GEORGE HERBERT

100 POEMS

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George Herbert

SELECTED AND EDITED BY

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Contents

Preface

HELEN WILCOX

Reading the poetry of George Herbert is like entering a room in which a conversation is going on, and finding oneself drawn unwittingly into the dialogue. The tenor of the conversation is very often loving, but it can also seem perplexed, disappointed or anxious, and sometimes angry. The main speaker frequently addresses God, though occasionally we hear the voice of the Lord in response, gently nudging the protesting human towards greater understanding. The speaker enters into debates with God, but also with parts of his own self – his wayward thoughts, his hard heart – and sometimes seems to recount stories for an audience. Above all, the voice of the speaker is so familiar in all its variety of moods and tones that we, as readers, can find our own experiences given expression in the poems, and we may in some sense become the speaker, too. Reading, and re-reading, Herbert's poems is a process of self-discovery.

How can this be said in the early twenty-first century about a devotional poet who was writing four centuries ago? The key to the immediacy and accessibility of Herbert's verse is its rare balance of rhetorical skill and complexity on the one hand, and a simplicity and directness of style on the other. The closing line of his last lyric is about as plain and monosyllabic a statement as one could utter: 'So I did sit and eat' ('Love (III)'). The power of the short line derives from its position, having been held back until the end of the poem after the sophisticated poetic dialogue and verbal dance that precede it; the impact of the line also stems from the layers of social and spiritual significance given during the poem to the act of eating. The lyric's remarkable clarity is thus an achieved simplicity, brought about by

the writer's knowledge and craftsmanship. As Herbert writes in 'Praise (II)', the fresh spontaneity with which the feelings of the 'heart' are poured out is finely controlled by the poet's 'utmost art'.

Many modern readers come to Herbert's poetry through its association with another art form, music, whether the words are familiar as hymns or in musical settings for concert performance. This connection is most apt, for the poems themselves are profoundly musical: they frequently use the stanza forms of song lyrics, delight in rhyme and other forms of sonic 'chiming', identify their role as 'hymns' or 'window-songs' to God, widely employ musical metaphors and experience the process of praise as the heart's 'singing' ('Deniall', 'A true Hymne', 'Dulnesse', 'Easter'). This lyrical nature of Herbert's verse is a reminder of how greatly he was inspired by the Psalms, the biblical songs of David which similarly give voice to the whole spectrum of human emotions. Conscious of this intensely biblical quality of Herbert's poetry, one of his early readers referred to the poet as a new Psalmist, the 'incomparable sweet Singer of our Israel' (Oliver Heywood, *The Sure Mercies of David* (1672), p. 119).

By contrast, some of Herbert's poems are more notable for their visual impact than their lyrical sweetness. Again, the poet is using all his verbal art to give material expression to the spiritual life: words are to be seen as well as heard, and the shape of a poem on the page can contribute significantly to its meaning. Herbert's carefully constructed poems such as 'The Altar' or 'Easter wings' are the seventeenth-century equivalent of concrete poetry, showing how a 'broken' heart can still be moulded to form a place of offering ('The Altar'), or how necessary it is for the human spirit to become 'most thinne' before it can expand into flight with the risen Christ ('Easter wings'). Every dimension of language – what it looks like, how it sounds, what it recalls and what it means – is pressed into service by this most inventive of poets. He even discovers new meaning hidden within the constituent parts of words – expanding 'JESU' in the poem of the same name into the comforting phrase '*I ease you*', for example – thus making the poet's task into a

kind of re-spelling, re-interpreting the words and the world that we think we know so well.

Herbert is a poet of surprises: instead of resting our 'eye' on the surface of things, we are encouraged to look beyond and thus 'the heav'n espie' ('The Elixer'). A poem of deep spiritual frustration, such as 'Deniall', seems trapped in the misery of a disconsolate soul likened to an '[u]ntun'd, unstrung' musical instrument – yet even here there is an unexpected twist at the very end of the poem. The breakthrough comes when the speaker finally prays, in desperation, and immediately the last line restores both hope and a harmonious rhyme scheme. Verse structure and mood go hand in hand, and in a transformation that is a characteristic of Herbert's teasing titles, the denial which initially appeared to be God's refusal to hear the speaker turns out to have been the speaker's inability to admit God's love for him. The poems are fundamentally optimistic, yet never sentimental; they may be 'sweet', but their 'sweetness' derives from an exquisite rhetoric of spiritual honesty ('Jordan (II)'). Their hope is anchored in the resurrection, and their speakers take pleasure in the friendly companionship of the risen Christ, as a conversation partner or powerfully present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Typically, Herbert is repeatedly amazed by the generous humility of a God who offers himself as food to sustain his creation, not appearing with fanfare or grandeur but quietly 'creeping' into the human body 'by the way of nourishment and strength' ('The H. Communion').

An appreciation of Herbert's poetry is not at all dependent on knowledge of his life, but it is possible to see deep connections between the poet and his work. The finely poised skill of his verse should not be unexpected from the man who was public orator of Cambridge University in the early 1620s, and thus one of the most accomplished rhetoricians of his generation. The musical qualities of his poetry, too, may be linked to his reported love of hearing and playing music, both in church and at home. The elegant sociability of many of his poetic narrators is in keeping with the milieu of a man whose birth and

achievements seemed to destine him for a career at court. Equally, the love of everyday images and plain phrases such as 'My God and King' ('Antiphon (I)') reveals the biblical grounding and pastoral sensitivity of the country parson he eventually became. Herbert's life and works are both full of paradoxes, each bringing together apparently opposing qualities in a way which makes his poetry fascinating and appealing, just as his lyrics manage to combine witty playfulness with deep seriousness and devotion. This is the poet who carefully devised subtle varieties of stanza and rhyme structure for each lyric that he wrote, in order to match most precisely the form to its meaning; yet at the same time this is a writer who was intensely aware of the temptation inherent in poetry's 'sweet phrases' and 'lovely metaphors' ('The Forerunners'). He was anxious to use beautiful language but always alert to the dangers of '[c]urling with metaphors a plain intention' ('Jordan (II)'), seeking instead to establish the 'beautie' intrinsic to 'truth' itself ('Jordan (I)').

Herbert died in 1633 at the age of forty, and his only volume of English verse, *The Temple*, was printed posthumously in the same year. With its engaging clarity and enticing skill, Herbert's poetry immediately became a best-seller. *The Temple* was published during a period of great religious tension in Britain, less than ten years before the outbreak of Civil War, yet the poems manage to wear their doctrinal loyalties so lightly that his work was popular among early readers as far apart politically as King Charles I and the chaplain to Oliver Cromwell. Like the Bible by which it is so profoundly influenced, Herbert's devotional verse became a kind of communal cultural property, and indeed continues to this day to inspire readers from a huge variety of backgrounds and affinities.

In its original form, Herbert's collection of poetry was in three parts: 'The Church-porch', 'The Church' (containing all his shorter English lyrics) and 'The Church Militant'. Unfortunately, there is insufficient room in this selection for the two longer poems which framed 'The Church' in its seventeenth-century social context. 'The Church-porch', a didactic poem concerned with how to live a worthy life, helped the reader over the threshold from the secular world into the sacred space of

'The Church', the appropriate location for the lyric poems focusing on spiritual and liturgical life. At the other end of the volume, 'The Church Militant' led the reader out of the church with a historic account of the struggle of the Christian faith around the world. Though this symbolic architectural vision of a church with its entrance and exit was obviously vital to the conception of Herbert's original volume, it is the shorter lyric poems which tend to speak most vividly to readers now and are therefore represented in this selection.

The task of choosing just 100 of Herbert's lyrics for this current volume, from over 160 poems in 'The Church', was unexpectedly challenging; the fact is that Herbert wrote many more than 100 excellent poems! Readers familiar with his work may regret, as I do, the exclusion of poems such as 'Time', 'Giddinesse', 'The Glimpse', 'The Rose' and 'The Banquet', and it was obviously a difficult decision to leave out one of his five 'Affliction' poems, or two of the three poems entitled 'Praise'. These sacrifices have been made, however, in order to present 100 poems which represent the range of forms, moods, subjects, tones and styles to be found among the lyrics of 'The Church'. The poems appear in the order in which they were printed in 1633, to highlight some of the deliberate thematic clusters featured in 'The Church' – the passion and Easter at the beginning of the sequence, for example; the church services, features and festivals towards the middle, and death and the afterlife at the end of the collection. The ups and downs of an individual's relationship with God are given vivid expression throughout 'The Church', and the aim of this selection is, as far as possible, to honour the immense richness of Herbert's poetic art and allow readers, as he phrases it in 'The Flower', to 'relish' his 'versing'. The work of the greatest devotional poet in the English language deserves no less.