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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 sore shadows 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 argu-
ment:

"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

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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

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weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not,
yet weariness
may toss him to my
breast."

Among the poems which may be read as curiosities of versification, and which arouse the wrath of the critics against the whole metaphysical school, are those like "Easter 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 cutting 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, Jehanabad