

The Poetry of George Herbert (1593-1633)

REDEMPTION

Having been tenant long to a rich lord,
Not thriving, I resolved to be bold,
And make a suit unto him, to afford
A new small-rented lease, and cancel th' old.

In heaven at his manor I him sought:
They told me there that he was lately gone
About some land which he had dearly bought
Long since on earth, to take possession.

I straight returned, and knowing his great birth,
Sought him accordingly in great resorts –
In cities, theaters, gardens, parks and courts;
At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth

Of thieves and murderers; there I him espied,
Who straight, “Your suit is granted,” said, and died.

THE HOLDFAST

I threatened to observe the strict decree
Of my dear God with all my power and might.
But I was told by one, it could not be;
Yet I might trust in God to be my light.

Then will I trust, said I, in him alone.
Nay, ev’n to trust in him, was also his;
We must confess that nothing is our own.
Then I confess that he my succor is.

But to have naught is ours, not to confess
That we have naught. I stood amazed at this,
Much troubled, till I heard a friend express,
That all things were more ours by being his;
What Adam had, and forfeited for all,
Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall.

LOVE

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lacked anything.

“A guest,” I answered, “worthy to be here”:
 Love said, “You shall be he.”
“I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.”
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 “Who made the eyes but I?”
“Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.”
“And know you not,” says Love, “who bore the blame?”
 “My dear, then I will serve.”
“You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”
So I did sit and eat.

AARON

Holiness on the head,
Light and perfection on the breast,
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To led them unto life and rest.
Thus are true Aarons dressed.

Profaneness in my head,
Defects and darkness in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest.
Poor priest thus am I dressed.

Only another head
I have, another heart and breast,
another music, making live not dead,
without whom I could have no rest:
In him I am well dressed.

Christ is my only head,
My alone only heart and breast,
My only music, striking me even dead;
That to the old man I may rest,
And be in him new dressed.

So holy in my head,
Perfect and light in my dear breast,
My doctrine tuned by Christ, (who is not
dead,
But lives in me while I do rest)
Come people; Aaron's dressed.

DISCIPLINE

Throw away thy rod,
Throw away thy wrath:
 O my God,
Take the gentle path.

For my heart's desire
Unto thine is bent:
 I aspire
To a full consent.

Not a word or look
I affect to own,
 But by book,
And thy book alone.

Though I fail, I weep:
Though I halt in pace,
 Yet I creep
To the throne of grace.

Then let wrath remove;
Love will do the deed:
 For with love
Stony hearts will bleed.

Love is swift of foot;
Love's a man of war,
 And can shoot,
And can hit from far.

Who can 'scape his bow?
That which wrought on thee,
 Brought thee low,
Needs must work on me.

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

TIME

Meeting with Time, slack thing, said I,
Thy scythe is dull; whet it for shame.
No marvel Sir, he did reply,
If it at length deserve some blame:
 But where one man would have me grind it,
 Twenty for one too sharp do find it.

Perhaps some such of old did pass,
Who above all things lov'd this life:
To whom thy scythe a hatchet was,
Which now is but a pruning knife.
 Christ's coming hath made man thy debtor,
 Since by thy cutting he grows better.

And in his blessing thou art blest:
For where thou only wert before
An executioner at best;
Thou art a gard'ner now, and more,
 An usher to convey our souls
 Beyond the utmost stars and poles.

And this is that makes life so long,
While it detains us from our God.
Ev'n pleasures here increase the wrong,
And length of days lengthen the rod.
 Who wants the place, where God doth dwell,
 Partakes already half of hell.

Of what strange length must that needs be,
Which ev'n eternity excludes!
Thus far Time heard me patiently:
Then chafing said, This man deludes:
 What do I here before his door?
 He doth not crave less time, but more.

PRAYER (I)

PRAYER the Churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth ;

Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tower,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six days world-transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear ;

Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted Manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,

Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the souls blood,
The land of spices, something understood.

VIRTUE

SWEET day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridal of the earth and sky:
The dew shall weep thy fall to-night ;
For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue angry and brave
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye,
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie,
My music shows ye have your closes,
And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like season'd timber, never gives ;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

EASTER

RISE heart ; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
Without delays,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him mayst rise :
That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold, and much more just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
With all thy art.
The cross taught all wood to resound his name
Who bore the same.
His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
Pleasant and long :
Or since all music is but three parts vied,
And multiplied ;
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
And make up our defects with his sweet art.

COLOSSIANS 3:3

“OUR LIFE IS HID WITH CHRIST IN GOD.”

MY words and thoughts do both express this notion,
That **LIFE** hath with the sun a double motion.
The first **IS** straight, and our diurnal friend:
The other **HID**, and doth obliquely bend.
One life is wrapt **IN** flesh, and tends to earth;
The other winds t'wards **HIM** whose happy birth
Taught me to live here so **THAT** still one eye
Should aim and shoot at that which **IS** on high—
Quitting with daily labour all **MY** pleasure,
To gain at harvest an eternal **TREASURE**.

DEATH

DEATH, thou wast once an uncouth hideous thing,
 Nothing but bones,
 The sad effect of sadder groans:
Thy mouth was open, but thou couldst not sing.

For we consider'd thee as at some six
 Or ten years hence,
 After the loss of life and sense,
Flesh being turn'd to dust, and bones to sticks.

We looked on this side of thee, shooting short;
 Where we did find
 The shells of fledg'd souls left behind,
Dry dust, which sheds no tears, but may extort.

But since our Saviour's death did put some blood
 Into thy face;
 Thou art grown fair and full of grace,
Much in request, much sought for, as a good.

For we do now behold thee gay and glad,
 As at dooms-day;
 When souls shall wear their new array,
And all thy bones with beauty shall be clad.

Therefore we can go die as sleep, and trust
 Half that we have
 Unto an honest faithful grave;
Making our pillows either down, or dust.