Chapter VII
George Herbert: Greatness as a Devotional Poet

Herbert Grierson once said: "Poems are not written by influences or movements or sources, but come from the living hearts of men." Nothing could designate Herbert's devotional poetry more exactly than this remark.

A study of the existing works of George Herbert shows that while he accepted the restraint of formal literary style of his time in his Latin and Greek poems, in his orations, and in his other writings, in his devotional English poetry he poured out, without any inhibition, the intimate experiences of his soul. The co-equality of the man and the poet is so intense that it is difficult to tell one from the other.

Herbert's resolve as a young man of seventeen to write only religious verse, can be attributed partly to the influence of the literary John Donne, and the friendship with the saintly Andrewes, and partly to his predominantly religious temper. His closest relationship was with God. His English poems are an honest expression of his intense spiritual experience, and he wrote them, not to become famous, but to help his fellow Christians. He was deliberately simple in his poetry.

Three things stand in the way of Herbert's proper recognition as a poet. Firstly, there is Walton's projection of him as a saintly poet which is a virtual denial of his emotional self and
creative energy. Secondly, as a writer of a tercentenary article has put it, Herbert "suffers as a poet from having been too simply beatified." Thirdly, as Helen C. White has pointed out, the word 'simple', in relation to Herbert, is most likely to be misunderstood in our day as implying simplicity or dullness of the mind. It is, therefore, necessary, for a proper assessment of his poetry, to put his image as man and poet in the right perspective.

Mark Taylor has pointed out that the popular image of Herbert (corrected to an extent in recent times by the incisive works of Rosemond Tuve, Joseph Summers, and others) is that of an essentially simple, comparatively childlike, and unlettered man (except in Scripture), a man without sophistication, somewhat like Chaucer's 'parson' compounded with the 'plowman', but unlike the learned 'clerk.' This impression is rather unfounded, for we know that Herbert was a fellow of Trinity College, Reader in Rhetoric, and Public Orator of Cambridge University besides being a friend of many erudite men of England of his day. Herbert, then, must have been a greatly learned man himself. But some of his critics would not rather recognise as much. Joan Bennet's discovery of an unsophisticated mind in Herbert's poetry, in total disregard of his upbringing in a polite society, seems to indicate such an attitude. The failure of some distinguished critics to account for the absence of artifice in Herbert's poetry, is a little surprising.

The greatest preoccupation of Herbert's poetry is his relationship with God. He felt that the role of the poet was to mediate quietly and self-effacingly between his heartfelt Christian
experience and his audience, to serve as a subjectively silent channel through which his experience could pass as it is to the reader. Since the process required all the skill, ingenuity and inventiveness at his command, Herbert thought it wise to remind his reader humbly that the credit for his poetic performance belonged not to him but to God. It is thus necessary to see some aspects of Herbert's poetry before we try to judge its greatness.

While a secular poet often identifies his muse with his own inventiveness, Herbert sees his poetic power as dependent on and emanating from God's word: "Thy word is all, if we could spell". ('The Flower')

Herbert's contention here appears to be that the poet should be a mirror and not a lamp. God's image, as experienced by the poet, must be presented by him in all its purity.

Herbert is unhappy to find that the praise of God is neglected in the poetry of his day in preference to the praise of physical charm only:

Doth Poetry
Wear 'Venus' Livery? only serve her turn?
Why are not 'Sonnets' made of thee? and layes
Upon thine Altar burnt? Cannot thy love
Heighten a spirit to sound out thy praise
As well as any she? Cannot thy 'Dove'
Out strip their 'Cupid' easily in flight?

('Sonnet I', 3-9)

Stating the full commitment of his art to God, Herbert says:

Wherefore with my utmost art
I will sing thee,
and the creame of my heart
I will bring thee.

('Praise II', 9-12)
The words, 'utmost art', seem to indicate the seriousness of the poet's purpose. According to Mark Taylor, these words are at once the subject and the method of the poet's work, being a manifestation of his love for God which, in itself, is the result of God's love for him. God is the true artist, and so long as the poet's art reflects His work sincerely, and does not impose a selfish subjectivity of his own, can achieve its highest order. 6

Herbert's sole purpose in writing poetry was to offer a prayer to the Lord. This is borne out by the fact that he never showed his collection of poems to any publisher, or even to his close friend, Nicholas Ferrar. If he was satisfied that a prayer would be acceptable to God, he would consider it good poetry. This was the simple heartfelt test by which he seems to have evaluated his poems.

According to Mark Taylor, Herbert felt the gift of poetry, like the gift of language in general, to have come from the Lord, and that its being bestowed on man obliged him to use it in God's service. This reciprocity is a kind of metaphor for the redeeming bond of grace, in which feeling moves continuously in both directions between man and Providence. God's gifts to man are signs of His favour. Not to use them in His service would, the poet believed, amount to sacrifice. 7

For Herbert, a poem was the visible point at which the eternal, heavenly province of God, and the transitory, earthly providence of man, merged. It reflected a partnership of man and God. It is expressed in the poet's own words thus:
0 Sacred Providence, who from end to end
Strongly and sweetly movest, shall I write,
and not of thee, through whom my fingers bend
To hold my quill? shall they not do thee right?

Of all the creatures both in sea and land
Onely to Man thou hast made known thy wayes,
And put the penne alone in his hand,
And made him Secretarie of thy praise.

("Providence", 1-8)

The last line clearly brings out Herbert's conviction that of all created beings, man alone can sing God's praise, and that it is a sacrilege to waste or misuse this power, particularly on the part of a poet.

For Herbert, the love of beauty meant the appreciation of the divine attributes only. He was one who would not adore the beauty of the flesh. These thoughts find their proper expression in the following verses:

Immortal Love, author of this great frame,
Sprung from that beautie which can never fade;
How hath man parcel'd out thy glorious name,
And thrown it on that dust which thou hast made,
While mortall love doth all the title gain!

("Love I", 1-5)

In these lines, the poet has ridiculed the practice of praising mortal beauty and human love, neglecting God, the loving Creator of the universe, and the Ultimate Beauty. Similarly, in the following lines, he has exposed the hollowness of the habit of adoring the transient charm of a woman's person in preference to the abiding Beauty of the Lord:

Open the bones, and you shall nothing find
In the best 'face' but 'filth', when, Lord, in thee
The 'beauty' lies in the 'discovery'.

("Sonnet II", 12-14)
Herbert has also deplored the craze for love-poetry that was fashionable in his day:

Wit fancies beautie, beautie raiseth wit:
The world is theirs; the two play out the game.

('Love I', 9-10)

Herbert regrets to find that instead of singing the glory of God, the poet of his time has fixed his attention on the apparel of his beloved:

Who sings thy praise? onely a scarf or glove
Doth warm our hands, and make them write of love.

(ibid., 13-14)

Parodying the famous lines of Campion, "There is a garden in her face / Where roses and white lilies grow", Herbert writes:

'Roses' and 'Lillies' speak thee; and to make
A pair of cheeks of them, is thy abuse.

('Sonnet II', 6-7)

Presenting his concept of divine beauty, Herbert writes:

Who says that fictions only and false hair
Become a verse? Is there in truth no beautie?
Is all good structure in a winding stair?
May no lines passe, except they do their dutie
Not to a true but a painted chair?

('Jordan I', 1-5)

The reference to winding stairs in the third line above is to Plato's lover 'ascending by steps', and also to Bembo's 'Book of the Courtier', in which the progress up a whole staircase of physical beauty is depicted. In the last line, Herbert compares devotional poetry to a true chair while showing secular poetry as an imitation only, a painted chair. Socrates and St. Augustine also believed that the divine beauty alone was real. The former
said: "But what if a man had eyes to see the true beauty, the
divine beauty, I mean pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged
with the pollution of mortality and all the colors and vanities
of human life." The latter contended that no man would choose to
contemplate an imitation when real beauty could be his.

Herbert's concept of music also needs careful study. For him,
it was an art which expressed both thought and feeling, a medium
that was constantly transforming its materials into a harmony of
sound and sense. For him, God is the greatest musician:

All must appear,
   And be disposed, and dress'd, and tun'd by thee,
Who sweetly temper'd all. If we could heare
Thy skill and art, what Musick would it be!

('Providence', 36-40)

Most of Herbert's poetry has a pervasive note of suffering,
yet, at times, it is seen overflowing with joy. For the poet,
where there is music, there is gladness. The following lines
provide an instance:

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

Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
   'My God and King'.

('Antiphon I', 1-8)

Music chiefly abounds in the higher symmetry of Herbert's
thought. According to Sir Thomas Browne, music exists wherever
there is harmony, order, and proportion; and these, as already
seen, are the distinguishing qualities of Herbert's poetry.
Herbert aspires to attain to God, the Ultimate Harmony, by the aid of his own music:

My musick shall find thee, and ev'ry string
Shall have his attribute to sing;
That all together may accord in thee,
And prove one God, one harmonie.

('The Thanksgiving', 39-42)

It is quite evident that the poet did not attach importance to music as a form of pleasure. Both as a poet and a musician, he knew that music was more to be felt than heard. He is supposed to have once remarked, "Dust, alas, no musick feels." As far as he was concerned, music was another means of worship of the Divine. He has recorded his praise for devotional music in the following lines:

Sweetest of sweets, I thank you: when displeasure
Did through my body wound my minde,
You took me thence, and in your house of pleasure
A daintie lodging me assign'd.

('Church-musick', 1-4)

The reverence in which solemn music was held by Herbert, who depended on it, is depicted in these lines:

Comfort, I'le die; for if you poste from me,
Sure I shall do so, and much more:
But if I travell in your companie,
You know the way to heavens doore.

(ibid., 9-12)

Herbert's art of poetry is the art of plainness and complete sincerity. Writing on the subject, Arnold Stein says:

"As a religious poet Herbert addresses God directly and writes with the intention of being overheard by Him. For traditional and contemporary reasons, both religious and secular in origin, he aspires to an
art of plainness that can achieve absolute sincerity and that can reveal impersonal truth without distortion. 8

Stein has quoted the following two lines from Herbert's poem, 'Love II', in support of his argument:

And kindle in our hearts such true desires,
As may consume our lusts, and make thee way.

(4-5)

For Herbert, success in poetry is to be judged by one's ability to please the Lord. In his own words,

He will be pleased with that dittie;
And if I please him, I write fine and wittie.

('The Forerunners', 11-12)

Herbert feels so deeply inspired that he thinks that in writing his poems, he is only carrying out God's Will:

Onely do thou lend me a hand,
Since thou hast both mine eyes.

('Submission', 19-20)

He strongly felt that the art of his poetry depended on his capacity for appreciating the greatness of God, and on the grace bestowed by the Lord upon him. He expresses the thought thus:

To write a verse or two is all the praise,
That I can raise:
Mend my estate in any ways,
Thou shalt have more.

('Praise I', 1-4)

In these lines he prays to God to make him a more sincere servant of His, for then, he believes, the ability to praise the Lord will also increase.

For Herbert, poetry was a means of direct communion with the Lord. His poem 'Quidditie' bears it out:
My God, a verse is not a crown,
No point of honour, or gay suit,
No hawk, or banquet, or renown,
Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute:

It cannot vault, or dance, or play;
It never was in 'France' or 'Spain';
Nor can it entertain the day
With my great stable or domain.

It is no office, art, or news,
Nor the Exchange, or busie Hall;
But it is that which while I use
I am with thee, and 'most take all'.

Although Herbert does not believe a verse to be any of the things mentioned above, yet he believes that it takes him nearer God. That is how he attains the gift of creation that can sustain all these "excellences".

Commenting on Herbert's technique, Stein says that Herbert is a poet in whom the desire to understand and to relate is a commanding passion. He seldom gives himself to grief for its own sake. Instead, he sorts out afflictions and anguish to overcome them indirectly, and to reach through them to their cause and purpose. His deepest sense of God whom he would praise and love, requires the images of reluctance and conflicts he finds in himself; he is faithful to them, and struggles, with great success, to transform them into sincere poetry. 9

According to Marchette Chute, Donne is said to have once remarked, jokingly perhaps, about his poetry thus: "I did best when I had least truth for my subject." It is difficult to imagine Herbert saying anything like this, even in jest, for, in his poetry, he was dealing with what was of the utmost importance in his life — his relationship with God. This critic thinks that it
is because of this sincerity that even the Puritans admired his poems. She quotes Richard Baxter, a Puritan, who said: "Herbert speaks to God like one that really believeth in God, and whose business in the world is most with God." 10

The range and form of Herbert's poetic expressions are as wide and various as his relationship with God. Some of his poems are apparently plain and simple. Others depend upon an ingenuity of wit and conceit in the manner of Donne. In many of his poems, Herbert gives the impression of himself as a kind of an interlocutor. This he did in conformity with the prevalent practice of his day, particularly in devotional poetry. But underlying all his poems, there is a firmness of intellectual structure, a precision of phrasing, and an almost perfect craftsmanship.

In 'A true Hymne', Herbert writes:

Whereas if th' heart be moved,
Although the verse be somewhat scant,
God doth supply the want.

As when th' heart sayes (sighing to be approv'd)

'O, could I love!' and stops : God writeth, 'Loved'.

These lines bring out Herbert's idea of the relationship a true poet must have with God, he is firmly of the opinion that if love be true, God will surely grant him the power to express it in poetry. Herbert maintained that poetry should be based on truth and sincerity, and not on technique or rhetorical flourish of the kind used by Donne in his love-poems.

Almost all the poems of Herbert are based on his own experience. He does not depend upon hearsay, or on sentiment not
genuinely his own. In most cases, it appears as if the very act of writing a poem brought him peace. He seems to have lost himself in the process of writing a poem. This reminds us of Herbert's distant kinsman, Sir Philip Sidney, who once wrote to a friend that he was never less a prey to melancholy than when he was earnestly applying the feeble powers of his mind to some high and difficult object. The writing of a good poem seems to be an act of this kind, and it brought Herbert peace and equanimity when the poem was completed.

Unlike in Donne, in Herbert, the opening lines of the poems are usually quiet. He places the reader at the heart of the subject just as Donne does, and maintains, unlike the other poet, a demeanour of calm and restraint. A similar difference is noticeable between the closing lines of Herbert's poems and those of Donne. Herbert achieves his final effect often by relaxing the tension at the end of a poem. This is mainly because he writes of an experience after he had gone through it. For the purpose of his poetry, he lives it over again in retrospect, but Donne lives the experience in his poetry.

Herbert's poetry may, perhaps, be said to approximate Wordsworth's definition of poetry as emotion recollected in tranquillity. Also, it is perhaps permissible to ask if it satisfies in a way Eliot's standard of impersonality in art.

Herbert felt at times a sense of estrangement from the Lord. Lamenting the effect upon his art of such intermission of his closeness to God, however brief, he wrote:
How should I praise thee, Lord! how should my rymes
Gladly engrave thy love in steel,
If what my soul doth feel sometimes,
My soul might ever feel!

(The Temper I', 1-4)

The poet will continue to sing the praise of the Lord even when he has realised that His grace is not being bestowed on him, for he firmly believes God will sooner or later condescend to replenish the source of his poetry:

Lord, I will mean and speak thy praise,

Thy praise alone.

My busie heart shall spin it all my days:
And when it stops for want of store,
Then will I wring it with a sigh or groan,
That thou mayst yet have more.

('Praise III', 1-6)

Herbert as a poet was never averse to self-criticism. Rather, he was ever ready to examine his own work. In the following lines, he is seen ridiculing his straggling metaphysical conceits:

When first my lines of heav'ny joyes made mention,
Such was their lustre, they did so excell,
That I sought out quaint words, and trim invention;
My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,
Curling with metaphors a plain intention
Decking the sense, as if it were to sell.

('Jordan II', 1-6)

In the lines quoted below, Herbert has shown his awareness of the deficiency of his early poetry, and has reiterated his conviction that simplicity is the best art:

As flames do work and winde, when they ascend,
So did I weave myself into the sense.
But while I bustled, I might heare a friend whisper,'How wide is all this long pretence!
There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:
Copie out onely that, and save expence.'

(_ibid., 13-18)
These lines remind us of the famous Indian mystic poet, Kabir, who also expressed similar views in these lines (translated by Rabindranath Tagore):

0 Man, if thou dost not know thine own Lord,
Whereof art thou so proud?
Put thy cleverness away: mere words shall
Never unite thee to Him.
Do not deceive thyself with the witness of the Scriptures:
Love is something other than this, and he who has sought it truly has found it.

George Herbert did never devote the whole of himself to any pursuit other than poetry. Here he is a lover, a courtier, a musician, and a craftsman—all rolled into one. In poetry, he could use all his abilities to advantage. In his dialogue with God, Herbert did not suppress any part of himself excepting, of course, his erudition. The classical jargons and obscure allusions for which the writers of the Renaissance had great relish, and which Herbert himself had used in his Greek and Latin verses, are happily absent in his English poems.

Besides being a consummate poet, Herbert was also a severe perfectionist who spared no pains in polishing his poetry to utmost excellence. Praying to God for help in this regard, Herbert says:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in everything,
To do it as for thee:

No rudely, as a beast,
To runne into an action;
But still to make thee prepossest,
And to give it his perfection.

('The Elixir', 1-8)

It may interest the reader to know that this poem itself was revised by Herbert several times to bring it to its present form.
There are three revisions in Herbert's hand available. They differ considerably from each other, and show the meticulous care the poet took before bringing it to a level which satisfied his high standard.

Herbert did not resort to experimentation for its own sake. Every poem he wrote was an independent orderly attempt to convey the exact truth at a given moment, and to provide the best receptacle for his emotions.

Almost all of Herbert's images are of a personal kind. Those which meant something to the man Herbert were taken up, unconsciously perhaps, by the poet. Besides the temple itself, Herbert has used the river Jordan, the grove, the altar, the flower, the pulley, the collar, wings, a bunch of grapes, church monuments, and parts of a church building itself, and sighs, and groans repeatedly in his poems.

Many biblical images are also extensively used in his poetry. His poems are replete with the homely and familiar things from daily life to which Christ himself often alluded. These are the moon and stars, birds, sheep, fish, flowers, vines, bread, water, the door and the key, to name only a few. He has also made use of symbols related to dew and frost, rain and snow. In addition, images pertaining to commerce, jurisprudence, and architecture have been used by him in some of his poems.

Quite different from the above, however, is the case of his poem, called 'Hope'. It is apparently a simple poem, but it contains very deep and meaningful use of images. In all, it consists of three exchanges, and one comment by the poet. The poem is reproduced:
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 optick sent.
With that I gave a viall full of tears:
But he a few green eares.
Ah Loyterer! I'le no more, no more I'le bring:
I did expect a ring.

While the simple interpretation of the images here by Rev. F.E. Hutchinson seems to be, on the whole, satisfactory, two points need to be added. According to Hutchinson, a watch implies that the time of fulfilment of the poet's hope is almost near, while an anchor implies the need for greater patience. An old prayer-book indicates the long time spent in prayers, while an 'optick' or a telescope suggests that the fulfilment of hope is still far away. While the tears depict pain and prolonged suffering, the 'green eares' of corn received in return indicate that more time would be required for ripening. The two points which need emphasis here are: first, the expectancy of a ring could mean that the poet expected a halo representing holiness, or, as Helen Vendler has pointed out, it could indicate a commitment, or a marriage of the soul to God; secondly, the title of the poem, 'Hope', is also significant. The protagonist in the poem may appear a little indignant at not having received the expected commitment, but this reaction would be only short-lived because he has not stopped hoping still.

In another of his well-known poems, 'The Windows', Herbert has expressed the futility of mere speech which 'Doth vanish like a flaring thing.' But doctrine and life, he maintains, can combine to create "a strong regard and aw." The significance of Herbert's emphasis on doctrine and life is truly indicative of his attitude
as man and poet.

Herbert remarked in 'The Country Parson' that Jesus had confined himself to homely and familiar language so that he might make his doctrine slip in more easily into the hearts of men. In the matter of his own poetic expression also, Herbert seems to have followed Jesus. In other words, an easy intelligibility of his thought was his prime concern in poetry. In the same work, Herbert also emphasized the need for "dipping, and seasoning all our words and sentences in our hearts, before they come to our mouths, truly affecting, and cordially expressing all that we say; so that the auditors may plainly perceive that every word ishart - deep". ("The Parson Teaching") That Herbert had put his preaching faithfully into his own practice can be easily seen by any perceptive reader of his poetry.

Mark Taylor believes that all the poems in 'The Temple' can be viewed as Herbert's attempts to make his own words approach the Word of God. When the attempt seems successful, Herbert's tone is gentle, and his manner relaxed, as in 'The Flower'; when it does not, the gentleness gives way to stridency, the relaxation to urgency, as in 'The Storin'. These modulations in tone and manner, both of which are evident in 'The Collar', show that Herbert's sense of divinity participates in more than the subject of his poetry.12

In his poem 'Jordan II', Herbert says: "There is in love a sweetness readie penn'd:" By his own example, he showed that this sweetness should be intrinsic, and not a mere gloss. That way alone can the Word of God be matched by the word of man.
There are critics who would categorise Herbert's poems after their own fashion, while others have offered their views on their existing order in 'The Temple'. George Herbert Palmer's division of the poems into the Cambridge period (upto 1627), the crisis period (from 1627 to 1630), and the Bemerton period (from 1630 till his death) as more suggestive than conclusive. Helen Vendler has divided the poems into four groups by types, namely, "the allegorical and Emblematic poems", the "liturgical and homiletic poems", the "discursive and speculative poems", and, lastly, the famous poems of "personal experience". But this grouping also is not of much value. Two things clearly emerge from Herbert's own words (as reported by Walton); firstly, that his poems are a record of his spiritual conflicts and inner struggles, and, secondly, that he felt that they would serve their purpose if the recounting or study would encourage other struggling hearts. Apparently, Nicholas Ferrar agreed with the original order of the poems, and got them published without disturbing it. According to Helen C. White, this gives us the best clue to 'The Temple'. It is the story of a man's struggle within himself, and not the triumphant account of a pilgrimage proceeding by dramatic and well-defined stages. It is not even a lyric version of the mystic way. She maintains that the three main points of Herbert's poetry as a whole, namely, the occurrence of a conflict, the feeling or the sentiment attached to it, and the poet's faith in the outcome, are appreciated best in their order only if the original arrangement is followed. In his observations on Herbert, T.S. Eliot also has praised 'The Temple' as 'a coherent sequence of poems'.

Some scholars have, from time to time, asked whether Herbert was a mystic. Although a diversity of opinion has already
been expressed on this question, there is still scope for a fresh look at it.

Rufus M. Jones has defined mysticism as "religion in its most acute, intense and living stage"; but it is a religion in which, as Dr Moberly said, God "ceases to be an object and becomes an experience".

Evelyn Underhill says that if the purpose of art is to unveil Reality, the mystic and the poet can both claim an identity of purpose. She calls the poet the mediator between his brethren and the Divine, for art is the link between appearance and reality. We are reminded of Blake's words when he stated that the purpose of art was to "cleanse the doors of perception, so that everything may appear as it is — Infinite".

Itrat-Hussain has pointed out that the mystical language of love and longing in which the poet could assert "Lord thou art mine and I am thine", and realise that, separated from God, his personality will lose all its richness and significance, leaves no doubt about the quality of Herbert's experience which was mystical in its essence. This critic has quoted these lines of Herbert to reinforce his point:

If I without thee would be mine
I neither should be mine nor thine.

('Clasping of Hands', 9-10)

We can see that Herbert's longing for God was so intense that every particle of his being cried for the Lord, as is apparent from these lines:

Jilt thou deferre
To succour me
Thy pile of dust, wherein each crumme
Sayes, Come?

('Longing', 39-42)
Itrat-Hussain has further pointed out that Herbert used even the typical mystical symbolism of wine and the cup, the celestial wine carrying him high into the heavens where he sees God. This critic has quoted Evelyn Underhill when she says: "No image, perhaps, could suggest so accurately, as this divine picture of the condition of Perfect Illumination; the drinking deeply, devoutly, and in haste, of the Heavenly Wine of Life." The same critic has drawn our attention in this context to the following lines of Herbert:

> Having raised me to look up,  
> In a cup  
> Sweetly, he doth meet my taste.

(‘The Banquet’, 37-39)

Commenting on this topic, J.H. Summers says that if we extend the definition of the word 'mystic' to include those who are initiated into the mystery of Christ, and who believe in the possibility of gaining insight into the mysteries transcending ordinary human knowledge while engaged in active life, then Herbert might be considered a mystic of the via positiva, in something of the sense that most devout Christians are at times mystics; valuing union with God, but expecting it fully only with death, expressing joy for the moments of presence of God, and lamentation for the days of His absence.

Itrat-Hussain seems to have had the final word on the subject which appears to us to be also most sensible:

"Though he has not the intensity and passion of a great mystic, his poetry is rich in mystical content. He is the poet who has known God and has felt the peace and joy of His presence and also the pain and
agony of His absence in a manner peculiar to the mystics, and he has communicated his experience to us with the complexity and richness characteristic of a sensitive and sincere artist.  

It is a measure of Herbert's excellence that his poetry has appealed equally to critics of different times and of different temperament. George Macdonald, the author of 'England's Antiphon', while introducing Herbert to his readers, is said to have remarked: "With my hand on the lock I shrink from opening the door. Here comes a poet indeed! and how am I to show him due honour?"  

Aldous Huxley called Herbert a poet of 'inner weather'. Praising him for his art and thought, he wrote:  

'Accurately, in a score of lyric unexcelled for flawless purity of diction and appositeness of imagery, he has described its changes and interpreted, in terms of a mystical philosophy, their significance. Within his limits he achieves a real perfection.'  

It has been the opinion of many critics that Herbert has not got full recognition for his originality of thought and technical excellence, the latter consisting mainly in a proper fusion of substance and form — so much so that it is nearly impossible to discuss one of the two without the other.  

His poems, unlike those of many of his predecessors or contemporaries, do not shine by their purple passages only. Almost each of his poems is admirable for its integrity of thought and design. Most of them are brief pieces. Only ten of his poems contain more
than fifty lines; almost every one of them, again, has a definite beginning, a middle, and an end. Herbert's verse, like that of Donne, and the rest of his school, is free from the conventional poetic embellishments, and in rhythm and accent, it suggests the tone of impassioned conversation.

Helen Vendler has pointed out that in his "Shelburne Essays", Paul Elmer More found Herbert less gifted than Donne, but a year earlier, Herbert Palmer had praised him as a "gentle and incomplete poet." According to Vendler, Herbert Grierson, writing fifteen years after, seems to have had More in mind when he called Herbert a 'sincere and sensitive poet, and an accomplished artist."

Although Herbert made use of the metaphysical style in his poetry, he yet left his own impress upon its form. A few critics have exaggerated Donne's influence upon Herbert. Margaret Bottrall has rightly maintained that although Herbert had knowledge of Donne's poems at firsthand, and was acquainted with the latter's skill and 'technique of versification', he would not tread the beaten track, but find his own independent path in poetry. It can be seen that, in the matter of poetic practice, Herbert had closer links with Sydney than with Donne. Besides, the whole cast of his mind was radically different from Donne's. Herbert had as great a capacity for faith, as Donne had for doubt and experiment. This critic has pointed out that Herbert's wit was fired, not by the example of Donne, but by the paradoxical nature of Christianity itself. She maintains that Herbert's command of the right manner
and tone, whatever the occasion, never fails him, and his fastidious taste prevents his religious verse from lapsing into mawkishness, or contorting itself into ill-judged extravagances.\(^{22}\)

Margaret Bottrall does not call Herbert a metaphysical poet in the prevalent sense of the term. She, like many other critics, has rightly maintained that Herbert conveys an intensity of emotion by means of phrases charged with thought. His wit is one of his foremost qualities. But since it does not depend for its effect upon far-fetched conceits, recondite allusions, or reasoned arguments, there is little justification for calling it 'metaphysical', or for connecting it, inseparably, with the wit of Donne. What Herbert has in common with Donne is the ability to apply his whole intelligence, reason, and sensibility simultaneously to whatever experience he is shaping into a poem. It goes to Herbert's credit that, unlike his brother Edward, he did not succumb to the seduction of Donne's startling poetic methods.\(^{23}\)

Herbert had a marked influence upon his contemporaries. Rev. F.E. Hutchinson has given a detailed account of the impact of Herbert's poetry on his contemporary poets and others. A few of the facts brought out by Hutchinson are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Richard Crashaw modestly gave to his first volume of sacred English verse the title, 'Steps to the Temple' (1646), and included in it a further tribute to Herbert in the poem, 'On Mr. J. Herbert's booke sent to a Gentlewoman', beginning:

\begin{verbatim}
Know you faire, on what you looke;
Divinest love lyes in this booke:
Expecting fire from your eyes,
To kindle this his sacrifice.
\end{verbatim}
Henry Vaughan called Herbert "a most glorious true Saint, and a Seer", mentioning specially 'his incomparable prophetick poems.' In a preface to the enlarged edition of his 'Silex Scintillans' (1655), he attributed his conversion to sacred poetry to "the blessed man, Mr George Herbert, whose holy life and verse gained many pious Converts, (of whom I am the least)."

Joseph Beaumont praised Herbert in the third and posthumous edition (1702) of his poetic allegory, "Psyche". After the praise of Pindar and Horace as lyric poets, which had appeared in the first edition (1648), he added:

Yet neither of their empires was so vast
But they left 'Herbert' too full room to reign,
Who Lyric's pure and precious Metal cast
In holier moulds, and nobly durst maintain
'Devotion in Verse', whilst by the spheres
He tunes his Lute, and plays to heav'nly ears.

There are echoes of Herbert in the lesser poetry of the time, for example, in 'The Petition' of Thomas Beedome's 'Poems Divine and Humane' (1641), and in most of the poems of Ralph Knevet (1600-71), who gives to a group of them the heading,'A Gallery to the Temple'. Christopher Harvey published anonymously in 1640 'The Synagogue, or, The Shadow of the Temple... In imitation of Mr George Herbert'. The second (1647) and later editions of 'The Synagogue' were commonly bound up with 'The Temple' until the nineteenth century.

There are tributes to Herbert in the poems of Clement Barksdale ('Nympha Libethris', 1651), James Duport ('Musae Subsecivae', 1676), and Thomas Flatman who wrote of 'noble Herbert's flame'. Charles Cotton contributed to the 1675 edition of Walton's 'Lives' a poem, 'To my old and most worthy Friend, Mr Izaak Walton',
which includes these verses:

And Herbert: he, whose education,
Manners, and parts, by high applauses blown,
Was deeply tainted with Ambition.

And fitted for a Court, made that his aim:
At last, without regard to Birth or Name,
For a poor country-cure, does all disclaim.

Where, with a soul compos'd of Harmonies,
Like a sweet Swan, he warbles, as he dies
His makers praise, and his own obsequies.

There is abundant evidence of 'The Temple' being read throughout the seventeenth century by men of widely different churchmanship and poetical attachments. Sir Thomas Herbert, in his 'Memoirs of the Two Last Years of the Reign of Charles I', says that 'Herbert's divine poems' was among the few books which the King "read often" during his captivity. Lady Anne Clifford, Countess of Pembroke, and one time neighbour of Herbert at Wilton, was a lifelong admirer of his poetry. In 'The Standard of Lqualitie' (1647) by Philo-Dicaeus, the dedication to Sir John Danvers refers to 'the poems of Mr George Herbert, lately deceased ('whose nious life and Death have converted me to a full believe that there is a St. George'). The anonymous author of 'The Mirror of Complements' added to the fourth edition (1650) a supplement of twelve 'Divine Poems', all but two of which are from 'The Temple'. Still more significant is the marked devotion of leading Puritans to Herbert's poetry. Richard Baxter gave at the end of 'The Saint's Everlasting Rest' (1650) Herbert's long poem, 'Home', in full, and in the preface to his 'Poetical Fragments' (1681), after naming Cowley, Quarles, Sylvester, Fulke Graville, Davies, and other poets of the century, he concludes:
"But I must confess, after all that next the Scripture Poems, there are none so savoury to me, as Mr George Herbert's and Mr George Sandys...."

William Cowper tells us about the relief he found in 'The Temple' when he was first "overtaken with a dejection of spirits" at the age of 21:

"At length I met with Herbert's poems; and gothic and uncouth as they were, I yet found in them a strain of piety which I could not but admire. This was the only author I had my delight in reading. I pored over him all day long; and though I found not here what I might have found - a cure for my malady, yet it never seemed so much alleviated as while I was reading them."

Eighteen years later, Cowper wrote to Mrs Unwin that he had been reading Herbert to his brother. Such a sincere testimony to Herbert from a man of letters of the eighteenth century is indeed rare.

Herbert's poetry produced similar reaction in many modern critics, several of whom have already been quoted. Their impression of its greatness will be further strengthened in us by a close analysis of a few more of his important poems.

The opening lines of the poem, 'Artillerie', admirably bring out the poet's sudden intensity of feeling, the struggle for peace, and the equanimity at the end. The lines are reproduced:

As I one ev'ning sat before my cell
Me thoughts a starre did shoot into my lap,
I rose and shook my clothes, as knowing well,
That from small fires comes oft no small mishap.
When suddenly I heard one say,
Do as thou usest, disobey.
Expell good motions from thy breast,
Which have the face of fire, but end in rest.

(1-8)
The picture is of a priest sitting outside the cell of his monastery and reading the Bible - the 'Book of Starres', from which a word or 'starre' falls into his lap. The first response of the priest is secular, but then he hears the voice of his conscience which tells him that "good motions ... end in rest" - meaning, thereby, that prayer, and the acceptance of Christ as the revealed Word of God ('a Starre' of line 2), end in peace and eternity. It is surely to the poet's credit that he invented the epiphanic opening to convey his message so adroitly. Even the title, 'Artillerie', is quite appropriate, because it indicates that as the poet was startled by the vehemence of God's revelation, so will his prayers mount an upward assault in reply.

Helen Vendler has observed that a large part of the poet's strength and range is owing to his prosodic skill. She calls him the Schubert of English poetry, with a new rime in every invention. She adds that a cascade of forms flashes through 'The Temple', like one of the brookes of the Austrian composer, delighting in turns and reversals, now modest, now glittering. It is important to note that out of one hundred and sixty-nine poems, one hundred and sixteen are written in metres none of which is repeated.

'Redemption' is a short poem of fourteen lines in which the poet, by using a simple legal metaphor, portrays his search for Christ, and the blessings which he receives from the Saviour at the Crucifixion. It illustrates Herbert's ability to express intense feeling in a compact allegorical form. It is reproduced:

Having been tenant long to a rich Lord,
Not thriving, I resolved to be bold,
And made a suit unto him, to afford
A new small rented lease, and cancell th' old.
In heaven at his manour 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 return'd, and knowing his great birth,
Sought him accordingly in great resorts;
In cities, theatres, gardens, parks and courts:
At length I heard a rigged noise and mirth
Of thieves and murderers: there I him espied,
Who straight, 'Your suit is granted', said, and died.

Herbert has here stated that Christ had come down on earth for man's redemption, but he did not live in an exalted state like a king, but led a simple life, and, for man's sake, ultimately sacrificed his life on the Cross with thieves and murderers. The whole movement of the narrative is brisk, and its end truly exciting, thereby establishing the poet's art of effective presentation.

In the poem, called 'The Banquet', Herbert has succinctly presented the immense joy of Communion, through six short and simple lines, without any adornment. His success lies in conveying a sense of happy welcome to the reader to participate in the holy ceremony. The lines are quoted:

Welcome sweet and sacred cheer,
Welcome daare;
With me, in me, live and dwell:
For thy neatnesse passeth sight,
Thy delight
Passeth tongue to taste or tell.

(1-6)

The last two lines remind us of Kabir who also expressed the inability of the human tongue to tell the taste of God's sweetness.
Kabir has sung thus:

It cannot be told by the words of the mouth,
It cannot be written on paper:
It is like a dumb person who tastes a sweet thing
how shall it be explained?

Herbert's poetic expression is marked by ease and grace. An instance is found in the following lines where he has presented
the harmonious relation between God and Man:

Whether I fly with angels, fall with dust,
Thy hands made both, and I am there:
Thy powers and love, my love and trust
Make one place every where.

('The Temper I', 25-28)

Mark Taylor says that Herbert's poems present, in subject and in form, a living microcosm of his experience, a continuous reaffirmation of God's grace. They focus the past and the future in a limitless present. The poem is not about the experience, it is the experience, and thus it is an act of return to the divine source, as expressed in his poem 'Prayer I': 'God's breath in man returning to his birth'. Taylor has maintained that Herbert's poetry works on this principle in interaction of finite content and infinite form, in which each continuously breathes life into the other. The conjunction of the two, which face each other, as do man and God, is Herbert's final metaphor for grace. His poetry is a paraphrase for the soul, and beyond that, for the soul's union with God.

Herbert's greatness as a poet can also be seen in his effortless presentation of a thought that is deep and serious. Often it comes in the form of a statement that is smooth and concise. The following lines, in which the poet has shown his relationship with God, present an instance in point:

The God of love my shepherd is,
And he that doth me feed,
While he is mine, and I am his,
What can I want or need.

('The 23rd Psalme', 1-4)
In the brief passage given below, Herbert exhibits a rare commingling of thought and feeling:

Lord, cleare thy gift, that with a constant wit
I may look towards thee:
Look onely; for to love thee, who can be,
What angel fit?

('Dulnesse', 25-28)

Seeing love as "a man of warre", the poet gives yet another example of his elegant poetic manner:

Love is swift of foot;
Lov's a man of warre,
And can shoot,
And can hit from farre.

"('Discipline,' 21-24)

In Herbert, even a single line, now and then, declares the inmost realisation of the poet's heart. The following line is an instance:

What is so shrill as silent tears?

('The Famille')

Herbert's poem, 'Prayer I' was quoted earlier. It is, however, necessary to add here that this exquisite poem can be compared to a necklace, with the words interlaced as beads. In the following lines, one can see the perfect agreement between the poet's words and emotions:

The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage (3)
The six-daies world transposed in an houre (7)
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse (9)
Church - bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bâloud
The land of spices, something understood. (13-14)

Here we find Herbert at his very best. A prayer to the Lord is conceived by him variously, in terms of rapid succession of things
or ideas or qualities, each of them greater in appeal and deeper
in significance than those preceding, until they all reach their
graceful culmination in something that is apparently vague to us
but intensely felt by the poet—"something understood".

Helen Vendler says that the final definition of prayer as
"something understood" abolishes or expunges the need for explana-
tory metaphors. A metaphor, Herbert seems to say, is, after all,
only an approximation; once something is understood, we can fall
silent; once the successive rethinkings of the definition have been
made, and the truth has been arrived at, the poem is over.

Because of the close similarity in the matching of words and
ideas, some critics have thought it appropriate to compare this
poem with Keats' 'Ode to Autumn'.

'The Collar', perhaps the most famous of Herbert's poems, is
another that proves his greatness. It opens with a note of defiance.
The poet's confrontation with God, and his revolt against a life
of conformity, build up tremendously till, at the end, hearing the
voice of the Lord calling him 'Child', he surrenders himself fully
and suddenly by replying, "My Lord!"

Commenting on Herbert's technique as used in this poem, archette
Chute has pointed out that the poem mirrors disorder in a frame
of perfect control. The apparently broken construction of the lines,
the brilliant audacity of the rhyme scheme, the jerk and pull
effect of increasing frenzy—all these are held safely in a hand
that knows exactly what it is doing. In the last line, the hand
closes gently, and the poem moves from resistance to peace, with
the rhyme-scheme following the emotion and quieting it into order.
Emphasizing the import of the last words, "My Lord", Helen C. White says that seldom have the arguments against a life of strict religious renunciation and devotion been presented with greater directness and energy. She asserts that nowhere in English poetry has the profound cogency and expressiveness of one word been more dramatically or more simply vindicated. It is a great moment when the artist lays away his art with all its strength and beauty, and yields himself to the bare "thing in itself". This is such a moment.\(^{31}\)

Some critics have found Herbert's poetry quaint and obscure. But there are others who would not agree. Joan Bennett has declared that Herbert states his premises with perfect precision, usually by means of an image, in the tone of a prose argument. The reader, she asserts, is never befogged.\(^ {32}\)

It is surely an indication of Herbert's great popularity that one single stanza of his poem, 'The Flower', has been able to draw the admiration of several eminent critics. The stanza in question reads:

\[
\text{And now in age I bud again,}
\text{After so many deaths I live and write;}
\text{I once more smell the dew and rain,}
\text{And relish versing: O my onely light,}
\text{It cannot be}
\text{That I am he}
\text{On whom your tempests fell all night.}
\]

(36-42)

Coleridge, as quoted by Gerard Hammond, observed:

"The poem entitled 'The Flower' is especially affecting; and to me such a phrase as 'and relish versing' expresses a sincerity and reality, which I would willingly exchange for the more dignified 'and once more love the Muse' etc."
and so with many other of Herbert's homely phrases."

T.S. Eliot commented on it as follows:

"I cannot resist the thought that in the last stanza — itself a miracle of phrasing — the imagery, so apposite to express the achievement of faith which it records, is taken from the experience of the man of delicate physical health who had known much illness. It is on this note of joy in convalescence of the spirit in surrender to God, that the life of discipline of this haughty and irascible Herbert finds conclusion: 'In His Will is our peace.'"

A. Alvarez is yet another critic to have been deeply impressed by the passage. He put his comments thus:

"This is, I suppose, the most perfect and most vivid stanza in the whole of Herbert's work. But it is, in every sense, so natural that its originality is easily missed. To speak of the love of God as a 'Whole' delight of the senses as much as of the spirit, had to my knowledge never been done before. To do it there was needed a combination of personal tact that was Herbert's special gift. His contribution to religious poetry is large and his own."

According to J.B. Leishman, what makes Herbert's poetry so intensely human and interesting is its expression of perpetual struggle after inward peace, of the unceasing effort to bend a proud and passionate nature into conformity with a strict conception of the religious life. The battle has to be continually re-fought and re-won, and the moods of perfect joy — 'post after stormie sea' — which follow such victories are often expressed
with exquisite freshness and simplicity, as in 'The Flower'. It is seen that Herbert achieved perfection in his art of poetry to a marked degree for which he had prayed to God on more than one occasion. In a short poem, called 'The Wreath', we find a perfect agreement of word and thought. The poem is reproduced:

A wreathed garland of deserved praise,
Of praise deserved, unto thee I give,
I give to thee, who knowest all my ways,
My crooked winding ways, wherein I live,
Wherein I die, not live: for life is straight,
Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,
To thee, who art more farre above deceit,
Then deceit seems above simplicitie.
Give me simplicitie, that I may live,
So live and like, that I may know, thy ways,
Know them and practise them: then I shall give
For this poor wreath, give thee a crown of praise.

The first thing to note here is the poet's adoption of a technique which is in keeping with the title of the poem. The whole of it is expressed in such a delightfully innovative manner that the lines and the words seem to suggest a wreath. What draws our attention next is the inter-relation in the development of its various thoughts. The poem is, then, another illustration of the poet's skill.

Douglas Brown has praised Herbert for his perfect craftsmanship which was, for the poet, a test of truth and of self-submission to a higher standard of perfection than ordinary. Brown has added that Herbert had a fine judgement of just what kind of a poem to make, in order to explore his inner conflicts, and often in unequivocal clarity and distinctness.

T.S. Eliot is another critic to praise Herbert as a great poet. He wrote:
"When I claim a place for Herbert among those poets whose work every lover of English poetry should read and every student of English poetry should study, irrespective of religious belief or unbelief, I am not thinking primarily of the exquisite craftsmanship, the extraordinary metrical virtuosity, or of verbal felicities, but of the content of the poems which make up 'The Temple'. These poems form a record of spiritual struggle which should touch the feeling, and enlarge the understanding of those readers also who hold no religious belief and find themselves unmoved by religious emotion."

Above all, Eliot has, in the same context, emphasized in Herbert's poetry the very rare "discipline of suffering which leads to peace." 38

Rev. F.E. Hutchinson also has similarly expressed his praise for Herbert's poetry. He has taken particular note of what Eliot called its "spiritual stamina" without which it would have degenerated into mere commonplaces. He has, besides, gladly admitted Coleridge's dictum that Herbert was a "true poet". 39

The cross-section of criticism just quoted is further proof of Herbert's greatness as much in subject as in form. His poems are of a man with a profound interest in the realisation of God in life, and there was nothing to distract him from it. In the annals of English literature, as a devotional poet, he is second to none. It should now be amply clear that Herbert is no 'quaint', 'obscure', or 'incomplete' poet as he has been made out to be by some superficial critics. His poetry — 'devotion in verse' to quote Beaumont — is the perfect expression of his "sweet and
virtuous soul*. It is, in the exact sense, "a true heart's worship*. 'The Temple' is a kind of spiritual autobiography — a register of his hopes and fears —, in fact, the record of his very essence of being. In him alone it is no exaggeration to say that 'poetry' and 'prayer' are synonyms. And it is because of this rare synonymity that Herbert as a poet has remained close to the heart of generations of readers. His own image of "season'd timbre" applies fully well to Herbert. As a man and a poet, he lives in the mind of his reader by his own intrinsic divinity.