Chapter VI
George Herbert: Man and Poet - Unusual Synthesis

Most of the critics of Herbert's poetry over the years have held the view that his personality was totally immersed in his poetic creation. While his poetry as a whole has received its due share of critical attention, one particular aspect, which shows the man Herbert standing shoulder to shoulder with the poet, still remains neglected. The aim of this chapter is to emphasize this aspect, implied or obvious, for the purpose of showing the complete coexistence of the man and the poet.

It can be quite clearly seen that throughout his poetry, there is an untiring search for an ideal way of life, and a mode of being, following which he would be able to surrender himself to the Will of God. The spirit of this surrender pervaded all of Herbert's thought and activity. His 'Dedication' of 'The Temple' makes it amply clear:

Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee;
Yet mine neither: for from thee they came,
And must return. Accept of them and me,
And make us strive who shall sing best thy name.

It is now known that Herbert had only one refuge, one place in his troubled life where he could impose order. And that was in his deeply personal poetry where he found some solace. He was a poet, and it is a poet's business to bring in a sense of harmony and order. It was in writing poetry that Herbert found
a sense of order without which it was impossible for him to exist.

Herbert felt himself to be utterly useless in God's universe. He prayed to the Lord for mercy, and for a chance to prove himself:

I am no link in thy great chain,
But all my companie is a weed.
LORD place me in thy consort; give one strain
To my poore reed.

('Employment I', 21–24)

He expresses his agony at remaining far away from his goal, and compares himself to a useless weed in the Kingdom of Heaven:

To have my aim, and yet to be
Further from it then when I bent my bow;
To make my hopes my torture, and the fee
Of all my woes another wo,
Is in the midst of delicates to need,
And ev'n in Paradise to be a weed.

('The Crosse', 25–30)

We also see that Herbert was deeply and incessantly interested in the working of his own mind, examining his moods and motives. He did not condone the weaknesses he discovered in himself, nor did he wallow in remorse. He could be patient and tolerant even towards his own intractable heart, as these lines show:

Full of rebellion, I would die,
Or fight, or travell, or denie
That thou hast ought to do with me.
O tame my heart;
It is thy highest art
To captivate strong holds to thee.

('Nature', 1–6)

Declaring his situation as worse than that of a bird or a beast, Herbert paints a poignant picture in the following lines:
Indeed at first Man was a treasure,
A box of jewels, shop of rarities,
A ring, whose posie was, 'My pleasure:
He was a garden in a Paradise:
Glorie and grace
Did crown his heart and face.

But sinne hath fool'd him. Now he is
A lump of flesh, without a foot or wing
To raise him to a glimpse of blisse:
A sick toss'd vessel, dashing on each thing;
Nay his own shelf:
My God, I mean myself.

('Miserie', 67-78)

Comparing his tormented soul to a neglected, untuned musical instrument, Herbert addresses a prayer to the Lord in the following poignant lines to tune him, and mend his state without delay:

Therefore my soul lay out of sight,
Untun'd, unstrung:
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,
Like a nipt blossom, hung
Discontented.

O cheer and tune my heartlesse breast,
Deferre no time;
That so thy favours granting my request,
They and my mind may chime,
And mend my ryme.

('Deniall', 21-30)

Douglas Brown has rightly pointed out that Herbert's habitual honesty, his 'self-giving' into poetry, produces two apparently contrary effects in most of his poems. The moods of despair, rebellion, or vexation get the freest possible play. Yet, at the same time, their occurrence is in the past. The poem of the present moment is an achievement of re-direction, renewal and submission. The poem by its very character provides a guarantee of faith by separating the mood from actual reality.¹

In the light of the above, it is considered necessary to discuss a few stanzas from Herbert's most autobiographical poem, 'The Collar', which has attracted wide critical attention. It
starts with forceful lines depicting his rebellion against the Lord:

I struck the board and cry'd, No more.  
I will abroad.  
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?  
My lives and life are free, free as the rode;  
Loose as the winde, as large as store.  
Shall I be still in suit?  
Have I no harvest but a thorn.

(1-7)

The vociferous protest gradually builds up through a series of sharp challenges until it reaches a climax of revolt before the poem is finally resolved in a mood of calm surrender:

Call in thy deaths head: tie up thy fears.  
He that forbears  
To suit and serve his need,  
Deserves his load.  
But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde  
At every word,  
I thought I heard one calling, 'Child'  
And I reply'd, 'My Lord'.

(29-36)

In the first line the poet challenges God to withdraw from him the concept of death, which has been traditionally a representative of Christian morality and discipline. Herbert also expresses his revolt by asking the Lord to tie up and take away from him the very fear of death. The poet's mood of rebellion is, however, totally resolved in the last two lines when he hears a fatherly voice, and immediately submits to it wholeheartedly. It is worth noting that the poem is narrated in the past tense, thus giving the impression that the whole action took place some time earlier. The last two lines, which are reminiscent of a priest bowing to the Lord, delink the mood and reality most effectively. This is perhaps the finest example of resolution of such a
tumultous rebellion in so delicate a manner - expressed in so few words.

Herbert's faith in God was not academic. It was the very core of his being. He might have had moments of agonising separation and even rebellion, but it was in the all-encompassing love of God that he looked for peace and solace. This is brought out well in these lines:

Yet by confession will I come
Into thy conquest: though I can do nought
Against thee, in thee I will overcome
The man, who once against thee fought.

('The Reprisall', 13-16)

Herbert was able to detach himself from his emotional conflicts and view man's basic nature quite clearly, as these lines show:

Man is no starre, but a quick coal
Of mortall fire:
Who blows it not, nor doth controll
A faint desire,
Lets his own ashes choke his soul.

('Employment II', 6-10)

The above lines bring out the fact that Herbert was able to achieve detachment despite his deep emotional involvement with life. The last line, in particular, illustrates this clearly.

While he is able to dissect the mind of man at times, and express incisive opinions like the above, there are other moments when his mind becomes confused by the complexity of man's personality, and he cannot but exclaim:

Oh, what a thing is man! how farre from power,
From settled peace and rest!
He is some twenty sev'rall men at least
Each sev'rall hour.

('Giddinessse', 1-4)
The last two stanzas must surely be based on Herbert's experience of his inner nature. These can be taken to be autobiographical in their implied sense, as sometimes he understood himself and his weaknesses clearly, but at other times he found himself to be incomprehensible.

'Affliction I' is also autobiographical in import. Alluding to God as mother, the poet describes his happy childhood thus:

At first thou gav'st me milk and sweetnesse;
I had my wish and way:
My days were straw'd with flow'rs and happiness;
There was no month but May.

(19-22)

The weather changed as sickness afflicted his youth and brought him pain and sorrow:

But with my yeares sorrow did twist and grow,
And made a partie unawares for wo
My flesh began unto my soul in pain,
Sicknesse cleave my bones;
Consuming agues dwell in ev'ry vein
And tune my breath to grones.

(23-28)

We know that sickness had dogged Herbert since his adolescence. But about his intense suffering and utter loneliness, we know little until we read these lines:

Sorrow was all my soul; I scarce believed,
Till grief did tell me roundly, that I lived.
When I got health, thou took'st away my life,
And more; for my friends die:
My mirth and edge was lost; a blunted knife
Was of more use then I.
Thus thinne and lean without a fence or friend,
I was blown through with ev'ry storm and winde.

(29-36)

Though he gives impression that he found his academic life rather tedious, we know that he made a mark in it. However, his
feelings, as expressed in the following lines, are worth noting:

Whereas my birth and spirit rather took
    The way that takes the town;
Thou didst betray me to a lingering 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, I threatened oft the siege to raise
    Not simpering all mine age,
Thou often didst with Academick praise
    Melt and dissolve my rage
I took thy sweetened pill, till I came where
I could not go away, nor persevere.

(37-48)

Lamenting the futility of his academic attainments, Herbert expresses the wish that instead of being a man he would have better served the Lord's creation by being a tree:

Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me
    None of my books will show;
I read, and sigh, and wish I were a tree;
    For sure then I should grow
To fruit or shade: at least some bird would trust
Her household to me, and I should be just.

(55-60)

While 'Affliction I' can be said to be representative of the secular life of Herbert, we find an equally moving account of his spiritual life in his poem called 'Dialogue', which is a dialogue between Herbert's soul and God. The poem is reproduced:

Sweetest Saviour, if my soul
    Were but worth of having,
Quickly should I then controll
    Any thought of wav'ing.
But when all my care and pains
Cannot give the name of gains
To thy wretch so full of strains,
What delight or hope remains?

What, Child, is the balance thine,
    Thine the poise and measure?
If I say, thou shalt be mine;
    Finger not thy treasure.
What the gains in having thee
Do amount to, onely he,
Who for man was sold, can see;
That transferr'd th' accounts to me.

But as I can see no merit,
    Leading to this favour:
So the way to fit me for it
    Is beyond my savour.
As the reason then is thine;
So the way is none of mine:
I disclaim the whole design:
Sinne disclaims and I resign.

That is all, if that I could
    Get without repining;
And my clay, my creature would
    Follow my resigning;
That as I did freely part
with my glorie and desert,
Left all my joyes to feel all smart
    Ah ! no more : thou break'at my heart.

Commenting on the incomparable last line, Arnold Stein says
that God's grief, exemplified in Christ's passion, is the major
mystery which, when brought forward, can silence the flow of
human complaint and questioning. At that moment, all the argument-
tative cunning of the human debtor is abandoned as irrelevant.

'The Flower' is another autobiographical poem of Herbert in
which he develops the central topic that when the feeling of guilt
overtakes a man, his experience of God's awareness is also
dimmed, and the soul goes underground like a flower-seed. But, like a flower,
the personality of man blooms forth once again when the sunshine
of God's grace falls on it, and the inner season changes from winter
to spring.

Another interesting poem is 'The Forerunners' in which the
physical, artistic, and the spiritual worlds of Herbert juxtapose -
thus giving very clear insight into the psyche of the man Herbert.
It starts with the poet detecting streaks of grey in his hair which fills him with sudden alarm. He wonders if it is not an indication of the impending loss of wit and sparkle, and the commencement of senility. But he quickly recovers, for taking refuge in his love for the Lord, he overcomes the initial feeling of despair. He then moves to the aesthetic (or moral) plane when he derides the concept of physical beauty and its depiction in art. He declares that beauty, in the strict sense of the term, belongs to the Lord only, and a true artist must put that in appropriate terms:

Let foolish lovers, if they will love dung,
With canvas, not with arras, clothe their shame:
Let follie speak in her own native tongue.
True beautie dwells on high: ours is a flame
But borrow'd thence to light us thither,
Beautie and beauteous words should go together.

Herbert strikes a spiritual tone in the following lines from the same poem:

Yet if you go, I passe not; take your way:
For, 'Thou art still my God', is all that ye
Perhaps with more embellishment can say.
Go birds of spring; let winter have his fee;
Let a bleak paleness chalk the doore,
So all within be livelier then before.

In 'The Pulley', Herbert has suggested that the very restlessness of man is part of a divine scheme intended to cause him to return to the Lord, with whom alone can man find true rest and peace. This is depicted in the lines quoted:

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts in stead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
So both should losers be.
Herbert as a devout person believed that his Church was all within himself. He thought that God's real abode was in the human heart, and this belief was expressed in his poem 'Sion' when he said: "For all thy frame and fabrick is within."

He declared that without Christ, who lived in him, he should have no rest:

Without whom I would have no rest:
In him I am well drest.

('Aaron', 14-15)

This joy has come to him from his unwavering faith in God, and he has realised the deeper truth that the surrender to the Will of the Lord is an enrichment of life:

Much troubled, till I heard a friend expresse,
That all things were more ours by being his.

('The Holdfast', 11-12)

Herbert is not one of those poets who wax eloquent in their admiration of the external beauty of the world, or find satisfaction in the mere play of words. He is intent on realising the love of God in his own soul:

My stuffe is flesh, not brasse; my senses live,
And grumble off, that they have more in me
Than he that curbs them, being but one to five:
Yet I love thee.

('The Pearl', 27-30)

Herbert's firm belief that all peace and order emanates from God is depicted in the following lines, which are an example of his art of plainness:
For where thou dwellest all is neat,
First peace and silence all disputes controll,
Then order plaies the soul;
And giving all thin's their set forms and houres,
Makes of wilde woods sweet walks and bowres.

('The Familie', 8-12)

Sometimes it is really difficult to tell the poet from the
man, thanks to the intensity of his poetic expression. To those
who know how devout Herbert was as a person, the fusion of the
man and the poet, in a passage like the following, is quite
obvious:

Come dearest Lord, passe not this holy season,
My flesh and bones and joynts do pray:
And even my verse, when by the ryme and reason
The word is, 'Stay', sayes ever, 'Come'.

('Home', 73-76)

As already stated, just before accepting holy orders, Herbert's
mind was assailed with doubts as to his fitness for the same. This
perplexity is depicted in his poetry in these lines:

Holinessse on the head
Light and perfections on the breast,
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To lead them unto life and rest:
Thus are true Aarons drest.

Profanenessse in my head,
Defects and darkness in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest:
Poore priest thus am I drest.

('Aaron', 1-10)

A similar doubt is expressed by him in these lines:

But thou art fire, sacred and hallow'd fire;
And I but earth and clay:should I presume
To wear thy habit, the severe attire
My slender compositions might consume.
I am both foul and brittle; much unfit
To deal in thy holy writ.

('The Priesthood', 7-12)
Herbert was known to have nurtured strong hopes for courtly preferment before he became a churchman. He was a little disappointed to find that they did not fructify. The following lines bear evidence of the poet's frustration:

Joy, I did lock thee up: but some bad man
Hath let thee out again:
And now, me thinks, I am where I began
Sev'n years ago:

('The Bunch of Grapes', 1-4)

A note of discontent is evident in the following lines also though the occasion that inspired them is hard to determine:

Perhaps great places and thy praise
Do not so well agree.

('Submission', 15-16)

Herbert's disdain, however, for worldly things is quite obvious in some of his other poems. Considering secular pleasures to be sugar-coated grieves, he writes:

Press me not to take more pleasure
In this world of sugred lies,
And to use a larger measure
Then my strict, yet welcome size.

First there is no pleasure here:
Colour'd grieves indeed there are,
Flushing woes, that look as clear
As if they could beautie spare.

('The Rose', 1-8)

The fourth line in the above passage shows that Herbert was content with what he had.

In yet another poem, he scorns honour, riches, and beauty thus:

Lord, in my silence how do I despise
What upon trust
Is styled honour, riches or fair eyes;
But is fair dust.

('Fraeltie', 1-4)
In what can be rightly regarded as a subtle point of self-criticism, Herbert prays to the Lord for a flexible outlook which could stand by him in the courtly circles as well as in spiritual surroundings:

Give me the pliant mind, whose gentle measure
Complies and suits with all estates;
Which can let loose to a crown, and yet with pleasure
Take up within a cloisters gates.

('Content', 13-16)

These lines also indicate that in his heart of hearts Herbert was equally inclined to a life at court to priesthood.

In another autobiographical poem, named 'The Quip', Herbert has professed his distaste for earthly beauty, riches, honour, and wit, but has reiterated his abiding faith in God in whom he finally wishes to take refuge. The poem is reproduced:

The merrie world did on a day
With his train-bands and mates agree
To meet together, where I lay,
And all in sport to geere at me.

First, Beautie crept into a rose,
Which when I pluckt not, Sir, said she,
Tell me, I pray, whose hands are those?
But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.

Then Money came, and chinking still,
What tune is this, poore man? said he:
I heard in Musick you had skill.
But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.

Then came brave Glorie puffing by
In silks that whistled, who but he?
He scarce allow'd me half an eie.
But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.

Then came quick Wit and Conversation
And he would needs a comfort be,
And, to be short, make an Oration.
But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.
Yet when the houre of thy designe
To answer these fine things shall come;
Speak not at large; say, I am thine;
And then they have their answer home.

Rev. F. E. Hutchinson has shown his agreement with George Herbert Palmer in the latter's opinion that in his poetry, Herbert must have found one of his few defences against pain. He believes that the poet's conversion of his suffering and frustration into the music of poetry, gave him ready relief, and fortified his faith in God. This is also borne out by these lines:

I live to shew his power, who once did bring
My 'joyes' to 'ween', and now my 'griefs' to 'sing'.

('Josephs coat', 13-14)

Herbert's high regard, similarly, reflected in his poetry. Poems like 'Christmas', 'Lent', 'Easter', 'Good Friday', and 'Trinitie Sunday' are not mere conventional exercises. They are filled with profound meaning, for they had their strong appeal for the poet personally. According to Marchette Chute, Herbert's 'Whitsunday', written for the festival that celebrates the descent of the holy spirit at Pentecost, is an expression of his longing for the light that once shone on the apostles, and a prayer that it may shine again. The following lines from the poem were quoted by the critic to support his argument:

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.

(25-28)

That Herbert adhered, almost adamantly, to all that was genuine in tradition, custom, or practice, is an indirect affirmation of the integrity and profundity of his religious faith.
What Herbert said and did in the few days before his death, has already been mentioned in Chapter I. We know from Walton about Herbert's readiness to shed the mortal coil. But long before his end, Herbert expressed similar sentiment in his poetry also. The following lines provide an instance:

0 show thy self to me
Or take me up to thee.

('Come', 5-6)

Herbert's thought of joy abounding in Heaven where he hopes to stand face to face with God, makes him all the more eager to welcome death:

If thy first glance so powerful be,
A mirth but open'd and seal'd up again;
What wonder shall we feel when we shall see
Thy full-ey'd love!

('The Gland', 15-20)

In the lines reproduced below, the poet Herbert appears to have written a very suitable epitaph for the man Herbert:

Farewell deare flowers, sweetly your time Ye spent,
Fit, while Ye liv'd, for smell or ornament,
And after death for cures.
I follow straight without complaints or grief,
Since if my sent be good, I care not if
It be as short as yours.

('Life', 13-18)

Brief though Herbert's life was, its fragrance has remained alive even today to the great delight of all.

It can now be said that in no other poet do we see so much of his life and being merging into his poetry in as fine a manner as in Herbert. In very truth, the two apparently separate identities are inextricably blended.