

THE LIFE AND THE POETRY OF EDWARD, LORD HERBERT
OF CHERBURY:
A STUDY IN RELATIONSHIPS

by

PETER LEONARD PAOLUCCI

A thesis submitted to the Department of English,
University of Manitoba, in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to explain and interpret the wide variety of images, content and form, and the so-called "uneven quality" in the dated poems of Herbert's canon.

The main thrust of the argument is that Herbert's poetic style was constantly in the state of change, and that changes took place according to specific patterns. The specific pattern of changes which occur in the poetry are closely paralleled by changes in the poet's social position. Herbert rises and falls from political prominence and power, and as he does so, his poetry takes on new images and styles which reflect these new circumstances. Herbert's canon, in its existing form, was shaped not only by literary influences, but by social political and personal forces as well. In short, the thesis takes the position that Herbert, the poet, the politician, the social climber and the philosopher are all part of the same entity, and that this entity was a dynamic and changing individual. Consequently, his poetic style was also constantly changing.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been much argument and contradiction among Herbert critics about the essential nature of Lord Herbert's poetry. Yet most critics settle, in some form or another, for the view that Herbert is a poet of "eclectic" tastes, and that his poems are "uneven" in quality. While we do have a fairly clear sense of the man drawn through his Autobiography together with subsequent studies, we do not have any real understanding either of the poetry considered as a totality, or of the relationship of the man to the poet. The tendency has been to view either the man himself, or his poems, but rarely both together. Moreover, no one has really attempted to explain the eclecticism in the canon.

When I first began work on this thesis, I did so with a careful study of Herbert's poems in order to familiarize myself with the canon. While engaged in this process I also began to read Herbert criticism. The great variety of Herbert's forms, images and themes (his so-called poetic "eclecticism") seemed to have caused critical confusion and I saw that critics tended to react to the poems in one of two ways: either they selected and discussed only those poems which tended to support an *a priori* notion about the nature of the poetry, or they argued generically, saying that the variety in the canon was due primarily to Herbert's experimentation and/or imitation of literary conventions and genres. In one of its aspects this latter view seemed to me to be closer to the truth, but its fatal shortcoming was that it tended to suggest that Herbert's poetry was merely a game. This attitude was not consonant with the nature of Herbert's poetry as I was beginning to understand it.

Although I saw that Herbert undeniably experimented and imitated literary fashions and genres, it seemed to me that a number of critics had fallen into a trap by attempting to make him one type of poet rather than another. Indeed, the very variety in the canon denies the view that Herbert was simply Elizabethan, or Metaphysical, and suggested that he was, at different times in his life, all of these. The characteristics of the canon as a whole had to be explained without recourse to the view that Herbert was simply playing games when he wrote poetry. I had to ask myself why images of one kind rather than another were selected from a largely public source of images, why his imitations and experimentations with various genres and conventions had resulted in poems of specific kinds with specific content, and most importantly, why Herbert's *choice* of style, form, content, theme and image was constantly changing.

These questions were partly raised and partly answered as I studied Herbert's life. I began to see some potential correlations between the form and/or content of poems written at specific points in time and the conscious preoccupations of the poet at these times in his life. I was, therefore, led to a detailed study of the poems in chronological sequence of composition, and to an attempt at making connections between the life and the poems, thus viewing the poetry as one aspect of a larger totality.

Ideally, a study of Herbert's poetry as a totality in the sense that I have defined it, would also have to include a comparative study of works in similar genres by other poets in order to discern similarities and differences. To be true to my method, however, this would also require a close study of the lives of those other poets and the relation-

ship of shifting concepts and images in the poetry to those other lives. Quite apart from the impossible length of such a project, there is also the practical difficulty that all too often we know so little about those lives. Herbert is exceptional in that he did leave us an Autobiography as well as other prose works, and he was considered a sufficiently important figure for further biographical evidence to have come down through other channels.

In Chapter I, I shall discuss and criticize representative criticism in an attempt to show where and why it has been unable to cope satisfactorily with Herbert's poetry. We shall see that the central problem is a failure to see the poetry as an integral part of the life. I shall also outline the basic methodological approach for my thesis and show how its approach grew out of the strengths and weaknesses of established criticism. In Chapter II, I offer an essential biography. I shall argue here, that Herbert's life can be divided into three main phases, and that the poet's social and political preoccupations during these periods changed significantly. I shall also argue that Herbert's social downfall was caused by financial difficulties and a political naivety. In Chapter III, I place the dated poems of the canon within the framework of the biographical, social and historical patterns outlined in Chapter II. This chapter will attempt to achieve six objectives: First, to show the essence of each poem as a poem by revealing its literary characteristics in terms of some of its imitative and experimental (innovative) elements; essentially, this is the generic approach to which I have already referred; secondly, to show that the dated poems in the canon can be divided into three groups, each with similar styles,

images and contents; thirdly, to show literary similarities between each poem and other poems in its particular group; fourthly, to illustrate differences between each of the three groups; fifthly, to suggest that reasons for the shifting literary emphases can be found in the connections between Herbert's poetic art and his social and personal victories and defeats; and sixthly, to show why the poems will not fit into established critical views. This latter objective will be executed essentially through footnotes since the main thrust of the argument at this point in the thesis is no longer primarily concerned with the relationship of Herbert criticism to the poems but rather with treating the poems in the light of the new critical approach.

Following these three chapters are a series of appendices. In Appendix A I briefly examine textual and editorial problems and establish a working text for this thesis. The observations and conclusions in Appendix A are the result of my collation of the four major editions of Herbert's poetic canon. In Appendix B I discuss Herbert's Autobiography in relation to his poetry as well as to other biographical data, and in relation to the general history of English society in the early part of the seventeenth century.

It was my original intention to include a treatment of the undated poems in the canon and based on internal and external evidence, to suggest their approximate dates of composition. However, space did not permit me to include this and I shall return to the problem of the undated poems at a later time.

CHAPTER I

A SURVEY OF HERBERT CRITICISM

In some respects, Lord Herbert is a very important seventeenth-century figure. He is frequently looked upon as an eclectic whose academic interests led him to make significant contributions to philosophy and history, and whose other diversified interests led him to enthusiastic participation in seventeenth-century political life. Yet while his philosophical treatises, historical tracts and other minor prose works have attracted scholarly consideration, his poetry was virtually ignored for over two hundred years after his death. Only in the last two decades of the nineteenth century did his poetry suddenly begin to attract critical study, but even this interest was overshadowed by a greater concern in his Autobiographical writings. It was not until the latter part of the 1950's that the poems began to receive serious and intensive critical attention. Since then, awareness of Herbert as a poet has steadily increased although it seems fairly obvious that critical opinion will never likely acclaim him a "major" poet.

Relative to the criticism of other seventeenth-century poets little has been written on Herbert's poetry, but the small body of criticism that we do have contains an astonishing variety of conflicting opinions. Some critics argue that Herbert is an Elizabethan, some that he is a Metaphysical and some that he is an embryonic Augustan; some contend that he is a good poet, others that he is a bad one.

Despite this general dissimilarity of conclusions, the different

critical approaches share a common methodological starting point. The tendency among Herbert critics is to be comparative in a purely literary sense. Most critics arrive at their positions after having completed comparative, generic studies of various poetic modes. For instance, many critics view Donne as the central, poetical figure of the early seventeenth century. They see Lord Herbert and other minor Metaphysical poets as imitators or disciples in what George Williamson¹ calls "The Donne Tradition" or what Alfred Alvarez² calls "The School of Donne." Thus, for critics like these, Donne is responsible for the establishment of a particular type of poetry and his poetry is a sort of Platonic *Form* of Metaphysical poetry. The minor Metaphysicals are, for these critics, the followers of this type of poetry and their poems are merely imperfect *Copies* of the true *Form* of Metaphysical poetry.

Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with comparative-generic studies, we shall see that there are some limitations to this approach, limitations which can create serious misunderstandings about Herbert's poetry. For in addition to undeniable literary influences, there were also other important forces at work which significantly influenced Herbert's poetry. In much the same way that literary influences shaped the form, the style and the content of Herbert's poems, these non-literary influences also helped to mould Herbert's style of writing. His was an evolving style which often approached, and later departed from other poets' styles.

In this chapter we shall closely examine the common starting points as well as the points of divergence of critical approaches in an attempt to resolve some of the more pressing critical issues that hinder a fuller

understanding of Lord Herbert's poetry.

One of the most obvious precedents for comparative generic studies was set by George Williamson in his book, *The Donne Tradition*. Williamson contends that Lord Herbert, like many other minor Metaphysicals, adopted one major ingredient or characteristic from the multi-faceted poetry of Donne. For Williamson, the poetry of Herbert and of others is essentially a derivative form of Donne's. He suggests that Crashaw, Vaughan and George Herbert are part of the "Sacred Line" because they tend to emphasize some of the religious elements found in Donne, while Marvell, King, Townshend and Lord Herbert are part of the "Profane Line" because they tend to emphasize some of the secular elements found in Donne. Cleveland, Benlowes and Cowley are the "Chief Offenders" because their poetry tends to move away from the Metaphysical (Donneian) style.³

Williamson (p. 135) remarks that, "While Lord Herbert's *Elegy* reflects the unhappy side of the Donne tradition his best poems reflect the happy side and miss the defects of the metaphysical qualities." He goes on to suggest that Herbert's competence as a poet is dependent upon the extent of his imitation of Donne's love lyrics: "For the Donne tradition [Lord Herbert] is important because he contributed a few lovely poems and because he was the first to imitate the love songs of Donne, just as his brother was the first to imitate the divine poems" (p. 135). Here, in addition to the oversimplified classification of Donne's poems into the "Sacred" and the "Profane," we see an implied hierarchical ranking of poets which is misleading. Herbert's poetical merits are reduced to a function of the extent to which he partakes in the Donneian *Form* of Metaphysical poetry. Such a comparative interpreta-

tion and evaluation of Herbert's (and also Donne's) poetry is deceptive because it does not allow for any significant degree of individuality among minor Metaphysical poets generally and in Herbert in particular. While it is undoubtedly true that Donne exerted a literary influence on Herbert, it is surely a most serious mistake to conclude that Herbert wished merely to imitate Donne and to do little or nothing more.

Other critics after Williamson have willingly adopted his thesis about the master-disciple relationship between Donne and Herbert, but they arrive at somewhat different conclusions with regard to the nature of Herbert's poetry. For example, Patrick Cruttwell in *The Shakespearean Moment*,⁴ (p. 167) observes that, "Of Lord Herbert's poetical output, almost the whole is thoroughly in the metaphysical manner; it is very clearly the work of a man who had read his Donne and taken him as master." Here again, we have a superior-inferior ranking of poets; Donne is the master, Herbert, the disciple. Cruttwell notices significant differences between the master and the disciple, and he concludes that these differences are due not to any quarrel about poetics but to varying degrees of artistic competence. The differences begin, Cruttwell insists, in the rhythm. Donne's rhythm is smooth but Herbert's tends to be "depressingly nerveless; it trails on and on . . ." (p. 168). Moreover, according to Cruttwell, the poems are too abstract in thought and too "uneven" and "rough" in execution; they tend to be "expository" and seem to be written in a "lecturing manner."⁵

Finally, Cruttwell argues (p. 174) that "Lord Herbert's bent was not by nature, that of a metaphysical poet His positive qualities were those of the Restoration, the embryonic Augustan." But even Herbert's

resemblance to the Augustans does not finally save him from Cruttwell's condemnation (p. 167): "Lord Herbert appears to have had all the talents . . . to make a true poet But something, in him, went wrong; some failure in fusion there must have been, some inability to weld his various gifts into a successful achievement in art." It is by no means made clear what a "true poet" is, but for Cruttwell Herbert is apparently both a Donneian and not a Donneian, and unsuccessful at both styles.

The underlying thrust of Cruttwell's argument is that Herbert, who was not a Metaphysical poet "by nature," imitated the Metaphysical style of Donne's poetry and did so because it was fashionable. According to Cruttwell, Herbert's preoccupation with writing fashionable poetry seriously interfered with his ability to recognize his own poetic limitations, thus resulting in his failure as a poet in the Metaphysical manner.⁶

The strength of Cruttwell's argument lies in the correctness of his observations with reference to the early poems in the canon. But while it is undoubtedly true that these poems tend to be somewhat stereotyped and lacking in original thought, it is misleading to explain the presence of these elements *solely* in terms of literary experimentation, imitation and influence. Indeed, if it is true that Herbert imitated the Metaphysical style because it was fashionable, then he probably did so because at that particular point in his life he was preoccupied with impressing everyone around him with his *avant garde* attitude. As we shall see, at certain times in his life, Herbert's obsession to impress social peers and inferiors became so dominant that it permeated everything he did. This we see in his actions at court, in his personal and public relations, in his behavior on the battlefield, and even in his poetry. The obsession

manifested itself different ways, but nevertheless, its underlying essence remained the same. This argument shall be developed more fully in chapters two and three.

Douglas Bush⁷ is another critic who adopts Williamson's thesis about the master-disciple relationship between Donne and Herbert. In *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century*, (p. 160ff.) he writes: "As George Herbert stands at the head of the metaphysical religious poets, so his eldest brother, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1582-1648), is the first disciple of Donne on the secular side." Like Cruttwell, Bush is also aware that there are significant differences between Donne and Herbert. He observes (p. 160-1) that

Herbert has little of Donne's personal intimacy, glancing wit, everyday realism, recondite learning, verbal and metrical power, and dramatic force. He rarely raises his voice above a studied and almost prosaic quietness, and his diction is so simple that one is surprised at the effort of comprehension his close and sometimes knotted texture requires. All these negatives indicate that Herbert is not an immediately compelling poet, in the ordinary meaning of the term.⁸

Like Cruttwell, then, Bush sees that while Herbert is a "disciple" of Donne's his poetry is also unlike Donne's. Bush concludes that the differences between the two poets signify Herbert's inferiority to his "master,"⁹ and like Cruttwell he finds little of value in Herbert's poems.

Ultimately, Bush's argument is unconvincing because it is inconsistent. He says that Marvell and Herbert are both disciples of Donne but that the differences between Donne and Marvel are due to their respective personalities and poetics, whereas the differences between Donne and Herbert are due to an artistic "failure" in the latter. Surely there is