

GEORGE HERBERT

'THE first, that with any effectual success attempted a *diversion* of this foul and overflowing *stream*,' wrote Henry Vaughan in the preface to *Silex Scintillans*, 'was the blessed man, Mr. *George Herbert*, whose holy *life* and *verse* . . . gave the first check to a most flourishing and admired *Wit* of his time.'

Perhaps this attempt to divert the 'foul stream' and check an 'admired Wit of his time' may explain why, as he tells us, he at first 'sought out quaint words and trim invention, curling with metaphors a plain intention,' since in the Sonnet sent to his mother as a New Year's gift from Cambridge in 1608, he asks :

My God, where is that ancient heat towards thee?

. . . . Doth poetrie

Wear Venus' liverie? onely serve her turn?

Why are not sonnets made of thee? and layes
Upon thine altar burnt?

for undoubtedly some of his poems in their allegorical obscurity and subtlety of expression rival those of the wearers of 'Venus' liverie.' The subtlety, however, is only in the form in which he has chosen to express familiar religious truths in order to allure those who would be attracted by it.

But, indeed, as Vaughan's words suggest, it was his own 'holy life' that was the first and most powerful element in the remarkable influence he exercised over his contemporaries, and it was this that gave meaning and charm to his poetry.

His mother, the gracious lady whom Donne regarded with such affectionate admiration and used to address as 'The Lady Magdalen Herbert, of St. Mary Magdalen,' was a notable woman in her devotion to the education of her seven sons. Her husband had died when Edward, the eldest, was sixteen years old, and George, the fifth son, was four. She destined

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Edward, as befitted his rank, for a career at Court; and he afterwards became Lord Herbert of Cherbury, a distinguished diplomatist and the author of that deistical Latin treatise, *De Veritate prout distinguitur de Revelatione*. One son entered the Army, and another the Navy, and another, Henry, was for many years Master of the Revels. But George, frail and delicate from childhood, she took under her special care and intended him for the Church. It was an intention, however, which his signal successes at Trinity College, Cambridge, and the ambition which awoke in him when he was made Public Orator in the University and King James took marked notice of him, and his great kinsman, the Earl of Pembroke, was proud of him, and such men as Francis Bacon and Lancelot Andrewes sought his friendship, seriously threatened to frustrate. For a time he had a struggle with himself against what he called the 'painted pleasures' of the world. Although, as Walton pathetically expresses it, 'in this morning of that short day of his life he seemed to be marked out for virtue and to become the care of heaven,' yet it was observed that he 'kept himself too much retired and at too great a distance with all his inferiors; and his clothes seemed to prove that he put too great a value on his parts and parentage.' For 'he had acquired great learning, and was blessed with a high fancy, a civil and sharp wit'—he must have inherited that from his mother—'and with a natural elegance, both in his behaviour, his tongue and his pen.'

Everyone is acquainted with the well-known picture of him: the long, emaciated, aristocratic face with its stern lips and large, serious eyes. When King James first took notice of him at the time when, as Public Orator, Herbert accepted on behalf of the University the King's presentation of his book, *Basilicon Doron*, he asked the Earl of Pembroke if he knew the Orator.

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The Earl replied that he did, and that he 'loved him more for his learning and virtue than for that he was his kinsman.' At which the King smiled and asked if he might love him too, for he took him to be 'the jewel of this University.' But Herbert was not the kind of man to be overcome by flattery, and yet the struggle was severe. We must take this into account in our estimate of him. The world, as he afterwards wrote, was at this time a great temptation :

Whereas my birth and spirit rather took
The way that takes the town;
Thou didst betray me to a ling'ring book,
And wrap me in a gown.
I was entangled in the world of strife,
Before I had the power to change my life.

Yet, though thou troublest me, I must be meek;
In weaknesse must be stout.
Well, I will change the service; and go seek
Some other master out.
Ah my deare God! though I am clean forgot,
Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.

The story of his renunciation of court prospects is told by Izaak Walton. He does not call it by that name, but a renunciation it undoubtedly was. Behind the later portion of the quaint and pathetic narrative we can read the truth. The King's death, the loss of other friends at court, and the consequent fading away of his hopes, together with his increasing ill-health and fear of consumption, determined his resolution. But it was not without reluctance that he left the high-road along which his brother Edward had travelled, and turned down the country lane that led to Bemerton Rectory.

The pictures that Walton, in his famous biography, draws of him as a country clergyman are very pleasant to look at. His marriage to Jane Danvers, Lord Danby's kinswoman, was as romantic as that of

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Richard Hooker to poor Joan Churchman, but with quite opposite results, for it was a singularly happy union. We have a glimpse of their custom of morning and afternoon prayer in their oratory, to which whosoever wished might come: and of the labourers in the fields who stopped in their work and removed their caps for a moment when they heard 'Mr. Herbert's Saints-bell' ringing at ten o'clock and four. The scene where he meets the poor old woman who wishes to speak to him and dare not is a charming idyll of country life. 'Speak, good mother, be not afraid to speak to me, for I am a man who will listen to you with patience,' and sitting down beside her he listens to her story. 'For,' adds Walton, 'it is some relief for a poor body to be heard with patience.' And the way he informs his rustic congregation, after having once preached them a very learned sermon, that it will not be his custom to do so, but that for the future he will take care to preach in very simple language, because he wanted them to understand and profit by his sermons, is a characteristic touch. It illustrated one of the rules he laid down for himself in that most wise and practical summary of pastoral duties, published in 1652, twenty years after his death, *A Priest to the Temple, or The Country Parson, His Character, and Rule of Holy Life*.

Surely no other such faithful and self-forgetting 'Country Parson' ever ministered to an ignorant village congregation. It was the more remarkable because 'The popular disease in the former half of the seventeenth century was the degraded condition of the country clergy . . . Such shepherds neither guided nor fed their flocks.' Herbert complained that some of his clerical brethren 'huddled up the Church prayers' and 'said the Lord's Prayer in a breath.' It was not his devout spirit alone, nor his aristocratic sense of a duty to the poor, that accounted for the

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contrast between himself and them. His favourite recreation counts for something. Twice a week he walked across the fields to Salisbury to hear the Cathedral choir, and before returning he would meet a few friends at a 'music meeting,' when he would 'sing and play his part.' And on the Sunday before his death he rose up in his bed and, calling for his lute, tuned it, saying :

My God, my God,
My music shall find thee,
And every string
Shall have his attribute to sing.

and sang to his own accompaniment his poem, 'The Sundays of man's life.'

His collection of poems, *The Temple*, was not published until after his death. He left it to Nicholas Ferrar to publish. 'If he can turn it to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public: if not, let him burn it; for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies.'

There is one peculiarity in his poems which an attentive reader will probably notice. It is that their enigmatical character is not always caused by their 'metaphysical' form. It is sometimes caused by his hesitancy, by his dissatisfaction with the state of religion in his day, by his wistful glances backward at an earlier and purer time. It seemed as if a racial or ancestral Catholic consciousness awoke in his sensitively devout mind. This is not an unusual phenomenon to-day, although these subconscious returns are rarely understood and admitted. But, after all, we inherit from our forefathers, and Catholic life is in our blood. Nothing can destroy our past, not even Protestantism. There are roots to our religious life, roots which can be traced to a remote past, before we were born. They throb with new sap in many an individual 'Second Spring' in later generations, and

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show their vitality in many a 'recent conversion.' And a naturally devout soul like that of 'holy George Herbert' is most of all liable to the troubled awakenings of these 'misgivings of a creature moving about in worlds not realised.'

And it is one certain effect of this—to be looked for in him especially—that he should break out occasionally (there are two instances of it, at least) in violent invective against the Roman Catholic Church: outbursts which are easily explained psychologically; for a repressed affection uses strange remedies for its relief, even the denial of its existence. A second effect in him was his craving for a 'past that is.' Listen to this, for example, taken from his 'To all Angels and Saints':

Oh glorious spirits, who after all your bands
See the smooth face of God, without a frown,
Or strict commands;
Where ev'ry one is King, and hath his crown,
If not upon his head, yet in his hands:
Not out of envie or maliciousnesse
Do I forbear to crave your speciall aid.
I would addresse
My vows to thee most gladly, blessed Maid,
And Mother of my God, in my distresse:
Thou art the holy mine, whence came the gold,
The great restorative for all decay
In young and old;
Thou art the cabinet where the jewell lay:
Chiefly to thee would I my soul unfold.
But now, (alas!) I dare not . . .

Or to this, from 'Whit-Sunday':

But since those pipes of gold, which brought
That cordiall water to our ground,
Were cut and martyr'd by the fault
Of those who did themselves through their side wound,
Thou shutt'st the doore, and keep'st within;
Scarce a good joy creeps through the chink:
And if the braves of conqu'ring sinne
Did not excite thee, we should wholly sink.

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Lord, though we change, thou art the same;
The same sweet God of love and light:
Restore this day, for thy great name,
Unto his ancient and miraculous right.

Or to this, from 'The Priesthood':

But th' holy men of God such vessels are,
As serve him up, who all the world commands.
When God vouchsafeth to become our fare,
Their hands convey him, who conveys their hands:
O what pure things, most pure must those things be,
Who bring my God to me!

Wherefore I dare not, I, put forth my hand
To hold the Ark, although it seems to shake
Through th' old sinnes and new doctrines of our land.
Onely, since God doth often vessels make
Of lowly matter for high uses meet,
I throw me at his feet.

It is true that a different meaning has been given to these significant verses by some writers, but although it was by Laud's persuasion that he received Holy Orders, he was not what was called in later times a High Churchman. He was simply, as he called himself, a 'Country Parson,' such as some of us were accustomed to in our youth, and brought his high gifts and fidelities to the humble evangelical work of an ordinary village clergyman. This it is that, known or unknown, gives his *Temple* poems their abiding charm and imparts to them a fragrance of holiness from the hands of him who wrote them. Others may give a later Laudian interpretation to the lines that have been quoted, but it is certain that his 'Communion Table' never imitated a Catholic Altar, and that he never pretended to 'restore' the forms and functions which Protestantism had emptied and cast away. But if the Established Church of England ever comes to canonise its saints, the name of 'holy George Herbert' will be the first upon its calendar.

JOHN FOSTER MAKEPEACE.