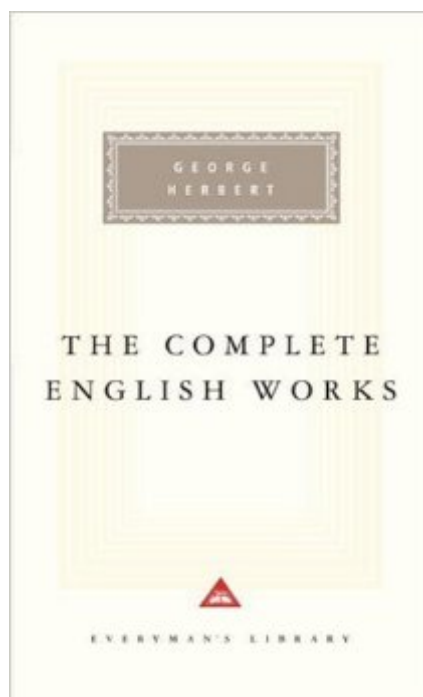


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Herbert: The Complete English Works (Everyman's Library)



Synopsis

In George Herbert (1593-1633), profound religious sensibility is richly allied with a playful wit and with literary and musical gifts of the highest order. Herbert experimented brilliantly with a remarkable variety of forms, from hymns and sonnets to "pattern poems", the shapes of which reveal their subjects. Such technical agility never seems ostentatious, however, for precision of language and expression of genuine feeling were his primary concerns. Herbert is one of the finest religious poets in any language, though even secular readers respond to his quiet intensity and exuberant inventiveness. The poems he made achieve a perfection of form and feeling, a luminosity and a metaphysical grandeur unexcelled in the history of English writing. Though long overshadowed by Donne and Milton, Herbert has come to be one of the most admired of the metaphysical poets. In this new edition of Herbert's works, the distinguished scholar and translator Ann Pasternak Slater shows through detailed textual notes, a reordering of the poems, and an extensive introduction just how great a writer Herbert is.

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Customer Reviews

"Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart / Could have recovered greenness." In 1998, after a visit to Charleville, Rimbaud's birthplace in northeastern France, I went to Bemerton, near Salisbury in England, where George Herbert lived and preached the last three years of his life. Rimbaud hated Charleville and was repelled by its Sunday-dinner respectability; he wanted only to escape it, and the day I spent there, wandering alone, left me troubled and saddened. In contrast entirely, the modest church of Saint Andrew's in Lower Bemerton seemed a perfect and moving mirror of

Herbert's work and character; seeing the altar beneath which Herbert is buried, I was moved to tears of gratitude. Christianity permeated the great English poetry of the seventeenth century and no one succeeded above Herbert in letting it be the whole and everyday life of his work. From Donne he inherited the intellectually and syntactically knotted style that Johnson mockingly dubbed "Metaphysical," and Donne is perhaps a poet of greater moments, of greater range and intensity. But Herbert goes with us on our way: his poems are more trimmed and homely than Donne's, Traherne's, or the Catholic Crashaw's, more vividly ordinary than Vaughan's. With the pastorate at Bemerton, Herbert abandoned connection and courtly ambition; the choice delivered him, and shaped and reflected his best gifts. He can be startlingly modern in diction, as when he calls prayer "Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood, / The land of spices; something understood." But the informing modesty, the love and gratitude over elemental things, can seem both special to his time and a rarity in any day.

George Herbert's poetry is, to my ears, some of the best religious poetry ever written. I studied a lot of poetry in grad school, but Herbert remains at the very top of my own personal literary canon. In Herbert, the best of godly devotion and exquisite craftsmanship are married, and that is a rare thing. This version of Herbert's works not only contains all of his poetry but also his wise and wonderful book on the ministry, "A Priest to the Temple." Reading this manual on ministry gives you greater insight into where the profundity and godliness of Herbert's poetry comes from: in Herbert, the poet and priest are perfectly united. Walton's biography is also included. The poetry itself is divine. Although English metaphysical poetry may not be to everyone's taste, and it will be difficult for many modern readers, it's perfectly suited to mine. I love the whimsical word play and the delight in the English language that Herbert manifests. The form matches the matter, and it always seems as if the poems end when they should on a note of satisfaction and having said just what one wanted to say. Most important of all, Herbert's poetry assists me in my praise of and devotion to my Lord. One of the most excellent aspects of Herbert's poetry is that it is not merely the individual meditations of a solitary Christian but is intimately connected to the life of Christ by being connected to His Bride, the Church. The structure of Herbert's collection, "The Temple," is aptly named. In summary, Herbert's poetry is a delight to my ears, my tongue, my mind, and my soul! Herbert's poetry also has a very personal connection with me: I used to read it to my wife when we were courting and early in our marriage.

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