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## EDWARD, LORD HERBERT OF CHERBURY

1583–1648

Edward Herbert, Baron of Cherbury, was the older brother of George Herbert; in the course of a life crowded with incident, he was by turns a philosopher, a poet, a historian, a diplomat, a soldier, and a recounter of his own past. Curiously, his success in all these lines was considerable. His *Life and Reign of King Henry the Eighth* was published the year after his death, and is still read. His book *De Veritate* ("On Truth," 1624) was widely influential in establishing the religious philosophy of deism, or natural religion. He killed or humiliated his enemies in a series of ferocious quarrels; as ambassador to France from 1619 to 1624, he sustained his monarch's royal dignity with bristling assurance; and he told in detail the story of these stirring events in his *Autobiography* (published posthumously in 1764).

His poems are still admired. Although it was first published in 1665, the present example was probably written as much as thirty years earlier. Its exact occasion is uncertain, and one cannot say whether it was inspired by a person (Lady Diana Cecil?), a spectacle (perhaps Johnson's *Masque of Blackness*), or a principle in physics. Perhaps even family pride was involved; in their West-Country neighborhood, the Herberts were known as "Black Herberts."

### Sonnet of Black Beauty

Black beauty, which above that common light,  
 Whose power can no colors here renew  
 But those which darkness can again subdue,<sup>1</sup>  
 Dost still remain unvaried to the sight,  
 5 And like an object equal to the view  
 Art neither changed with day nor hid with night;  
 When all these colors which the world call bright,  
 And which old poetry doth so pursue,  
 Are with the night so perished and gone  
 10 That of their being there remains no mark,  
 Thou still abidest so entirely one,  
 That we may know thy blackness is a spark  
 Of light inaccessible, and alone  
 Our darkness which can make us think it dark.<sup>2</sup>

1665

1. I.e., ordinary ("common") light can reveal no colors but those which darkness can overcome and take away.

2. It is only our darkness (i.e., ignorance) which can make us think blackness obscure.