists but has to come to terms with the fact that his relationship with Christ is always radically unequal, that Christ must both initiate it and make possible his own response. He struggles constantly with the paradox that, as the works of a Christian poet, his poems ought to give fit and sincere praise to God but that they cannot possibly do so—an issue explored in *The Altar*, the two *Jordan* poems, *Easter*, *The Forerunners*, and many more.

His recourse is to develop a biblical poetics that renounces conventional poetic styles—"fiction and false hair"—so as to depend on God's "art" wrought in his own soul and displayed in the language, metaphors, and symbolism of the Bible. He makes scant use of Donnean learned imagery drawn from such areas as cosmology or medicine or Scholastic philosophy, but his allusions carry profound significances. A biblical metaphor provides the unifying motif for the volume: the New Testament temple in the human heart (1 Corinthians 3.16). Another recurring biblical metaphor represents the Christian as plant or tree or flower in God's garden, needing pruning, train, and nurture. Many poems are related to religious emblems: shaped poems like *The Altar* that present image and picture at once, or others like *Life* that might stand as commentaries on an emblem, here, a posy. Other poems allude to typological symbolism, which reads persons and events in the Old Testament as types or foreshadowings of Christ, the fulfillment or antitype; often, as in *The Bunch of Grapes*, Herbert locates both type and antitype in the speaker's soul.

FROM *THE TEMPLE*[1]

The Altar[2]

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 touched the same.[3]
A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy power 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.[4]
Oh let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.

Redemption[1]

Having been tenant long to a rich lord,
Not thriving, I resolvèd to be bold,
And make a suit unto him, to afford
A new small-rented lease, and cancel th' old.[2]

In heaven at his manor I him sought:
They told me there that he was lately gone
About some land which he had dearly bought
Long since on earth, to take possession.

I straight returned, and knowing his great birth,
Sought him accordingly in great resorts—
In cities, theaters, gardens, parks, and courts:
At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth

Of thieves and murderers; there I him espied,
Who straight, "Your suit is granted," said, and died.

1. The title of Herbert's volume sets his poems in relation to David's Psalms for the Temple at Jerusalem; his are new covenant "psalms" for the New Testament temple in the heart. All of the following poems come from this volume, published in 1633.
2. A variety of emblem poem. Emblems customarily have three parts: a picture, a motto, and a poem. This kind collapses picture and poem into one, presenting the emblem image by its very shape. Shaped poems have been used by the occasional author from Hellenistic times to Dylan Thomas.
3. A reference to Exodus 20.25, in which the Lord enjoins Moses to build an altar of uncut stones, not touched by any tool, and also to Psalm 51.7: "A broken and the contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."
4. A reference to Luke 19.40: "I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out." Herbert's poems obtain much of their resonance from the biblical echoes they incorporate.
1. Literally, "buying back." In this beautifully concise sonnet Herbert figures God as a landlord, himself as a discontented tenant.
2. I.e., to ask him for a new lease, with a smaller rent; the figure points to the New Testament supplanting the Old.

Easter Wings[1]

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,° *abundance*
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more
Till he became
Most poor:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.[2]

My tender age in sorrow did begin:
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sin,
That I became
Most thin.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day thy victory;
For, if I imp[3] my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Affliction (1)[1]

When first thou didst entice to thee my heart,
I thought the service brave:° *splendid*
So many joys I writ down for my part,
Besides what I might have
Out of my stock of natural delights,
Augmented with thy gracious benefits.

I looked on thy furniture so fine,
And made it fine to me;
Thy glorious household stuff did me entwine,
And 'tice° me unto thee. *entice*
Such stars I counted mine: both heaven and earth
Paid me my wages in a world of mirth.

What pleasures could I want,° whose king I served, *lack*
Where joys my fellows were?
Thus argued into hopes, my thoughts reserved
No place for grief or fear;
Therefore my sudden soul caught at the place,
And made her youth and fierceness seek thy face.

1. Another emblem poem whose shape presents the emblem picture; the lines, increasing and decreasing, imitate flight, and also the spiritual experience of falling and rising. Early editions printed the poem with the lines running vertically, making the wing shape more apparent.

2. The idea of the "Fortunate Fall," which brought humankind so great a redeemer.

3. In falconry, to insert feathers in a bird's wing.

1. Herbert sometimes uses the same title for several poems, thereby associating them; editors distinguish them by adding numbers.

Well, I will change the service, and go seek
Some other master out.
Ah, my dear God! though I am clean forgot,
Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.

Prayer (1)[1]

Prayer, the church's banquet; angels' age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth;
The soul in paraphrase,° heart in pilgrimage; *clarifying by expansion*
The Christian plummet,[2] sounding heaven and earth;

Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tower,
Reversèd thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days' world transposing[3] in an hour;
A kind of tune which all things hear and fear:

Softness and peace and joy and love and bliss;
Exalted manna,[4] gladness of the best;
Heaven in ordinary,[5] man well dressed,
The milky way, the bird of paradise,

Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.

Jordan (1)[1]

Who says that fictions only and false hair
Become a verse? Is there in truth no beauty?
Is all good structure in a winding stair?
May no lines pass, except they do their duty° *pay reverence to*
Not to a true, but painted chair?[2]

Is it no verse, except enchanted groves
And sudden arbors shadow coarse-spun lines?[3]
Must purling° streams refresh a lover's loves? *rippling*
Must all be veiled,[4] while he that reads, divines,
Catching the sense at two removes?

Shepherds[5] are honest people: let them sing;
Riddle who list,° for me, and pull for prime:[6] *wishes*

1. This extraordinary sonnet is a series of epithets without a verb, defining prayer by metaphor.
2. A weight used to measure (sound) the depth of water.
3. A musical term indicating sounds produced at another pitch from the original.
4. The food God supplied to the Israelites in the wilderness.
5. I.e., "everyday heaven."

1. The river Jordan, which the Israelites crossed to enter the promised land, was also taken as a symbol for baptism.
2. It was the custom for men to bow before a throne, whether it was occupied or not (see Donne, *Satire* 3, lines 47–48, p. 1257), but to require bowing before a throne in a painting would be ridiculous.
3. "Sudden," i.e., that appear unexpectedly (an artificial effect much sought after in landscape gardening). "Shadow": shade.
4. As in allegory.
5. Conventional pastoral poets.
6. To draw a lucky card in the game of primero. "For me": as far as I am concerned.

The Holdfast[1]

I threatened to observe the strict decree
Of my dear God with all my power and might.
But I was told by one, it could not be;
Yet I might trust in God to be my light.

Then will I trust, said I, in him alone.
Nay, ev'n to trust in him, was also his;
We must confess, that nothing is our own.
Then I confess that he my succor is.

But to have nought is ours, not to confess
That we have nought. I stood amazed at this,
Much troubled, till I heard a friend express,
That all things were more ours by being his.
What Adam had, and forfeited for all,
Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall.

The Collar[1]

I struck the board[2] and cried, "No more;
I will abroad!
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free, free as the road,
Loose as the wind, as large as store.
Shall I be still in suit?[3]
Have I no harvest but a thorn
To let me blood, and not restore
What I have lost with cordial° fruit? *restorative to the heart*
Sure there was wine
Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn
Before my tears did drown it.
Is the year only lost to me?
Have I no bays[4] to crown it,
No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?
All wasted?
Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,
And thou hast hands.
Recover all thy sigh-blown age
On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute
Of what is fit and not. Forsake thy cage,
Thy rope of sands,
Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee

1. Alludes to Psalm 73.27 in the *Book of Common Prayer*: "It is good for me to hold me fast by God." The poem dramatizes the entire reliance on grace—and the abnegation of any human capacity to cooperate with it or claim any merit—that was a cornerstone of Calvinist theology.

1. The emblematic title at first suggests a clerical collar that has become a slave's collar; also, punningly, it comes to suggest the speaker's choler (anger) and, perhaps, the caller that he at last hears.

2. Table, with perhaps an allusion to the communion table.

3. In attendance, waiting on someone for a favor.

4. The poet's laurel wreath, symbol of recognized accomplishment.

Good cable,[5] to enforce and draw,
And be thy law,
While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.
Away! take heed;
I will abroad.
Call in thy death's-head[6] there; tie up thy fears.
He that forbears
To suit and serve his need,
Deserves his load."
But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Methoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*[7]
And I replied, *My Lord.*

The Pulley[1]

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
"Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can:
Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,
Contract into a span."

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honor, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.[2]

"For if I should," said he,
"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

"Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness:
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast."

The Flower

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! even as the flowers in spring,
To which, besides their own demesne,° *domain, demeanor*

5. Christian restrictions on behavior, which the "petty thoughts" of the docile believer have made into strong bonds.
6. Skull, emblem of human mortality, and often used as an object for meditation.
7. The call "Child" reminds the speaker of Paul's words (Romans 8.14–17) that Christians are not in "bondage again to fear" but are children of God "and if children, then heirs."

1. The poem inverts the legend of Pandora's box, which released all manner of evils when opened, but left Hope trapped inside.
2. "Rest" has two senses: "remainder" and "repose."

Love (3)

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack° *hesitant*
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.[1]

"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here":
Love said, "You shall be he."
"I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on thee."
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
"Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve."
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"

1. Souls that have left the body and gone to heaven are like fledgling chicks that have left the shell behind; that corpse ("dry dust") sheds no tears but may draw ("extort") from the survivors.

1. The first question of shopkeepers and tavern waiters to an entering customer would be "What d'ye lack?" (i.e., want).

"My dear, then I will serve."
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
So I did sit and eat.[2]

2. In addition to the sacrament of Communion, the reference is especially to the final communion in heaven, when the Lord "shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them" (Luke 12.37).