

Herbert's Poems

Herbert's chief work, 'The Temple' consists of over one hundred and fifty short poems suggested by the church, her holidays and ceremonies and the experiences of the Christian life. The first poem 'The Church Porch' is the longest and though polished with a care that foreshadows the classic school, the least poetical. It is a wonderful collection of condensed sermons, wise precepts and moral lessons, suggesting Chaucer's "Good Counsel", Pope's "Essay on Man", and Polonius's advice to Laertes, in Hamlet only it is more packed with thought than any of these. Of truth-speaking he says:

"Dare to be true. Nothing
can need a lie;
A fault which needs it
most grows two thereby."

and of calmness in argument:

"Calmness is great advantage: he that lets
Another chafe may warm
him at his fire!"

Among the remaining poems of 'The Temple' one of the most suggestive is "The Pilgrimage". Here in six short stanzas, every line close-packed with thought, we have the whole of Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress'. The poem was written probably before Bunyan was born but remembering the wide influence of Herbert's poetry it is an interesting question whether Bunyan received the idea of his immortal work from this "Pilgrimage". Probably the best known of all his poems is the one called "The Pulley", which generally appears, however, under the name "Rest" or "The Gifts of God".

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, honor, 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 repi-
ning restlessness:
let him be rich and

weariness, that at least,
 if goodness dead him not,
 yet weariness
 may toss him to my
 breast."

Among the poems which may
 be read as curiosities of ver-
 sification, and which arouse
 the wrath of the critics again-
 st the whole metaphysical
 school, are those like "East-
 er wings" and "The Altar",
 which suggest in the printed
 form of the poem the thing
 of which the poet sings. More
 ingenious is the poem in
 which rhyme is made by cut-
 ting off the first letter of
 a preceding word, as in the
 five stanzas of "Paradise":

"I bless thee, Lord,
 because I grow
 Among thy trees, which
 in a row
 To thee both fruit and
 order ow."

And more ingenious still are
 odd conceits like the poem

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"Heaven", in which Echo, by repeating the last syllable of each line, gives an answer to the poet's questions.

The end.

Munni Bhushan Sinha
Deptt. of English
S.S. College, Tehanabad