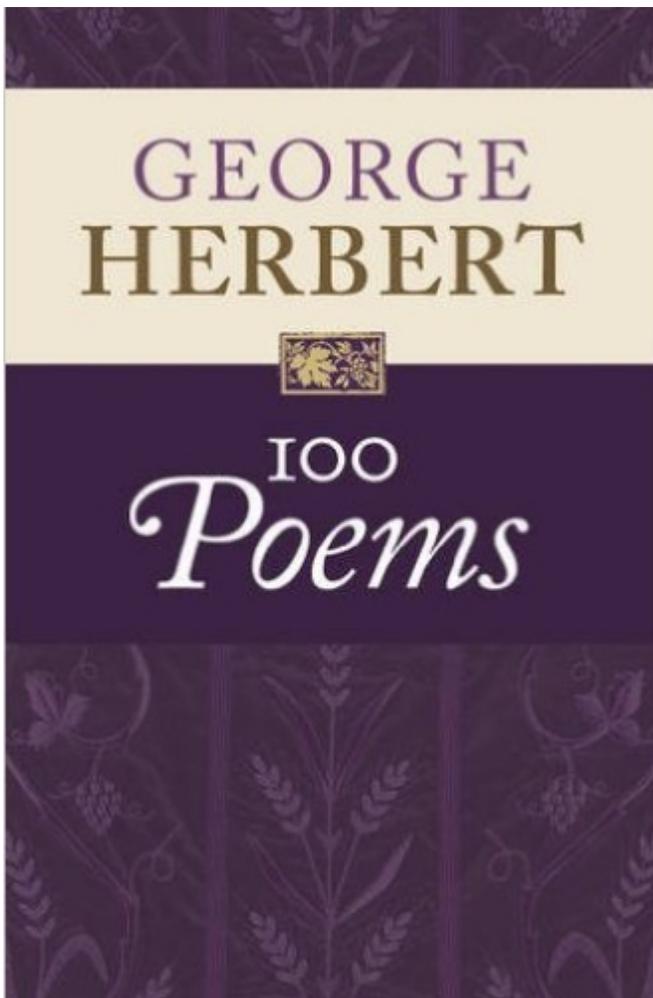


Poetry that bids us welcome

How is it that the poems of a 17th-century aristocrat still resonate with us?

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [October 12, 2016](#) issue

In Review



George Herbert

Selected and edited by Helen Wilcox
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In Wallace Stegner's novel *Crossing to Safety* a young woman named Charity advises her boyfriend to find something useful to do besides writing poems: "All I'm saying is that poetry isn't *direct* enough most of the time. It doesn't concern itself with the vital *issues*." She goes on to argue that if poetry doesn't reflect the poet's real work and relationships, it amounts to nothing more than the self-absorption of the leisure class.

Charity has a point. And it's a point worth considering in the case of George Herbert, one of the English language's greatest devotional poets. How is it that the poems of a 17th-century aristocrat still resonate with our own religious sensibilities?

Helen Wilcox's chastely edited volume of Herbert's lyrical poems provides a rich and persuasive answer. Her book contains 100 poems from the central section of Herbert's great work, *The Temple*. It includes only a few stanzas of his longer works, including his brooding meditation on the death of Jesus, "The Sacrifice," each of whose 63 stanzas ends with the refrain, "Was ever grief like mine?" For these the reader may consult Wilcox's acclaimed edition of *The English Poems of George Herbert*.

Herbert was himself to the manor born, the scion of a wealthy and well-connected family that counted kings, archbishops, eminent musicians, and the Cambridge elite as friends and dinner guests. His elder brother Edward was ambassador to France and later Lord Herbert of Cherbury. It was a life in which finding a real job—and his true vocation—proved to be a persistent challenge.

Although by today's standards an introvert, a collector of proverbs, a gardener, a hiker, and lover of all things solitary, young Herbert enjoyed close friendships as well, with the likes of John Donne, Thomas Nevile, and Sir Francis Bacon. At Trinity College, Cambridge, he distinguished himself as one of the best Latinists of his day and rose to the position of university orator. He seemed destined for a career at court, perhaps as James I's secretary of state. As the political landscape changed, however, Herbert appears to have lost interest in the "vital issues" and delved more deeply into his poetry, his music—he was accomplished on the lute and viol—and most of all his Christian faith. By the time he died in 1633 at age 39, the once rising star had quit Parliament and settled in as the rector of a tiny parish in Bemerton near Salisbury, from where he explored the Christian life and ministry in his poems and music as well as in his classic treatise, *The Country Parson*.

As one of the metaphysical poets, the greatest being John Donne, Herbert wrote verse marked by inventive and ingenious comparisons packaged in frank, witty, and playful language, yet free of an earlier generation's sentimentality. At the conclusion of "The Dawning," for example, which is a poem about the resurrection's power over grief, Jesus deigns to leave his grave clothes in the tomb—for what reason? As a handkerchief with which to dry our tears.

Like many metaphysical conceits, the effectiveness of the figure depends on the imagination of the reader. If the reader is willing, the poet doesn't mind having a little fun.

In "Jesu" Herbert plays on the Latin use of the letter I for the English J and concludes: "I sat me down to spell them, and perceived / That to my broken heart he was / ease you, / And to my whole is J E S U."

In "Man" he remarks on the beauty of our human bodies: "Man is all symmetrie, / Full of proportions, one limb to another." The punch line follows: "Since then, my God, thou hast / So brave a Palace built; O dwell in it."

In his poem "Miserie" he spends stanzas on the frailties and ambitions of "man." Only in the last line does he fess up: "My God, I mean myself." Any preacher has got to love Herbert's exuberant approach to scripture: "Bibles laid open, millions of surprises." Surprise! Is there any better spirit in which to interpret a text?

The dust jacket of *100 Poems* identifies Herbert as "the greatest devotional poet in the English language." One immediately wants to counter with the dramatic boldness of Donne's Holy Sonnets ("Death, be not proud . . .") or the majesty of Milton. But unlike Donne, Andrew Marvel, Robert Herrick, and others who composed both religious and erotic love poetry, Herbert wrote only what he found in church, the ministry, and the deepening awareness of his own calling. Like no other, he combines the complexity of the metaphysical poets with the long tradition of meditative reflection, including, most notably, the dramatic interior dialogue and the imagination of critical scenes in which the presence of God is suddenly experienced.

The Temple is a tour through the church's furnishings, from its baptismal font to its altar and windows. It is also a tour of the soul as he recreates the ordinary duties and temptations of a parish priest. Like the revelations of his favorite theologian, Augustine, many of Herbert's poems begin in intimate conversation with God and end in robust dialogue with himself.

In "Affliction (IV)," for example, his prayer includes this self-portrait: "Broken in pieces, all asunder, / Lord, hunt me not, / a thing forgot. . . . My thoughts are all a case of knives." In "The Windows" the parson asks how it is possible for such a broken creature to preach God's holy word. His answer is more encouraging:

Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?
He is a brittle crazie glass:
Yet in thy temple thou doest him afford
This glorious and transcendent place,
To be a window, through thy grace.

As the supremely meditative poet, Herbert is the psalmist of the 17th century, both in the realism of his verse and its musicality. Like the psalmist, he doesn't divulge the particulars of his unhappiness, thereby imparting a universality to it. Also like the psalmist, his verse follows the narrative curve from suffering and complaint to resolution and peace.

One of his best-known poems is "The Collar." Like any good story, the poem begins in a crisis: "I struck the board, and cry'd, No more. / I will abroad." The country parson is in a rage with his own disappointing life. Must it be "No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted? / All wasted?" he asks. After venting his spleen at fate and lost opportunity, the poet abruptly evokes the peace that is available to all restless hearts. Only at the end does he shock us with two words that have not yet appeared in the poem. As someone said of Emily Dickinson, you can never guess the next line: "But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde / At every word, / Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Childe*: / And I reply'd, *My Lord*." With this resolution, signified by *Childe* and *Lord*, the universe is set right once again. And the minister's collar, which is often interpreted as a symbol of confinement, dissolves into a yoke of love.

We cannot do justice to the musicality of Herbert's poetry, since the many hymns he composed are lost. But several of his poems have been sung as hymns, including the old favorite: "Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing, / *My God and King*." Or "The Call," set to the hauntingly beautiful melody of Ralph Vaughan Williams:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
And such a Life, as killeth death.

In “Christmas” he writes, “The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be? / My God, no hymne for thee?” The musicality of his poetry goes beyond his own skill on the lute (which he played on his deathbed). Music expresses the God-intended harmony of all things, for God is in all things great and small and wishes them to be one. Music is an intrinsically reconciling gift. The natural harmonies and their discordances make an important theme for the metaphysical and meditative poets alike.

From his quiet perch in the country, the rector of Bemerton views his own declining health and the growing division in the Church of England as irrefutable evidence of a world “untun’d, unstrung.” His response transcends doctrinal disputes and personal tragedy by revealing the more primal (but not simpler) truth of God’s love for all. What is left is not reductionism, but a reduction nonetheless of many ingredients into one savory sauce.

Throw away thy rod;
Though man frailties hath,
Thou art God:
Throw away thy wrath.

As John Drury points out in his majestic biography of Herbert, *Music at Midnight*, his voice resonates with us because it offers what the poet Wallace Stevens called “the bread of faithful speech.” It’s significant that the unbeliever Stevens along with many other nonreligious, nonclerical readers have admired Herbert, if not for his doctrine, then for his honesty, gentle irony, and mastery of the human heart.

In “Love (III)” Herbert concludes the middle part of *The Temple* with yet another dramatic portrayal of spiritual conflict. This is the poem Simone Weil called “the most beautiful poem in the world.” Perhaps she heard in the poem echoes of her own spiritual dilemma. For it reaches beyond the clerical life and speaks to anyone who feels unworthy to be in Christ’s presence, to anyone who desperately needs grace but doesn’t know how to receive it.

In “Love,” as in many of Herbert’s dramatic narratives, the problems raised are fussy, complicated, and overwrought. The solution is, as always, pristine and revelatory. “Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, / Guilty of dust and sin.” This poem never mentions “God” because Herbert’s God is entirely cloaked in the human vesture of love. Like the poet, the reader is temporarily blinded—or should we say blindsided—not by the supernatural trappings of religion, but by the

Lord's humanity. The narrator protests, "I cannot look on thee. / [But] Love took my hand, and smilingly did reply, / Who made the eyes but I?"

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?

My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:

So I did sit and eat.

Love will gird itself with an apron and serve. "O taste and see," says the psalmist. To Herbert, food represents the most elemental expression of God's love for us. It is eucharistic in origin and universal in its application. The simplicity of the final six syllables overwhelms: So I did sit and eat.

When you read George Herbert, then, you are reading a man who has found his true work. His gift to the 21st century is that, if we listen attentively, he will help us find ours.