

He Got it Right

George Herbert: The Poet

George Herbert is either our most major minor poet in English language or he is the most modestly exquisite of our major poets.

From the introduction by John Tobin, (Ed.) in
George Herbert: The Complete English Poems,
Penguin Classics Edition, page XI.



On October 3, 2016 with my colleague and friend, Dick Staub, I explored a poet who lived in England from 1593 to 1633. The setting was a live podcast for the Earl Palmer Ministries/Kindlings Muse, an event held regularly in the Walker-Ames Room in Kane Hall at the University of Washington. The one hundred-plus attendees at the Kindlings Muse were inspired and challenged by the remarkable poems of George Herbert, the topic under discussion. I decided to write an expanded exposition on that title so that those unable to attend in person would be able to further explore his poems. I believe they are uniquely relevant for our generation and time.

Earl F. Palmer

In *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis tells of a writer who disturbed the atheism of a young Oxford don named C.S. Lewis. That poet was a writer himself, a man who died when he was only 40. He was George Herbert (1593-1633). Lewis puts it this way “But the most alarming of all was George Herbert. Here was a man who seemed to me to excel all the authors I had ever read in conveying the very quality of life as we actually live it from moment to moment; but the wretched fellow... insisted on mediating it through what I would still have called the “Christian Mythology” (Lewis, p. 214). “A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading,” (Lewis, p. 191).

How was it that the young Herbert would write in such a way that another young man who lived three hundred years later sensed such a resonance of shared feeling? I think it was three things: First, the earthy realism of Herbert; second his humorous take on life; and third, his ability to describe people and feelings. These three are combined together with a totally non-cynical belief in the possibility of goodness, and his faith in Jesus who revealed that goodness.

These four markers are not hard to find in the poems of Herbert. The third marker that makes George Herbert an everyman contemporary is his non-complicated way of observation and description. He helps us to somehow come into the room and join in with what is happening.

Though an atheist in his youth, C.S. Lewis was not cynical. He tells us in his autobiography “I lacked the cynic’s nose.” Lewis respected goodness whenever he saw it, “I can attribute this taste to myself freely (even at that age) because it was a liking for goodness which had nothing to do with any attempt to be good myself” (Lewis, p. 191).

In Herbert's realistic approach to people he found a genuine kindness and love. He also was strongly attracted to the humor of George Herbert. Describing another English writer, G.K. Chesterton, Lewis explained the humor he liked best, "Not 'jokes' embedded in the page like currants in a cake, still less (what I cannot endure), a general tone of flippancy and jocularity, but the humor which is not in any way separable from the argument but is rather (as Aristotle would say) the 'bloom' on dialectic itself. The sword glitters not because the swordsman set out to make it glitter but because he is fighting for his life and therefore moving it very quickly" (Lewis, p. 190). Both Herbert and Chesterton possessed that natural humor that is not separable from the argument itself, and therefore helps us to learn while we are smiling.

George Herbert was born in 1593, the fifth of seven sons in a family of ten children. His father, Richard, was the son of Edward Herbert, a knight and part of a famous family during the reigns of King Edward IV and King James I. His mother, Magdalene, was brilliant in her own right, a friend of William Shakespeare and a friend of John Donne. Herbert distinguished himself as a scholar and orator at Cambridge University. His language skill was extensive, in addition to Latin and Greek, he was fluent in Spanish, French and Italian.

Herbert became a Member of Parliament in 1624, during the reign of King James I. He was indebted to John Donne, twenty years his elder, himself a poet and Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Herbert carried to his death a gift from Donne, an engraved figure of Christ on an anchor with the inscription "crux mihi anchora." This poet wrote near his own death "When winds and waves rise highest, I am sure, this anchor keeps my faith, that me secure" (Tobin, p. 279).

While still in Parliament, in a sudden decision he chose to study for the Priesthood and at age 36 he became a Church of England parish priest at Bemerton, near Salisbury Cathedral. George Herbert's health was frail and during the final days of illness his classmate and close friend from Cambridge days who himself was a devout member of the Church of England, Nicholas Ferrar, was entrusted with the complete collection of Herbert's poetry. He wrote these instructions to Ferrar:

Sir, I pray deliver this little book to my dear brother Ferrar, and tell him he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master, in whose service I have now found perfect freedom; desire him to read it: and then, if he can think it may turn 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 (Tobin, p. 311).

We are grateful to the stewardship of Nicholas Ferrar in ensuring that the complete poems of George Herbert would be published as they were by Cambridge Press. The publisher attached this sentiment in publication:

I license the whole book; so that it came to be printed without the diminution or addition of a syllable, since it was delivered into the hands of Mr. Duncon, save only that Mr. Ferrar hath added that excellent preface that is printed before it (Tobin, p. 311).

Here are five of the George Herbert poems with my own brief reflections:

The Call (p. 147)

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
And such a Life, as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:
Such a Light, as shows a feast:
Such a Feast, as mends in length:
Such a Strength, as makes his guest:

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
Such a Joy, as none can move:
Such a Love, as none can part:
Such a Heart, as joys in love.

*This poem has been presented as a hymn, Music by Alexander Brent Smith,
Arrangement by Erik Routley Westminster Praises, 1976.*

There is a musical sound to this poem; as if it was a song, a startling call to presence. The opening word “Come” makes us wonder, is it the Lord inviting us to “Come” as in Matthew 11 “Come unto me all ye who are heavy laden” or is the speaker of the poem inviting “us” to breathe because of a truth that ends strife. Then comes the most startling line with a new word in a new way “Such a Life, as killeth death.” Herbert has now made us wide-awake with the word choice so that the final words of the poem become totally available to everyone whoever he or she is. We then hear about food to eat and love with joy that will last.

Hope (p. 113)

I gave to Hope a watch of mine: but he
An anchor gave to me.
Then an old prayer-book I did present:
And he an optic sent.
With that I gave a vial full of tears:
But he a few green ears:
Ah Loiterer! I'll no more, no more I'll bring:
I did expect a ring.

There is a subtle irony in this brief poem that is like the humor of dialectic. The requests are logical and yet each is surprised by an answer from “Hope” that is disappointing to the speaker in the poem. And yet, each answer is really better and richer than what I thought I wanted. We wonder if John Donne’s imprinted inscription is not in Herbert’s mind as he is the receiver of an anchor when he thought he wanted a time chart.

The humor of the speaker who calls hope Lazy and a Loiterer are ironic and perfect. But the good surprise is that as disappointing as hope seems nevertheless the name of the poem prepares us for something good to happen beyond our disappointments.

The Pulley (p. 150}

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 dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

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

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.

This is a creation poem, but not on the large Genesis 1 scale, but it is written as if creation happens in a small space. Therefore, because of the scale of the poem creation is made unusually personal and really knowable by one listener. The creation gifts are generously given and yet one gift called "Rest" is left unopened. Is "Rest" a play on the word, which in the Bible refers to that which is complete and fulfilled as in "Sabbath", "Seven", and "Rest"?

Then the question becomes, how is man/woman to find and own this "Rest?" The author/creator makes sure that every other gift stays in full force, yet without "Rest." The man/woman is rich and yet restless. For Herbert's poem, only goodness is able to lead man/woman to fulfillment. Even faith is not enough because faith is sometimes confused and makes faulty choices. If not love as the guide and leader, at least weariness will toss him to the breast of God.

Love (3) (p. 178)

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

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?
 My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.

This poem is about goodness, but there is a problem that the speaker makes clear: his “soul drew back.” The poem then journeys through the complaints of shame and feelings of unworthiness; nevertheless, love continues to invite the speaker to come and taste. The best surprise is the last line “So I did sit and eat.” Herbert is a welcomer who knows that it is possible to experience goodness. He offers an earthy and wonderful close to the poem. Love did win out and in the face of self-condemnation and self-doubt. For Herbert, this is what trust in God comes to. He decides to take the promise of God’s love at heart and try it out, “So I did sit and eat.”

Antiphon I (p. 47)

The heav’ns are not too high,
 His praise may thither fly:
The earth is not too low,
 His praises there may grow.
Let all the world in ev’ry corner sing,
 My God and King

The church with psalms must shout,
 No door can keep them out:
 But above all, the heart
 Must bear the longest part.
Let all the world in ev’ry corner sing,
 My God and King.

*This poem has been presented as a hymn, Oxford University Press. Copyright 1927.
The tune is by Reverend Alexander Stewart Macalister.*

Verse 1 affirms that we on earth’s every corner acknowledge grand news with four words, “My God and King”. The song of praise comes from the presence of God, and is sung on earth just as the shepherds discovered on the night of Jesus’ birth. The earth is not too low for that eternal good news to grow and spread. It belongs to all the world in every corner.

Verse 2 claims the universal task of those who believe (the church), to share this liberating truth with Psalms. Because no doors can keep it out, Herbert is claiming the trans-tribal nature of good news. No walls can block this good news that deserves to spread. Finally, Herbert makes the territory of the human heart the most important place that this good news of the kingly reign of the Lord who is God and King can happen. The human heart lasts longer than even the world, we bear the longest part.

Earl F. Palmer (2017)

References:

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Key People and Dates of Historical Events during the Lifetime of George Herbert:

George Herbert		1593-1633
John Donne	Poet and Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral	1573-1631
William Shakespeare		1564-1616
Queen Elizabeth I		1533-1603
King James I (Reigned from 1603 to 1625)	Authorized Version of Holy Bible published during his reign (1611)	1566-1625

Key People and Dates of Historical Events after the Lifetime of George Herbert:

King Charles I	Executed in 1649 during the Long Parliament/ Lord Protector Period	1600-1649
Oliver Cromwell	Led the 1645 Rebellion of the Long Parliament and became Lord Protector of England until his death. The Royalist Restoration follows this period.	1599-1658
John Bunyan	Authored <i>Pilgrim’s Progress</i> , imprisoned for 12 years during the Royalist Restoration Period as a dissident pastor	1628-1688
John Newton	Wrote <i>Amazing Grace</i>	1725-1807

