Preface

George Herbert (1593-1633), perhaps the most devout amongst the writers of religious verse in English, has left a truly indelible mark in the annals of devotional poetry. Judged by the number of editions of his poetical collection, 'The Temple', and the number of copies sold, he must have been a great favourite with the reader in his own day. According to Izaak Walton, his first biographer, more than twenty thousand copies of the book were sold by 1672. It had gone through two editions in 1633 and four by the time of Nicholas Ferrar's death in 1637. Considering the level of literacy and the taste of the reading public of that time, this is indeed a very impressive record. The poet was a popular and highly respected figure of the day. Francis Bacon, the scholar and eminent man of letters, held him in high esteem. The known admirers of his poetry included people of such differing tastes as King Charles I, Richard Baxter - the puritan divine, Henry Purcell, and John Wesley. His admirers of a later day include William Cowper, S.T. Coleridge, T.S.Eliot, G.M.Hopkins, Aldous Huxley, and W.H.Auden. Auden was so greatly impressed by Herbert's poetry that he developed a strong liking for the man and wished he were an intimate friend. Such a desire, he said, was not aroused either by Dante or Goethe or Wordsworth. This eagerness for a Christian poet on the part of one who had been for some years an ardent communist, indicates the appeal and power of the former's
personality as expressed in his poetry.

Ever since his day, Herbert's poetry has been a subject of deep interest, intense study, and vibrant criticism. A large number of books on his life and poetry has been written during these four hundred years since his death, and he has been praised universally, above everything else, for his piety and sincerity of feeling. There was, however, a sharp and unexpected decline of his popularity in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when critics like Dryden and Addison presented him in an unfavourable light. Dryden parodied him in 'Mac Flecknoe', and ridiculed him for his dramatic manner, his anagrams, and for "torturing one poor word ten thousand ways". Addison's six essays in 'The Spectator', on the subject of false wit, reinforced Dryden's charges. This derision of Herbert's poetry appears to be the reaction against the formidable and often dramatic style adopted by him, rather than against the devotional content of his poetry. It is worth mentioning here that not a single edition of 'The Temple' was published from 1709 to 1795.

It was Coleridge who retrieved Herbert's poetry from this cold neglect by his 'notes' to Pickering's edition of Herbert's works (London 1857). Also, there is his note to 'Essay VI' of the first volume of 'The Friend' where he called Herbert "a true poet ... a poet sui generis", and praised his poetry as the 'most exquisite of the kind'. During the nineteenth century, many popular editions and selections of Herbert's poems were published, and they greatly helped to re-establish him as a devotional poet.
The revival of Herbert's popularity has reached its peak in our day. As a result of a change in the literary taste early in this century, John Donne, Herbert's elder contemporary and famous devotional poet, and other poets of his school including Herbert himself, found favour with the critics, chief among them being T.S. Eliot who discovered a singular fusion of thought and feeling in Donne's poetry, and whose phrase, "re-unification of sensibility", has become a catchword in contemporary critical vocabulary. Writing in 'The Spectator' (CXLVIII, 1932, pp 360-361), Eliot discussed the spiritual stamina of Herbert's works and insisted that there was "throughout them a brain-work, and a very high level of intensity, his poetry is definitely an Oeuvre - to be studied entire." Other modern writers who have published their independent works on Herbert, or have casually commented on his life and poetry, include such distinguished names as those of Margaret Bottrall, J.H. Summers, Rosemond Tuve, Aldous Huxley, W.H. Auden, Helen Gardner, Helen Vendler, and C.A. Patrides, to name only a few. There is, besides, a large number of illuminating articles on Herbert, scattered over different literary periodicals.

An examination of the existing criticism of Herbert's life and poetry shows that he has been viewed by most critics as devotional in substance and, following Dr Johnson, 'metaphysical' in manner. The attempt to relate his poetry to his personality is not much in evidence. Some critics have considered him exclusively as a devout Christian, and expressed the view that his poetry is best appreciated only by those who share his belief. Coleridge was the first to express this opinion, followed by
Eliot who observed that one could not get much satisfaction from Herbert unless he could take seriously the things which the poet himself had taken seriously. Opinions like these, however eminently their authorship, are not wholly justified, for they tend to minimise the universality of Herbert's poetry. Happily, however, there are critics like Itrat-Hussain and Helen Vendler who have very maintained that it is not necessary for a reader to share Herbert's 'belief' in order to appreciate his poetry. Some of the other modern writers have tried to interpret Herbert's poetry from a number of pseudo-modern angles which are wholly untenable in relation to his poetry. The most controversial criticism of the poet in modern times is attributed to William Empson, who has viewed Herbert's devotional poetry ('The Hope', 'The Pilgrimage' and 'The Sacrifice' in particular) from a pseudo-psychological standpoint, including the Freudian, in his book, 'Seven Types of Ambiguity'. His interpretations are indeed difficult to understand (in one of them he slandered Christ by saying that as a boy he had committed incest in His Father's Garden). Commenting on the lines

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Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the Tree,  
The Tree of Life, for all but only me. 

('The Sacrifice', 202-203)
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Empson wrote:

'I cannot get away from feeling that these lines carry the usual homely quality of Herbert, and present the Christ in torment, with ghastly pathos, as an adventurous boy.'

Such pseudo-analytical interpretations of Herbert's poems
resulted in evoking a strong reaction in Rosemond Tuve who corrected Empson's analysis of 'The Sacrifice' by stating that the critic was ignorant of the poet's use of liturgical practices. She brought the derailed approach to seventeenth century poetry, particularly to devotional poetry, back to the right track by pointing out that to understand a poem of that age properly, it was necessary to read it in the light of the religious environment of the day. Poetry that was a record of deep religious experience, like Herbert's, could not be treated as an assortment of single, individual pieces. It has to be taken in its correct perspective and tradition, and not "as if it had no past."^2

Most of the works on George Herbert have been devoted to a recounting of the events of the poet's life, and to an analysis of his style, diction and poetic power. In the process, the critics have neglected the traits of his personality as reflected in his poetry. In the words of Helen Vendler,

"... the man Herbert is more than the record, is beyond even the best presentation of fact. All too soon biographers caught up in the spell of Walton have merely acquiesced in the portrayal of Herbert as a forerunner of the type of 'gentle Jesus', meek and mild (despite clear indications in his poem of his 'sudden soul' and his 'youth and fierceness' and despite his elder brother's comments on his Herbert passion and choler)".\(^3\)

No serious study of the close relation between Herbert's personality and his poetry has yet been made. The poet's temperament, his personal traits, his relationship with the members of his family, and with his contemporaries, have been left out. But all these have
a strong and direct bearing upon his thought and his deep-felt and most sincerely expressed poetry. Rightly did Coleridge observe that the "merits" of Herbert's poems "will never be felt without a sympathy with the mind and character of the man." It is pertinent to recall at this point a very significant observation made by Benjamin Lany, the then Vice Chancellor of Cambridge, to whom Nicholas Ferrar had applied for permission to publish the first edition of 'The Temple'. While licensing the book for publication without any change, he said: "... but I hope the world will not take him to be an inspired prophet."

Despite this prophetic caution, critics and biographers, starting with Walton, have tried to make a saint of one who was very much a man of this world, a truly sensitive soul — complete only in his inner struggles, rebellion, defiance, apparent lack of faith at times, and many other failings which, in the words of Herbert himself, a deeply devotional person suffers: "such spiritual conflicts, as none can think, but only those that have endured them."

Aldous Huxley, commenting on Herbert's temperament, says:

"The climate of his mind is positively English in its variableness and instability. Frost, sunshine, hopeless drought and refreshing rains succeed one another with bewildering rapidity. Herbert is the poet of this inner weather."

Rev. F.E. Hutchinson has referred to 'The Temple' as the document in which George Herbert laid bare the long story of his inner life with all its faults and ardours.

Despite his turbulent "inner weather" and "faults", Herbert was a man full of love and compassion for his fellow-men. This
is evident from his request to Nicholas Ferrar while sending him his manuscript of poems through Edmond Duncan (as reported by Izaak Walton):

"Sir, I pray deliver this little book to my dear brother Ferrar ... and if he can think it may turn to some advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made publick: if not, let him burn it."

Herbert's purpose in sending the book to Ferrar was to help those who might be treading the same path towards God as his. And a humble man was he who ended the request by stating: "for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies." (The same, incidentally, was his posie also, depicting his noble humility).

Though an impressive number of books has been written on Herbert's life and poetry, it is still felt that there is every need to relate his poetry to his personality, and to show that one is a mirror of the other. That is what the present work proposes to do.

This work will not be a detailed study of Herbert's life which has already been treated in full by many writers. Only such aspects of his life and career, as have a direct bearing upon his poetry, will be examined here. It is not at all the aim of this work to consider Herbert as a metaphysical poet. The aim is to bring out the personality of the man George Herbert in relation to his English works, chiefly the poems and the letters.

Chapter I of this study is devoted to a brief review of Herbert's life covering such aspects of it as have a direct connection with the overall plan of the work. A short survey of the social, religious, and literary environment of the early seventeenth
century has been presented in Chapter II. This is expected to facilitate an appreciation of the trend of Herbert's poetry in the context of the general conventions of the day.

One of the important critics of Herbert's poetry, J.H.Summers, once observed: "Heart-work and Heaven-work make up his books."

Chapter III of this work is devoted to an elaboration of this very just remark. It also aims at examining Herbert's personal qualities as reflected in his poetry. This is expected to shed light on certain important facets of his personality hitherto unexplored.

There is a rare fusion of church conformity and universal spirituality in Herbert's life and poetry, but it has not yet got its due recognition. In the present work an attempt has been made to bring it out vividly. This is being done in Chapter IV.

Herbert's letters also provide us rare glimpses into his mind. The qualities of his personality as seen in them have been discussed in Chapter V.

Herbert's poetry, deep-felt and faithfully presented, shows a singular synthesis of the man and the poet. This has been examined in Chapter VI.

Chapter VII is devoted to a discussion of Herbert's greatness as a devotional poet.

'The Works of George Herbert' edited by Rev.F.E.Hutchinson (Oxford, 1978) has been used for the purpose of the present study.

A work on Herbert, so late in the day, runs the risk of being repetitive. We have, therefore, tried our utmost to steer clear of whatever is not strictly relevant for this work. All available critical opinions on the poet, however, have been examined, but only such of them as throw some light on his personality, have been adopted here.