CHAPTER FOUR

QUESTIONS OF STYLE AND FORM

THOUGH THERE ARE many reasons for responding to artistic expression, we remain convinced only by the response we can renew, and since our desire for knowledge turns naturally toward what moves us, the questions we ask serve to test the validity of our response. If after we come to see how the main effects are achieved we are still moved, then the study of details may further test our pleasure and interest. But repeated experiences with a work of art cannot be identical. In the dialogue between poem and reader, then, the renewable experience will prove the validity of response by discovering no aesthetic reasons for distrust, while finding that the experience itself is not merely repeated but is capable of being extended and intensified. At the very least, we shall attribute uniqueness and a special kind of artistic inevitability to what attracts, satisfies, and still attracts, to what seems perfectly itself, enduring and rewarding the closest inspection.

Fear of monotony is a constant principle of artistic wisdom, but it is a negative principle which, if it comes to dominate, ends in aesthetic triviality—all variations and no theme. Lesser poets often imitate their own successes, but they may also avoid them so studiously that their creative talent gives itself up to discontinuous feats of originality. Major poets do not imitate their successes, and they have more of them. But they too are careful to guard themselves against the easy temptations; they avoid the plots and external circumstances which lead toward past triumphs, yet they seem to do so unobtrusively, by a moral tact that does not crowd them into defensive positions. They
invent and vary as a matter of course, and the things that move them to expression emerge with a kind of constitutional similarity. They are never the same, but we have confidence in their intrinsic lines of relationship; diversity never seems imposed from without. When we wish to speak in a general way of what they express, we invent honorific terms like “vision,” which no one expects to have simply lifted out of its formal expression and summarized in a bare statement. But in dealing with lesser poets we carelessly abstract their message, declaring that they do not have much to “say,” or that most of what they “really have to say” is in such-and-such poems.

We do not find Herbert repeating the situations and plots of his many striking poems. The mystery of God’s art with man is to be explored; there is no model to be copied. Though a poem of spiritual conflict that hopes to end in praise, meant and felt, can look outward to examples and rules, its proper tone is one of individual immediacy; it will no more wish to seem “imitated,” however well, than recollected in tranquillity. To lament-and-love is to express a single religious attitude that cannot be mastered once and for all; the variable balance between the terms is limited only by the poet’s capacity to perceive, experience, imagine, and express. What may be observed in the treatment of plots and themes has an obvious parallel in Herbert’s extraordinary invention of effective stanzaic forms. These are justly admired, but they deserve serious and extended critical study, not simply relevant remarks in passing. Without undertaking the study I recommend, my guess is that these formal elements are related to larger artistic purposes in ways that resemble the movements of words: Herbert creates individual rhythms to express the particularities of thought and feeling for every moment, and these expressive forms extend their immediate sense of life to everything they touch in the developing form; they serve a valuable purpose and they are beautiful in themselves.

Herbert’s capacity to invent and vary, and the strength of his commitment to do so, cannot be in doubt. Scores of poems we have not mentioned would only confirm what we already know. Their details are fresh and inviting, but I shall try to direct most of my attention toward extending and consolidating what we have already
learned about Herbert's sense of poetic form. In the exploration of his variety, time and time again we have met solid evidence of his ability to turn the materials of invention into a significant imaginative order. We attribute the variety, of course, to his power of invention, but this power is adjusted, with scrupulous sensitivity, to the particular circumstances of each poem. The imaginative order of many poems will strike us as free, flexible, even spontaneous, discovering order in motion—in the specific materials and propositions entertained, from within as it were—and with an individual rightness that in retrospect will seem inevitable. Yet the desire for variety, expressive grace, and freedom of movement must come to terms with the prior beliefs, needs, and purposes which move the poet, as a private human being, to expression. The common danger is that the significant form will be narrowly ordered, with the free discovery of individual rightness cramped by prior obligations, which may assert their inevitability. So on the one hand we may observe the elements of individuality and freedom, on the other hand, the commitment to significant form and specific beliefs. What the analysis can separate and gloom over, the poet must somehow combine in perfect balance.

These are problems that are real enough; many of them, and their varied solutions, have been presented in the preceding pages. But the discussion up to now has centered about other concerns. Let us now approach these problems directly and from some new perspectives. One critical opportunity is offered by the two poems Herbert revised most extensively, "The Elixir" and "Easter." From other revisions we glean valuable details, but from these poems we may gain some insight into what did or did not satisfy Herbert in terms of a whole poem.

In the manuscript of Dr. Williams' Library the first and last stanzas of "The Elixir" are preserved in an earlier version:

Lord teach me to referr
All things I doe to thee
That I not onely may not erre
But allso pleasing bee.
But these are high perfections:
Happy are they that dare
Lett in the Light to all their actions
And show them as they are.

The inferiority of the expression is plain enough, but Herbert does more than improve expression; he has altered the emphasis—indeed, the whole concept of the poem. In the earlier version the end makes a formal gesture toward the beginning; the connection is the state of being seen by God. This link disappears in the final version; at the same time the first stanza establishes much fuller, and more active, relations between the poet and God:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in any thing,
To do it as for thee.

The revised poem shifts from a state of passive obedience bordering on self-distrust to an emphasis on symbolic action, from analysis and description of duty to an acting-out which demonstrates, and participates in, the meaning of the elixir. After the initial prayer for the right relationship the poem then brings forward, each in a stanza, two defining actions, followed by an encompassing one to show how “All may of thee partake,” and a humble, transforming one which “Makes drudgerie divine.” Finally, there is the new stanza of summarizing praise:

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for lesse be told.

To be touched and owned by God is to have the initial prayer answered—or rather to set up the conditions for its being answered by demonstrating the actions that make God “Preposset.” The stanza of
the revised poem turns outward in general statement¹ and does not need to formalize its link with the beginning; yet the statement nevertheless touches on every issue and on almost every image in what has preceded. A new metaphorical relationship² is introduced by the alchemic image—"the famous stone" and all that it symbolizes of human endeavor, the whole history of the search for "perfection," exotic and humble, outward and inward, through heaven and earth. The novelty of the image and its expanding associations balance against the contraction of its application, which in its reflective movement draws together and solves the issues of the poem. The feature I have isolated seems unmistakably distinctive. Herbert preferred in his final version to balance an improved tightness of reflective relevance against a new imaginative movement that also opens outward.

Now let us turn to the song from "Easter," here quoted first from the manuscript³ and then in its revised version:

I had prepared many a flowre
To strow thy way and Victorie,
But thou wast up before myne houre
Bringinge thy sweets along with thee.

The Sunn arising in the East
Though hee bring light & th' other sents:
Can not make up so brave a feast
As thy discoverie presents.

¹ In the earlier version the shift from the first person singular to the third person plural may indicate Herbert's unrealized intentions.

² Though without knowing which came first, we may observe that this new image is related to Herbert's turning from the imagery of tree, fruit, and organic growth in the canceled fourth stanza to the different kind of growth implied by the "tincture." One remarkable retention from the earlier draft is the couplet structure, by which the thought advances two (unrhymed) lines at a time. Indeed, in the substituted last stanza he eliminated his one departure from that established movement. In The Metaphysical Poets: A Study in Religious Experience (New York, 1936), pp. 189–94, Helen White demonstrated by her study of this poem what has not yet been given enough attention: how much can be learned from the evidence of Herbert's revisions.

³ I have made some small changes to normalize the text.
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Yet though my flours be lost, they say
   A hart can never come too late.
Teach it to sing thy praise, this day,
   And then this day, my life shall date.

I got me flowers to straw thy way;
   I got me boughs off many a tree:
But thou wast up by break of day,
   And brought'st thy sweets along with thee.

The Sunne arising in the East,
   Though he give light, & th' East perfume;
If they should offer to contest
   With thy arising, they presume.

Can there be any day but this,
   Though many sunnes to shine endeavour?
We count three hundred, but we misse:
   There is but one, and that one ever.

The major structural change is to move the “I” of the poem out of the last stanza, transferring emphasis from the “I” (and its relations to the day) to the day itself and to the relations of that day to time. The “I” moves to “we” and is moved to the periphery, along with the sun and other days—all being assigned the background tasks of endeavoring and counting. A more pervasive structural change is the subtilizing of the logic in the final version. There the connections are less explicitly drawn, and the poem does not go back to pick up the small symbols of the flowers, and time (“before myne houre,” never “too late . . . this day . . . date”), and the heart’s gesture of individual love. The matter of timing in the first stanza and the possibility of presumption in the second come together as part of the contributing background of ineffective endeavor. The question of whether there can be “any day but this” jumps the argument into a generalization on time which depends on the imaginative demonstration of human and solar inadequacy on this day. The answer is that this day, being a symbol of eternity, transcends time.
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There is here, unlike "The Elixir," no reflective movement. Instead, once the poem has found its controlling symbol, all of the imaginative details on the way, though charming and rich in their incidental significance, are, as it were, used up in advancing the structure. What both poems share is the introduction of a new comprehensive image that opens outward, and in both revisions Herbert rejected an ending that would close up the poem by turning back to the beginning.

There are, however, poems that have some of the effects of closing down and turning back—poems that, for instance, end with clarifications that stand in opposition to expressive turbulences freely entertained, bringing them to a final, diminishing order. "Let me not love thee, if I love thee not" comprehends all of the issues in "Affliction" (I). But that solution is balanced between the passions of the immediate past and the unformed issues of the indefinite future. We are made to feel both. In the last chapter we identified this balance as a religious poise inseparable from Herbert’s handling of major themes; indeed, a poet determined to lament-and-love will need to seek solutions capable of expressing both attitudes. We may assume that Herbert’s characteristic solutions are not independently determined by his religious beliefs, and that his attitudes toward poetic form are deeply involved in all the poetic decisions he makes. We shall try to explore the subject further, but let us now consider some poems that deliberately turn back and close in on themselves.

We expect to find such poems among the emblematic pieces, and among those which are devoted to set subjects that move by prescribed steps toward expected conclusions. Herbert wrote many poems of this kind, and some of them do illustrate his interest in closed forms, for instance, "A Wreath," which progresses by interlocking expressions:

4

A wreathed garland of deserved praise,
Of praise deserved, unto thee I give,

4 For references to linked forms in Elizabethan verse see Martz, The Poetry of Meditation, p. 196.
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I give to thee, who knowest all my wayes,
My crooked winding wayes, wherein I live,
Wherein I die, not live: for life is straight,
Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,
To thee, who art more farre above deceit,
Then deceit seems above simplicitie.
Give me simplicitie, that I may live,
So live and like, that I may know, thy wayes,
Know them and practise them: then shall I give
For this poore wreath, give thee a crown of praise.

The technique is not one for which a poet is likely to find many convenient occasions, and the resources of artistic stammering are quickly used up if it becomes a style. It is worth noting, however, that Herbert succeeds in making some of the repetitions rhetorical and some syntactical. Furthermore, he manages to vary the spacing and rhythm of the repetitions; it is no small achievement that the final effect sounds more like speech than the product of a written word game.

When we look at the movement and coherence of the whole structure, we find that it does not lack individual distinction. The second quatrain, while continuing to weave the wreath, turns mostly away from personal concern; life is defined by God, but the “crooked, winding wayes” of appearances make life on earth a spiritual death of preferring illusion to reality. The concept is familiar enough, but the paradoxical statement, in context, is freshly imagined. For the poet is not trying to unwind the naturally “crooked,” though he prays for the essential thread of “simplicitie.” He is, one might say, taking the crooked appearances on their own terms and winding them to death. What begins in the present indicative mood touches on the eternally present (“ever tends,” “who art”), then becomes “may live,” “may know,” and finally “shall give.” The wreath to God “who knowest all my wayes” becomes, when man knows and practices God’s ways, not a garland but a crown, an offering of the transformed life. The rhyme words of the last four lines are the same as those of the first four, in reversed order. But “my wayes” have become “thy wayes,” the giving includes the giver, and the physical life is changed to spiritual;
the last word is “praise,” which sums up the qualitative changes of the repetitive form. The conditions of the poem are clearly special, and closed forms may serve different purposes at different times. But in terms of our initial questions concerning style, form, and prior beliefs, one must recognize that this poem is an emblem that does far more than assert or affirm. The form of the poem does not merely turn back on itself; it has been turning the whole time, the verbal device being conceptual, a winding with a purpose, and the purpose is to transform.

“Sinnes round” would seem to be a companion piece. The form is emblematic and circular, though the subject is different, and so are the effects. The interlocking expressions are limited to repeated lines, the last line of each stanza becoming the first of the next stanza; to complete the pattern the first line of the poem, itself a “round,” appears again as the last line: “Sorrie I am, my God, sorrie I am.” This poem does not, however, move by half-steps. In the first stanza a single image is fully developed until the thoughts, “working like a busie flame,” issue in words that “take fire from my inflamed thoughts.” In the second stanza a volcanic image combines with the actions of speech; the words are “spit” forth, and “vent the wares,” “And by their breathing ventilate the ill.” The image then concludes with the observation that words are not enough when the motives are “lewd”: hands are required “to finish the inventions.” In the third stanza we are presented with an image of successful cooperation, by means of which “my sinnes ascend three stories high, / As Babel grew, before there were dissensions.” But then we are ready to begin the round again, for “ill deeds” produce

New thoughts of sinning: wherefore, to my shame,
Sorrie I am, my God, sorrie I am.

The purpose of the poem precludes transformation, but the circular form does more than confirm the beginning; it establishes the compulsive order of sin and draws into its emblematic form, as an ambiguous adornment suitable to both beginning and end, the mere expression of regret.\(^5\)

\(^5\) When the expression “I am sorry” is used as a hopeless substitute for responsible action, it makes a ready target for Stoic scorn. See Lipsius’ *Of
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A poem constructed on the model of "A Wreath" and "Sinnes round," but without the complications that they present, is "The Call." Each of the three stanzas begins by invoking three abstract nouns which are then briefly developed, each in a line:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
Such a Life, as killeth death.

The second stanza begins, "Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength." The same form is then exactly repeated, with only the verbs and rhyming nouns altered. If anything, the form is further tightened, since "feast" is used as a rhyme and therefore appears again in the third line as "Such a Feast." The third stanza introduces a minor variation, for two of the rhymes are verbs, but except for their verbs and nouns the middle lines are identical:

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
Such a Joy, as none can move:
Such a Love, as none can part:
Such a Heart, as joyes in love.

In each stanza the third rhyme is echoed at the beginning of the fourth line, but here the second rhyme also does extra service; and the last line, by converting one of the abstract nouns into a verb, manages to draw together the key terms of the stanza. The poem as a whole demonstrates the surprising resourcefulness of a repetitive form that can move toward a climactic repetition—the last stanza, which has the least room for significant movement and yet turns in on itself admirably. That stanza is a tour de force which makes "A Wreath" seem lax by comparison, but the example of closed form, though a striking one, does less to confirm the development of the poem than to confirm the procedural method.

At this point we may glance at “H. Baptisme” (II), which conducts a lyrical argument without repetition or circularity. The poem combines Scriptural and Neoplatonic ideas and images; all of these illustrate and confirm the conclusion that “Childhood is health.” Though the imagistic illustrations are varied and flexible, they put no imaginative pressure, not even a token one, on the central attitude. Nothing is qualified or transformed; everything is confirmed, and it is left for other poems to search out what is unsaid here. And so we may regard the poem as an example of closed form, frequent enough in literature but (and this is my chief point) unusual in Herbert.

I shall conclude this phase of my exploratory survey by turning briefly to examples of closed form that, because of their similarity to “H. Baptisme” (II), can best instruct us in their differences. “The Posie” presents an ultimate expression that stands unchanged while the alternatives advance only to retreat. The end confirms the beginning, partly by quoting it:

Invention rest,
Comparisons go play, wit use thy will:
*Lesse then the least*

*Of all Gods mercies,* is my posie still.

No real argument has been advanced, for what is rejected is neither felt as loss nor valued as opposition, but is named only as the typical activities of wit, with “words and posies” competing in a kind of game. Opposed to what is rejected is an emblem, a contracted expression, the “posie” which underlies real “delight.” The rejections are negligible, while the central statement is profound and comprehensive—a single answer, always available, that humility can make to the challenge of all conceivable circumstances. A strange force is developed by the poem’s lack of a serious argument, and the power of the “posie” is that it governs in its calm contraction, which does not need to be expressed by typical activities, everything that wit, will, and invention strive to say.

“The Quip” makes use of a posy that answers the jeers of the “merrie world” by a quotation: “*But thou shalt answer, Lord, for*
The mocking temptations of the world are thus answered in kind by a single refrain that marks the irrelevance of their posturing. Then the final stanza draws the indirections together in a clear statement:

Yet when the houre of thy designe
To answer these fine things shall come;
Speak not at large; say, I am thine:
And then they have their answer home.

The playful leisure of the mocking world receives one answer in the deliberate leisure of the first two lines, which impose their sense of the encompassing movement of God’s time; the third line justifies the brevity of the poet’s answers by anticipating God’s, and the last line concludes by justifying the procedure of the whole poem. Delicate, ironic movements thus play, with easy, pointed relevance, underneath an unchanging attitude.

“The Rose” partly resembles “The Posie” and “The Quip” in advancing the answer of a single, unmoved position. There is no refrain, but a symbolic object, when interpreted, repeats the same answer in various ways. There is other variety as well, for an explanatory introduction, both general and personal, is conducted with an imaginative and witty leisureliness, in sharp contrast to the concentration of the following stanzas. At the same time, the expansive meanings of the symbolic rose, which Don Cameron Allen has reviewed “like a master in my trade,” are all contracted to a single sense.

Finally, let us note one of Herbert’s best examples of closed form, a poem that is at once unmistakably unique and typical. (The number of such poems is one mark of Herbert’s greatness.) In “Aaron” the repetitions create an imaginative argument by demonstrating their power to move through the oppositions they themselves represent in order to arrive at the desired purpose. “Aaron” is one of Herbert’s masterpieces: its repetitive form astonishes us, not for its virtuosity but for the latent power brought out of its deliberately limited mate-

rials. The poem repeats in unchanged order the same five rhyme
words throughout five stanzas, and the third line of every stanza
introduces an image of music. But these repetitions work through
contrast and conflict; the echoing reverberations, marvelously assisted
by simple prepositions, mark changes that become an expressive de-
velopment. At the end the ideal state merely described in the first
stanza has been confirmed, evolving through a process of active choice
which requires mastering alternatives convincingly imagined.

The discussion thus far ought to make it clear that Herbert shows a
pronounced interest in poetic form which turns back on itself, though
we have constantly had to recognize other tendencies. Now let us turn
in the opposite direction. In “H. Baptisme” (I) Herbert writes:

As he that sees a dark and shadie grove,
Stayes not, but looks beyond it on the skie.

That expanding movement outward is no less characteristic than the
contracting movements we have observed. For instance, the stanzas of
the emblem poem “Easter-wings” begin and end, perforce, with the
longest lines. The opening line expresses the fullest prosperity of the
state diminishes and then advances toward the last line of the first
stanza: “Then shall the fall further the flight in me.” The first line
of the second stanza is a little strained and is merely a long lie. But
the stanza ends by converting the physical and spiritual movements of
contraction into their opposite: “Affliction shall advance the flight in
me.”

The repetitive form of “Trinitie Sunday,” organized in triads,
partly resembles that of “The Call,” though the differences are
instructive. In the first stanza, for instance, the parallels do not stand
still or turn back but advance:

Lord, who hast form’d me out of mud,
And hast redeem’d me through thy bloud,
And sanctifi’d me to do good.
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The rhymes and the verbs mark progressive stages; the verbs themselves, in their rhythmical emphasis, make a distinctive pattern of augmentation: "form'd," "redeem'd," "sanctifi'd." The last line moves from gifts received to actions due. (The second stanza, which is inferior, also has one verb in each of the first two lines and two verbs in the last.) The third stanza turns the syntactical contraction into a final expansion. A single verb serves three concrete nouns in the first line and three abstract ones in the second. But the last line introduces a new triad, of intransitive verbs, which move outward and upward toward a final state of motionlessness:

Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me,
With faith, with hope, with charitie;
That I may runne, rise, rest with thee.

The last moment of a tightly wrought poem is decisive, and any departure from the established method will have the effect of loosening the form. So "The Odour," which develops a central image by careful half-steps and interlocking expressions reminiscent of "A Wreath" and "Sinnes round," concludes with some perhaps unintended awkwardness. The new idea that Herbert introduces at the end is nothing more than the expressed hope that the fictional experience of the poem can be applied to a literal concern of his own life. Such an ending is wholly conventional, the "practical" end of a formal meditation, and the expressed terms, "employ and busie me," are by no means irrelevant to the central action of the poem. The texture of that action has been so close and consistent, however, that the final statement seems neither to evolve from the poem nor to turn back in reflective relevance, but rather to exert leverage from an imaginative position outside the poem. In "Clasping of hands" a similar effect, but clearly intended and built in, dismisses the structure, issues, and method. The poem is an extreme example of interlocking expressions and repetitive form playing out the intricate changes of "thine" and "mine." Out of these two words, plus the rhymes "more" and "restore," Herbert constructs two strong and coherent ten-line stanzas—though the constant reverberations test one's
ability to grasp what is new in each minute turn of the meaning. In the last two lines the poem sums itself up and then hopes that the whole enterprise can be abandoned:

O be mine still! still make me thine!
Or rather make no Thine and Mine!

Once again we may observe a performance that is clearly not to be repeated. But my main point is that such loosening of form by rejecting the established terms of a poem is not infrequent in Herbert. For instance, the sonnet “Sinne” (I) begins: “Lord, with what care hast thou begirt us round!” The divine provisions are then reviewed for three quatrains; it is no methodical catalogue, and the writing is fresh and vigorous without any sign of slackening. But the whole program is changed in the concluding couplet:

Yet all these fences and their whole aray
One cunning bosome-sinne blows quite away.

In Chapter One a number of instances were noted in which Herbert deliberately broke form as if he were testifying that truth was more important to him than beauty. These last examples cannot be thought to have so radical an intention. What they break away from is by no means left without emphasis. In effect, they may be associated with Herbert’s evident pleasure in forms that end by suddenly turning outward and opening up, as was observed of the revised “Easter” and “The Elixir.”

It seems clear that Herbert is attracted by both extremes of poetic form, by poems that turn back on themselves and by those that turn away. But the examples that best illustrate one extreme are not themselves always rewarding poems, though we may learn from them how to approach poems in which neither extreme is expressed without significant qualification. It is useful to know that these opposing attitudes exist because when we recognize them they are not often easily separable from the expressive and intellectual elements which all together combine to make and resolve tensions. The fact that
Herbert is attracted by two contrary attitudes is one indication that the concept of form to be discovered in a poem has probably achieved its decisiveness by resolving, and not by merely dissolving, its relations with its conceptual opposite. Indeed, some of the more promising examples of closed form proved to be subtly compromising. We shall proceed, then, with the understanding that both open and closed forms may be expected to reveal tension and awareness of alternatives.

In “Grief” Herbert complains at length that his poem cannot express what he feels, and he ends with a broken exclamation, “Alas, my God!” The poem is, from the beginning, mannered and excessive. But whatever else he intends, Herbert is also rejecting its fluency. In “Jordan” (II) he is explicit in his mockery of bustling invention and proposes to “copie out” instead. Whether he speaks explicitly or not, however, one indispensable quality of his poems of spiritual conflict is the willingness to say too much, more easily than he should, and with too great resonance. Though such fluency is, of course, only one means by which he develops and clarifies conflicts, it has the great advantage of not being entirely fictional; that is, he can use one of his native gifts against himself. Facile invention is the chief quality of his Latin verse, at its best perhaps in the superficial brilliance of his epigram to Bacon, which resembles “Prayer” (I) in method, being made up of another string of images, but without the modulations, bite, and coherence of the English poem. The youthful sonnets to his mother are burdened with an excess of imagery and the rhythms are pushed too hard and too long: such insensitivities he later masters, or turns into distinctive dramatic voices. But occasionally, as in “Love” (I) and (II), he seems dominated by mere talent.

We might perhaps consider Herbert’s fluency of invention as an aspect of his interest in poetic form that turns outward in expansive movement. Such a translation of terms would regard the excesses, and

7 “In Honorem . . . Verulamii . . .” See Hutchinson’s note (p. 597) on the reputation of the poem. Martz aptly describes this kind of writing as “the technique of packed analogy” (The Poetry of Meditation, p. 195).
their modulations, as both the external signs and the very materials of conflict. But what of the opposite extreme, represented by contraction and closed form? As an end in itself, contraction may go beyond the purposes of definition and beyond the discipline of humility, signaling a failure to feel and to express. The way of inarticulateness, which triumphs in “A true Hymne,” and works well enough in a few poems, is nevertheless a restricted, highly specialized vehicle for hope or expression. The resources of overarticulateness, on the other hand, would seem to be unlimited. In Herbert’s characteristic practice, even when the end of a poem is an absolute definition, it must form its contraction out of superfluities which invite, challenge attention, apply pressure, and yield but do not defect or abscond. For instance, “The Crosse” moves with full and passionate immediacy, both flowing and ebbing, before it is brought to a final diminution, an accepted point balancing all the extensive personal discoveries. “The Pearl” pivots on its refrain, in order to return with greater energy and consciousness to the same place. In “The Collar,” the voice calling “Child!” (an ultimate expression, silent until the end) abruptly collects the apparently runaway freedom of self-expression. In these poems, as in many others, a restricting commitment controls, often with some daring imbalance, a personal fluency which is not limited to the “right” feelings.

What of the poem in which a driving fluency acknowledges no conflict or disparity between its expressive elements and its thematic contraction? “Church-monuments” repeats the elementary lessons of death. A rush of language one expects only in isolated moments of lyric immediacy is forced into a narrow channel of thought and sustained throughout the impersonal austerities of a lecture. But the poem is not without its tensions, for these are created in part by the friction of the language itself and by Herbert’s challenging refusal to modulate his intensity.8 “Church-monuments” may remind us of a problem

8 See the instructive analysis by Summers, George Herbert, pp. 129–35. There seems to be an unbridgeable difference between my reading and that of Martz, who describes the movement of the poem as a “steady onward pulsation” suggesting “an equanimity, a calm, a measured poise” (The Poetry of Meditation, p. 142).
with which this chapter began: the conflict between prior beliefs, which have a major voice in decisions concerning significant form, and those expressive elements which answer the desire for variety and individual freedom of movement. A poem that sets out to be a mortification has already made some basic decisions. Any open conflict between the beliefs and the expressive elements might require extraordinary measures to avoid seeming prearranged. The main limitations imposed on a poem of mortification are those of theme and attitude. To a modern reader these may seem crushing enough. But I think we can distinguish between such limitations and those which are produced, say, by arbitrary choices that fix the internal order of a poem. For instance, in poems like “A Wreath,” “Sinnes round,” “The Call,” and “Trinitie Sunday,” the expressive elements are severely limited, as the obstacles created by strict form take over the oppositions normally furnished by individual thought and feeling. These poems deserve our interest, and admiration too; besides, they make it plain how much Herbert values the discipline of his craft and the necessity of obstacles and opposition in his art. But measured by the standard of his best poems the triumph over technical difficulties will seem relatively cold and thin.

In Herbert’s most characteristic practice individual invention is permitted a generous latitude, and the poetic advantages are everywhere apparent. He is the master of an essential artistic illusion by which the flow of invention may seem to discover its own form, as if spontaneously. I shall now look at two examples of that illusion. They will also serve to introduce the next stage of this study by illustrating how the flow of invention, even if it is not in conflict with the commitments of theme and established attitudes, nevertheless can produce expressive elements which, expanding and contracting, create the tensions and conflict necessary to imaginative life.

Here are the first two stanzas of “Employment” (I):

If as a flowre doth spread and die,
   Thou wouldst extend me to some good,
Before I were by frosts extremite
   Nipt in the bud;
The sweetness and the praise were thine;
But the extension and the room,
Which in thy garland I should fill, were mine
At thy great doom.

The imaginative movement of the period is characterized by advance and retreat, proposition and qualification, expansion and contraction. The flower that can bloom and die, but can "spread" to good purpose in between, can also die prematurely. The second stanza then varies the possibilities by giving two versions of spreading and only one version of death. First we see things from God's perspective: the spreading flower produces fragrance which, according to the established metaphorical signals, constitutes an offering of praise. Then we see things from man's perspective: the human flower, conscious of its own enlargement as it occupies a place in the divine garland, escapes the contracting movements of both common death and divine judgment. The argument is delicately tendentious, and it flows with such easy grace that the rewards of personal aspiration are made to seem a natural consequence of the imagery. The rest of the poem makes it clear that Herbert is not taken in by his argument but is advancing it as one stage in a conflict.

Now let us look at the second example, the development of a final statement, the last stanza of "Sion":

And truly brasse and stones are heavie things,
Tombes for the dead, not temples fit for thee:
But grones are quick, and full of wings,
And all their motions upward be;
And ever as they mount, like larks they sing;
The note is sad, yet musick for a King.

Herbert has been contemplating the pomp and glory of the Old Dispensation, which has given way to a new architecture within the soul of man; its typical structure, "one good grone," is more precious to God than "All Solomons sea of brasse and world of stone." The old, massive style is better for tombs (and flesh); the new style,
echoing St. Paul, is a temple for the spirit. The “quick” groans express the living; they are swift also, like wings, and like both wings and temples they are symbols of the spirit and therefore aspire upward. When the groans take wings they ascend singing like larks. The dominant imaginative movement is forward and expanding, image producing image, except for that retrospective turn of “quick” before it takes wings. And then in the last line the flow of invention closes down in a beautiful diminution: “The note is sad, yet musick for a King.” The style of the New Dispensation thus presented in summary form is declared satisfactory. Groans, when they are freed from their imagistic efforts of rising, remain, as they should be, sad. That final note, however appropriate for a Christian, also echoes major features in the history of the poem: the flourishing glory abandoned, debate, struggle, sin, and death. Yet the fluency of invention seems to find its own form without the opposition of an overt conflict. One could say that the images sprout, work, and wind, and that the poet weaves himself into the sense, and that the movement is energetically expansive until everything is in place. Then the movement contracts, looks backward, and strikes a final, complex balance.

We now come to the major examples of this chapter: “Mortification,” “Life,” “Vertue,” “Love” (III), and “The Flower.” Whatever their diversity of form, these poems are all anchored firmly in a set of commitments. The first three poems are mortifications—obliged, therefore, to speak (like “Church-monuments”) against the attractive immediacies of life. They can hardly escape repeating tried and true arguments which lead to foregone conclusions. Yet, since these poems are masterpieces of lyric form, they should prove especially instructive to modern readers, who tend to regard such difficulties not as an imaginative challenge but as a plain disadvantage.

In “Mortification” the stanzaic pattern is tight, the progress of the argument fixed by custom, the theme familiar through and through, and the resolution predictable. No major surprises are expected. If there are to be tensions and conflict, then, they must come, as in the last stanza of “Sion,” from the expressive elements themselves. Each
of the first five stanzas represents a stage of man’s life from the perspective of death, and the last stanza makes a comprehensive comment. Each stanza is a model of Renaissance rhetorical description. But the poem is, no less, a model of twentieth-century “significant form,” for the stanzas also repeat, vary, and advance thematic materials, and the last stanza does not merely apply the appropriate moral comment: it responds to the aesthetic movements with an aesthetic comment. I shall emphasize the modern perspective and present the poem for its relevance to problems raised in this chapter.

From the first stanza we can learn most of the questions to ask:

How soon doth man decay!
When clothes are taken from a chest of sweets
To swaddle infants, whose young breath
Scarce knows the way;
Those clouts are little winding sheets,
Which do consigne and send them unto death.

Dying begins with birth, and the brevity announced in the first line establishes the tempo; but the variations of that tempo, as we shall notice, carry deliberate thematic significance. The first familiar household objects are all metaphors of death: clouts are shrouds, the permeating sweetness comes from dead, dried flowers, all taken from a wooden box. The beginning and end are connected in the uncertain breath, and the speed of decay becomes a compulsive process: “do consigne and send.” The infant must learn how to breathe, which introduces a theme varied in every stanza—the degree and kind of knowledge relevant to the stage of life being represented. “Breath” and “death” occupy the same place in each stanza, and so will register significant changes. Special effects will occur at the end of the third line, where the syntax will prevent anything more than a slight rhythmical pause—ending in “breath” but not permitting the reader to breathe until he completes the sense in the next, the shortest, line.

The last two lines of the stanza also invite regular inspection, but intellectual discipline that produces “the peculiar, tense coexistence of conflicting elements under steady control, moving toward a predetermined end” (ibid., p. 135). But, as I hope to show, the description is accurate.
first let us note some structural details. The rhymes are abcabc; the lines are, in terms of prosodic "feet," 354245. The rhyming pairs are therefore always unequal in length, the pattern being 32, 54, 45. So the "a" and "b" rhymes make a diminishing pattern, the "c" rhyme an augmenting one. Besides, the "c" rhyme is reinforced by the fact that it is always the same ("breath" and "death") and by the overlapping form, which makes the last two lines of the stanza like the "c" rhymes in that a four-beat line is followed by a five. A diminishing pattern, chiefly important in the first and fourth stanzas, is the decreasing of the second, third, and fourth lines from five to four to two beats. The syntax of the stanza tends to group these lines together against the resolution of the last two lines.

We shall see that the last two lines make a similar maneuver in each stanza: they always pause and are partly retrospective, after the manner of closed form. For instance, here in the first stanza the last two lines complete the focus which translates the household objects into images of death. "Those clouts are little winding sheets": they are, and they "do consigne and send." The metaphorical exchange between swaddling clothes and shroud is absolute, or so the manner asserts; the identification between the two partly reflects the precariousness of "young breath" and partly the imaginative "consignment" which transfers the destination (and its appropriate garments) to the very first motion of breath toward that destination. The material of the garments and the style of wearing them are surprisingly similar, but the assertion goes much further and declares them to be the same garments. The point of these remarks is that we may expect in the last two lines of each stanza not only a turning back but an individual metaphorical style, one that interprets, as it were, the distance and particular quality of the relations between literal and imaginative meaning.

Most of these observations will furnish us with questions for the second stanza:

When boyes go first to bed,
They step into their voluntarie graves,
Sleep bindes them fast; onely their breath
Makes them not dead:
Successive nights, like rolling waves,
Convey them quickly, who are bound for death.

In the first stanza an imaginative transfer joins birth and death in a brevity that cannot be surpassed or, for that matter, even developed. But the theme of time can be taken up, and with it the tempo of the progress toward death. The compulsive movement, implied and then asserted at the end of the first stanza, becomes a principal theme of the second. What we have now, though, settles down to being a process rather than an imaginative simultaneity, and Herbert gives us both the sense of speed and the sense of undeviating progress. The boys are bound "fast" and conveyed quickly "bound." A term of measure lengthens the brevity but strengthens the pattern of the progress, and instead of being wound at once in shrouds the boys are bound in a succession of nights. The knowledge displayed is hardly more conscious than that of the infants, but the motion of a step is harder to learn than how to breathe. At least the step is "voluntarie" and it does know "the way," if not what that way means.

Since the movements of the third and fourth lines are related to each other throughout the poem, it will be easier to follow these if the stresses and significant junctures are noted. Here are the relevant lines from the first and second stanzas:

1 4 13 1 2 3 4 To swaddle infants, whose young breath
3 2 1 4 Scarce knows the way.

4 2 1 4 3 1 2 4 Sleep binds them fast; only their breath
3 1 2 4 Makes them not dead.

(These details are derived, I hardly need to remind the reader, not from some apparatus of proved consistency but from one man's analysis of his own performance. They are "interpreted" and do not exclude the possibility of other interpretations; but like all the evidence and arguments offered in this book, they aspire to a sensitive accuracy that may deserve to be persuasive. At least the details may be
examined, may form the basis of an argument that can be accepted or corrected.) What we see, besides the fine variety in rhythm and phrasing, is a significant variation in the arrangement of pitch at the end of the lines. In the first stanza the stresses and pitch rise to "breath," pause, and then pause at level pitch after "Scarce"; then a longer phrase moves, perhaps like an exhalation, toward a concluding fall in pitch, with the voice fading gradually. In the second stanza the movement rises with "Sleep," falls and rises quickly; then after "fast," though the stresses fall and rise, the pitch only falls. The last four syllables of that line are in stress exactly duplicated in the following line, but the phrasing is different and the pitch rises, which gives an unusual kind of positive effect to the "not dead." A commonplace experience of parents, vividly recreated, does more than imitate the rise and fall of breath. The lines represent the ambiguous tensions of such familiar scenes, and the resolving recognition of life strangely follows the exhalation of "breath," coinciding with the two quickly spaced rises in pitch—"Makes... dead." That movement of the pitch echoes, less forcefully because of the differences in stress and phrasing, the movement of the first four syllables of the preceding line: "Sleep bindes them fast." And so, even if this were not the second occurrence of a thematic movement, we should be reminded that Herbert does not need the materials of a formal conflict to produce the tensions and resolutions characteristic of his art. Here, as in many examples from the third chapter, the expressive movements of words create their own forms, which, like metaphors, create meanings by establishing similarities.

Finally, when the last two lines turn back they translate the representative instance into the sleep of a lifetime. Bound in the rocking motion of their breath, much like a succession of nights or waves, the boys are conveyed, as if quickly, into a dimension of time that has been made uniform. Sleep is the familiar simulacrum of death, and waves are a traditional symbol of time, but the sense of speed is a product of the adopted perspective. As we noted of the first four lines, we have been given a process, however abbreviated, and not an imaginative simultaneity. Besides, there is one small but definite countermovement which resists being drawn into the imaginative
perspective: their breath, only but nevertheless, "Makes them not dead." The metaphorical exchange is less complete than in the first stanza.

The next stage is youth, parts of which invite critical brevity:

When youth is frank and free,
And calls for musick, while his veins do swell,
All day exchanging mirth and breath
In companie;
That musick summons to the knell,
Which shall befriend him at the houre of death.

In the first four lines the tempo and the kinds of movement strikingly depart from those established in the preceding stanzas. Suddenly there is leisure and daytime, “All day,” in a world where “mirth and breath” break out of the fixed relations of birth and death. The contracting movements of winding and binding are replaced by those of swelling and exchanging. The infants and boys were helpless objects looked at; youth, representative but singular, acts independently in a fellowship of peers. He “knows the way”—at least the way he wants to use his breath; in his general dilation of spirits he exercises choice by calling and exchanging. Now let us glance at what the stanza does in the movement of its third and fourth lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{3} & \quad \text{4} & \quad \text{1} & \quad \text{3} & \quad \text{1} & \quad \text{4} & \quad \text{1} & \quad \text{4} \\
\text{All day} & \text{exchanging} & \text{mirth and breath} & \text{In companie.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

We find none of the subtleties and tensions of this place in the previous stanzas. The most remarkable thing perhaps is that the syntactical completion provided by the fourth line is a rather weak phrase, coming as an addition rather than as an internal necessity. Everything else is straightforward and anticipatory—until the last two lines. These turn back to revise the music and the expression of companionship.

But the most interesting thing to observe is that the metaphorical gap has widened. When the two kinds of music and friendship are
brought together, they do not pretend to be the same. Previously the imaginative translation dominated the literal meaning, though less in the second than in the first stanza; now they are juxtaposed, and the declaration of similarity emphasizes the differences. The translation simply asserts that the lively scene imagined is an ignorant anticipation of the actual scene to come—a scene bare of details, left wholly to the reader’s imagination and memory. Time, not invited to this party, reappears with that single, arbitrary gesture, “summons.” Up to this point time has been expressed as the encompassing present; a day, however, has punctuated the flow and has presented itself as an event more distinguishable than “Successive nights.” The future is introduced formally in “shall befriend,” and time condescends to be named in a small unit, “the houre of death.” These minor but distinctive differences in the treatment of time may perhaps be attributed to an occasion (the “day” of youth) that actively disregards the force of time. It is the one moment of resistance, at the very center of the five scenes, and it evokes from time an individual act different from the comprehensive consigning and conveying. What we are noticing here is not formal conflict but, again, an expressive part of the poem used thematically. As for the metaphorical style of the last two lines, the gap between the literal and imaginative meaning stretches out the process of dying still further; while the confident arbitrariness of the relations brought together, under the authority of time and in the face of resistance, further strengthens the rigor of the progress.

Now we have the scene of maturity:

When man grows staid and wise,
Getting a house and home, where he may move
Within the circle of his breath,
Schooling his eyes;
That dumbe inclosure maketh love
Unto the coffin, that attends his death.

The tempo slows down markedly, and in the first four lines the dominant movement is not winding, binding, or swelling, but calmly
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balanced and circular. Like youth the mature man acts independently, as an individual; the presence of others is implied, but there is no exchange. He is declared wise of purpose, and the voluntary act which characterizes the advanced stage of his knowledge sets up limits; within these he consciously disciplines desires. When we turn to the movement of the third and fourth lines, we notice that we reach the end of the third line with our sense of syntactical expectation transferred from the last clause and phrase to the completion of the whole period begun by the first line. Moving "Within the circle of his breath" is a striking expression, apparently complete, and the participial addition that follows is neither anticipated nor, until it sinks in, felt as necessary. If anything, the casualness of the syntax increases the force of the relevance, and the irony is both retrospective and anticipatory. In the preceding stanza the similar looseness of "In companie" registers its ironic effect chiefly by anticipation. In this stanza the syntactical incompleteness usually poised at the end of the third line has been transferred to the second and fifth lines (the "b" rhymes), as if to withdraw emphasis from the individual act of breathing. One effect is to translate breath from a characterizing act into a generally representative state.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Getting} & \mid a \text{ house and home} & |\text{where he may} & \mid \text{move} \mid \\
& & |\text{Within} & \mid \text{the circle} & \mid \text{of his breath} \mid \\
& & & |\text{Schooling} \mid \text{his eyes} \mid \\
\end{align*}
\]

For the first time since the opening stanza, but more fully now, a particular potentiality of these middle lines is developed. They are grouped together rhythmically and syntactically. Their diminishing pattern is carefully balanced, the number of rhythmical phrases descending from 4 to 3 to 2, a symmetry much finer than that made by the number of syllables or beats, which must alter the proportion in moving to the shortest line. To illustrate Herbert's workmanship here, in the first stanza the rhythmical phrases in these three lines move from 4 to 4 to 2, and the shortest line falls into phrases of one and three syllables ("Scarce\mid knows the way"); but in this stanza he
binds the unit by repeating the participial construction, and the shortest line is balanced in two equal phrases which have the same stresses in reverse. The sense of balance is confirmed by still another means, for unless I am mistaken the pitch holds level after "breath," for the first and only time in the poem.

We may agree, then, that there has been no dearth of expressive means to establish and amplify the portrait of the mature man balanced within his chosen circumference. Again we may notice that the expressive elements of the poem are capable of developing, creating tensions and conflicts not available in the plot itself and the explicit ideas it carries forward. We come now to the metaphorical style of the last two lines. The fifth line repeats the syntactical enjambment of its rhyming partner, the second line, and in doing so introduces the most surprising image since the clouts were declared to be winding sheets. The two images have much in common, but the imaginative differences are fine and instructive. In both the metaphorical exchange may seem to be absolute, as the final focus translates domestic objects and existence into an image of death which proclaims not similarity but identity. The infants provide a startling identification between birth and death, being diapered with shrouds. But the mature man's identification with death is less direct and is not supported by the same kind of literal basis. For the infants even the arbitrary transfer of beginning to end is based on the actual precariousness of "young breath," besides the points of similarity in the material of the garments and the "chest of sweets." For the man identification is mediated by a symbolic structure, the "dumbe inclosure" he has made of his own free choice, which in turn "maketh love" to the coffin always waiting though not usually recognizable in the fashion of architecture and furniture or the shapes made by breath. The literal basis is a common observation of human behavior, elevated to a principle and interpreted. What is arbitrary in the imaginative transfer is subdued, but not rendered invisible, by the terms of the poem, by the cumulative context, and, most impressively, by the indirectness of the voluntary act. The man does not himself make love; he courts death by proxy, as it were, when he deliberately establishes and circumscribes his limits. No less important, he does not necessarily understand the
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significance of his act. He has grown “wise,” but we are invited to ask how far his wisdom extends. A positive action veiled at one remove is not unenigmatic, especially when it is an indirect passion issuing from direct repression; we are not encouraged to think that he has grown any wiser on the basic subject, in spite of ambiguous appearances, than were his predecessors, the infants, boys, and youth.

The final scene presents old age:

When age grows low and weak,
Marking his grave, and thawing ev’ry yeare,
Till all do melt, and drown his breath
When he would speak;
A chair or litter shows the biere,
Which shall convey him to the house of death.

Again the tempo changes; “weak” and “thawing” set the pace and suggest the movement, which is both more regular and more uncertain than any preceding lines. The old man has nothing to exchange or school; what he has to say must overcome the rheums and their silent message of dissolution. That message is a kind of involuntary knowledge, the most clear, precise, and conscious the poem has presented. Nevertheless, there are ambiguities and reservations. The message is perfectly understood by others, but we cannot draw a line between the old man’s demonstration and comprehension. For instance, does he recognize what the chair “shows”? The one firm action of the first four lines is “Marking his grave.” What this immediately means is plain enough; the trouble is that it can mean too much. The old man takes note of his grave, perhaps looks at it, certainly thinks about it, perhaps chooses the spot, or composes an epigraph, or considers the lettering. But he is also, in decline, a figure of death, characterizing the grave, and producing in others the thoughts he himself entertains. So his knowledge, though more precise than that of any previous figure, still is a compelled knowledge, not wholly in possession of itself, more significant for what it shows than for what it knows.

Now let us look at the movement of the third and fourth lines:
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Till all do melt, and drown his breath.

When he would speak.

The first of these lines is in some respects more regular than any preceding line. Its rhythmical and metrical phrasing coincide exactly. Here, after the first phrase, which seems to suggest the collecting of energy, the line moves with a painful show of effort, overcontrolled in stress and phrasing, letting the pitch fall at the middle and end but protracting the rhythmical flow longer than it can be held in balance. The handicap is relayed to the following line, which is a masterpiece of expressive awkwardness and weakness, faltering with uncertainty up to the pause, and then rising in stress and pitch—the effort barely but excessively accomplished, and left hanging, as if detached.

The old man and the youth, because of their degree of physical individualization, come closest to being “characters.” These two figures are related in that the youth offers most resistance to the symbolic representation, the old man least. The infants, boys, and mature man, in spite of their differences, all lend themselves to imaginative translations that discover the control which death exerts over life. The typical scene of youth will not yield itself up so. It must be brought into line by the application of an ironic reversal. One mark of the strain is the sudden appearance of the future tense; the comprehensive present is no longer adequate. At the other extreme old age is already a familiar symbol of death, and a typical scene provides little to translate or discover. When the last two lines turn back to interpret the stanza, the “chair or litter” serves to assemble the various movements toward dissolution. But the symbolic objects hardly need to point, they are so close to being what they indicate. The order of imagination is primarily physical as the chair becomes a bier. Even the syntactical relationships exhibit less energy and precision: the first four lines wander in their suspended construction,

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10 So does the opening line of each stanza (except the last), but these lines are declarative and emphatic, with other internal means of achieving individuality.
making the matter of breath seem for the first time a little digressive. Now that we have reached the actual threshold of death, and all the difficult imaginative transfers have been made, the proximity of the literal fixes and simplifies the direction of the remaining transfers. The wavering movements of the middle lines are converted into the brisk rhythm of the last line—a shocking change that simply happens, without comment. The symbolic house of the mature man no longer means, it practically is the "house of death." The boys whom nights "Convey . . . quickly" have arrived. The bier "Which shall convey" the moribund is a matter of fact, and the future tense now seems like an expression of pedantic exactitude. "Convey," stripped of associations with time, refers only to place, the carrying of a body from one house to another.

All the scenes have been presented, and the task of the final stanza is only too clear. It must point up a moral or, as a rhetorician might say, express "the cause and reason of a former narration."11

Man, ere he is aware,
Hath put together a solemnitie,
And drest his herse, while he has breath
As yet to spare:
Yet Lord, instruct us so to die,
That all these dyings may be life in death.

Since the narrative progress has been completed, the time sense of the stanza will have a new expressive purpose. It no longer needs to demonstrate in a compelling present scenes that imply the future. We now have the first introduction of the past tense, "Hath put together . . . And drest." It is remarkably quiet and unemphatic as a summary reference to the five preceding scenes. All of the imaginative excitement of time has been trained out of the last stanza. The question of knowledge finally disposes of the question of time. Brevity, announced in the first line of the poem and then progressively qualified, is looked at from an altered perspective. Man has really been demon-

11 Hoskins, Directions for Speech and Style, p. 35.
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strating "solemnitie." He has been ritualizing death in all the stages of life, not only before he was aware but whether or not he was aware. Now, brought up to the present and looking back on the record, he is in a position to employ his wisdom—which he does by praying for divine instruction. It is a dry and summary comment on the scope and purpose of human knowledge when it comes to the question of dying.

The movement of the third and fourth lines does nothing new or strikingly individual:

\[
\text{And drest his herse, I while he has breath} \]
\[
\text{As yet to spare. I}
\]

That is, Herbert satisfies the expectation that he has created by making this part of the stanza a place for special treatment. There is no falling off in the expressive relevance of the lines, but they are merely concluding one formal movement of the poem and are not charged with any complex pattern.

The final stanza does not begin with a suspended construction. The signals of change come early, when the opening line breaks precedent by pausing after the first syllable. Now the whole stanza turns back to interpret the poem, enlarging the movement which has concluded each stanza. That movement is also repeated as the last two lines turn back to interpret both stanza and poem. All of the rituals of death have been separate "dyings," each one turned back on itself and closed down firmly. The last moment sums up all of the closed scenes. They have been demonstrations that life is directed toward death, and each tableau is an individual combination of literal and imaginative materials, the "solemnitie" being symbolic and the death literal. From the final perspective all the lines meet at the same point, presenting to the man alive the privilege of interpretation and revision, permitting him to see death as "all these dyings." But the last moment recognizes and releases the alternative to the converging lines. In effect the whole process of the poem is reversed by an imaginative movement opening outward, as the most stubbornly literal word in the poem, "death," is at last converted to symbolic "dyings" and is represented as a stage of life.
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“Mortification” is not a poem of spiritual conflict. Theme and plot are fixed by religious and rhetorical traditions. But I believe myself to be exaggerating hardly at all in saying that every syllable is individual in its movement and in its dynamic relations, making and resolving tensions at every turn. Each stanza is both retrospective and progressive, shaping a general development within which we can identify significant internal communications created by the sense of pace, attitudes of awareness, and the styles of imagination. These expressive forms speak to themselves and to each other, and serve that final act of imagination which translates into its conceptual opposite the closed perspective of life compelled to ritualize death: the contractions of death become an argument for the open alternative, “life in death.” That alternative implies a radically different order of life, no longer dominated by death. The new freedom of choice will then be surrounded by limitations that assist human life and do not obsess it—by the need for spiritual instruction and individual discipline. The poem is itself both argument and pledge. As for the end proposed, the infinite life of eternity, that is not a proper subject for literary comment; one may at least observe, however, that the argument, and its conduct, addresses itself to the inescapable human problem of how to live without being dominated by the fear of death. Herbert’s poetic answer, if one may distinguish it from his religious answer, is to expose the secret forms of death, imagining them into familiarity, so that they can be recognized and mastered.¹² One final comment of another kind: in terms of form “Mortification” reverses the method of “The Collar,” which at the last moment contracts its expanding disorder and rediscovers concord.

¹² In the Williams manuscript the last word of the poem, “death,” is written in larger letters and with a different kind of capital “D.” That emphasis would certainly resist the easy reading, “LIFE in death,” but would as surely, I think, prevent a literal interpretation of “death.” The way to life in death is through the symbolic “dyings,” a discipline requiring continuous self-mastery and the support of spiritual instruction. I am indebted to my colleague Ben Drake for calling my attention to the problem raised by the manuscript evidence.
The methods of "Mortification" are not unusual in Herbert's poetry. We have seen many poems turn the immediacies of expressiveness into forms capable of establishing and developing thematic relations. The point is worth consolidating, however, and I shall now consider two more poems partly in these terms. "Life" and "Vertue" are simpler mortifications, informal treatments of the same theme. They get along without an established plot, a familiar cast of characters, and vivid scenes brought into brilliant focus. Besides, "Vertue" may pass for one of the purest lyrics in the language. But we shall see more than a casual resemblance to the methods of "Mortification." In the poems to be considered problems of conscious awareness and of imagination are developed in distinctive styles. Furthermore, although little happens in these poems at the level of explicit action and detail, they support a continuous argument by their poetic conduct of the expressive materials. Their formal ideas cannot be expected to excite much contemporary interest, though they have much to say to the neo-Freudians who are rediscovering the importance of death to life. The poems offer, as well, a liberating challenge to modern critical tastes, creating significant aesthetic form of surprising vitality out of severely limited materials and "fixed," unfashionable attitudes.

In "Life" Herbert contemplates a posy of flowers. As a symbol the flowers have one obvious and fixed meaning: they refer to the brevity of human life. But the symbol has another, less stable, meaning assigned to it—the quality of life. As a posy the flowers invite, like "A Wreath," an emblematic form that will express its motto while turning back on itself, as if it were some brief wisdom inscribed in a ring. The poem begins:

I made a posie, while the day ran by:
Here will I smell my remnant out, and tie
My life within this band.

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13 For example, Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown.
14 But I cannot agree with Martz's account of the poem in terms of "the formal process of meditation" (The Poetry of Meditation, p. 58).
But Time did becken to the flowers, and they
By noon most cunningly did steal away,
And wither'd in my hand.

"While the day ran by" sounds musical and vague: it echoes, appealingly, the arbitrary illusion of time in the never-never land of countless poems. For the flowers the day is a specific measure of time, ending at noon; for man time is both an external, indifferent measure and a major source of internal questions he must acknowledge and try to answer. The poet imaginatively identifying himself with the flowers knows that he is doing so, as part of his own posy and his double response to time. In declaring that he will "smell my remnant out," he is perhaps proposing, with linguistic and imaginative extravagance, to join the bouquet and contribute to the general fragrance. But to "tie" is a conscious, separate act, and "remnant" is a deliberately self-conscious word. Similarly, if to "smell my remnant out" suggests passing the rest of his life savoring the flowers, he is marking a most unusual relationship but not a union. In the context the expression is, for all its colloquial casualness, an arresting one, and part of its inescapable meaning is that he will trace the symbolic scent of the flowers to his own conclusion.

There are two kinds of doubleness in the account of the flowers' dying. First, the event is reported twice: they cunningly steal away and they wither in his hand. The manner is like that of "while the day ran by," a product of the naive imagination, recalling the atmosphere of ballad and oral tradition. But to the twentieth century, with its rediscovery of pre-logical thought, the report will not seem merely tautological. The flowers go away suddenly, invisibly, and at the same time they stay, showing the visible signs of death. The naive imagination registers two contradictory actions in two kinds of time, where the logical mind would observe one event occupying one measure of time. The second kind of doubleness is anything but naive. It reverses the symbolic orientation and transfers to the flowers the attributes of human life, thus marking two events which in other

\[15\] There is a similar effect in Southwell's "The Burning Babe": "With this he vanished out of sight, and swiftly shrunk away."
contexts we take so much for granted that they do not seem figurative: the invisible passing of the spirit in death and the withering of the physical remains after the life has gone.

The first stanza is divided between the flowers and the human response; the second turns wholly to the human actions:

My hand was next to them, and then my heart:
I took, without more thinking, in good part
Times gentle admonition:
Who did so sweetly deaths sad taste convey,
Making my minde to smell my fatall day;
Yet sugring the suspicion.

The hand, and then the heart, acts “in good part,” as if independently motivated in a simple imaginative world where chance proximity accounts for interactions that the analytical mind will need to explain by producing and applying a complex psychological apparatus. “Without more thinking” is a common, standard expression, like “in good part”—so worn and rounded by use that it cannot impose an exact meaning but will in part accept its meaning, or meanings, from the context. Perhaps the self-consciousness of the symbolic contemplation proposed in the first stanza is now no longer needed, since the hand and the heart have exemplified the sufficiency of their kind of “thinking.” The message has now been received, but to dismiss “more thinking” is a strange affirmation that, however swiftly, the intellect has been consulted and has approved. Indeed, while reproducing a world of the simple, “mythic” imagination Herbert anticipates, as it were, the apparatus of Renaissance psychology. The whole man is integrated by his good parts of will, affections, and mind; if one verb can speak for each it can speak for all: “I took” in hand and heart and thought. The fusion thus presented, being simple and astonishingly absolute, comes under some strain in the rest of the stanza and in the final stanza. It is a calculated strain which admits the fragmenting pressures of new imaginative movements, but which never quite comes apart.

“Times gentle admonition” momentarily reduces the symbolic con-
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templation of the flowers to their simplest message, the brevity of life. Time is an abstraction for the intellect to ponder, if it needed “more thinking”; “admonition” speaks to the will, and “gentle,” which speaks to the affections, is the binding word. They make a strange and admirable composition—an equilibrium in motion, an abstraction permeated with feeling, a stylized gesture so much at ease with itself that it seems to derive from some superior order of inspired spontaneity.

Then the next line, “Who did so sweetly deaths sad taste convey,” suddenly concentrates in a climax of sensuous excitement human attitudes which have been presented as casually simple. “Sad” admits what “admonition” barely suggests, and “convey” expresses a detached recognition that is different in quality from the imaginative record of beckoning, stealing, withering, taking. The “sad” is conveyed sweetly, however, and the intellectual recognition is translated into a single physical sense, taste, which unifies the response much as “gentle” did in the preceding line. From taste to smell is a short half-step. When the whole person declares, “Here will I smell my remnant out,” he is being consciously metaphorical, producing multiplex meanings intentionally. But when he says that his mind is made “to smell my fatall day,” the separateness in the metaphor has been radically diminished. The sense of smell, unlike sight and hearing, is in the traditional hierarchy a “lower” sense, but it can also reach out to gather knowledge, as touch and taste cannot. Knowledge has been reduced to a single item, and the mind has become a single basic function. The mind, which has taken its cue from hand and heart and taste, can now, “without more thinking,” apprehend all that it wants to know by further narrowing its perception to the agency of a single sense.

On the one hand we have moved from the verbal and imaginative self-consciousness of “smell my remnant out” to an opposite extreme; but we seem equally remote from the simple imaginative world of stock phrases, “pre-logical” simultaneities, and causal relations founded on the principle of proximity. The mind smelling represents a different order of simplicity, not a poetic recovery of more naive modes of thought but a disciplined concentration on the essential by
stripping away everything else in a peremptory exclusion. It is a brilliant effect and cannot go unobserved. We have therefore been noting some of the strains and separate imaginative movements in the fusion that the first part of the stanza achieves. But the line we have been considering, for all the pressure it generates, does not admit division. The last line, “Yet sugring the suspicion,” does acknowledge a certain separateness, for the “sugring” does not exert the assimilative effect of “so sweetly” on “deaths sad taste,” nor does it bind like “gentle.” And so the detachment and doubleness of the first stanza reappear, but mildly and unemphatically, almost lost in the dominating brilliance of the preceding lines.

I do not apologize for pursuing these details further than the expository point (which I have not forgotten) may seem to justify. It would be a shame, and a waste, to deal summarily with a poem which exhibits a range and quality of Herbert’s imagination that we have not met before. Nor can one, aloof from details, adequately describe the structure of a poem when the main plot is crystal clear, while the actions that compose it are both genuinely and deceptively simple—when, indeed, we encounter a kind of “primitive” poetic imagination joined with a highly developed intellectual power of imagining things in their absolute simplicity. It is a power of the mind closely akin to Marvell’s “annihilating” imagination, and it belongs to an advanced stage of thought in which the mind, conscious of itself, discovers forgotten powers.

The third stanza turns from a concentration on the human response and, like the first stanza, contemplates both the flowers and their referential meaning, but now the relations are drawn up, not as narrative but as a formal analogy:

Farewell deare flowers, sweetly your time ye spent,
    Fit, while ye liv’d, for smell or ornament,

16 In “Vanitie” (I) we find, not an actual poetic demonstration, but a jocular account of reducing things to their simplicity. The subtle chemist can “strip the creature naked, till he finde / The callow principles within their nest.” He is admitted to the bedroom while “ordinarie suitours” must wait outside until “They appeare trim and drest.”
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And after death for cures.
I follow straight without complaints or grief,
Since if my sent be good, I care not if
It be as short as yours.

The first three lines review the symbolic career of the flowers, and the last three lines apply that review to the poet's own life. The initial posy is that personal declaration in the future tense: "Here will I smell my remnant out, and tie / My life within this band." But the flowers die and the poet reflects on the meanings. His final statement is no longer an unqualified assertion of imaginative identification with the flowers; the terms have been refined and they do not meet exactly at every point. So the formal effects we shall want to examine are those produced by the reflective relevance which emphasizes how the process of the poem has qualified and transformed its materials.

In the first stanza the differences between the poet and the flowers are indicated by the very expressions that represent the closeness of the relationship—the self-conscious language on the one hand and the double effects of the imaginative naivete on the other. In the last stanza the terms of the relationship are simplified. The flowers are addressed as objects of affection, now dead and separate; the poet is alive, selecting the points of comparison. In life the flowers fulfilled their purpose of "smell or ornament." The option of the latter term is not taken up, though we are free to infer that the good human life will have its ornamental value. The point of comparison is the metaphorical fragrance, which other human minds may appreciate synesthetically. They may enjoy the example of a good brief life directed toward a good death, and so be prompted to repeat the poet's experience: to apprehend the "sad taste" of death in our lives' sweetness and to convert that apprehension into a way of living life. Another selective comparison is that the good life ending in a good death offers "cures" to the living. These are "cures" addressed entirely to the mind, whereas the dead flowers, properly regarded, affect the mind but are also the unnoticed "servants" man walks on everywhere, the herbs that "gladly cure our flesh."

17 "Man."
When we look at the terms of comparison so, we cannot miss what they in truth are, gracefully precise metaphors of relationship that press their similarities with tact, for they are under the discipline of an intellectual power that observes and does not blur the differences. To say that the human death will be “without complaints or grief” is to offer a heightened, negative expression, resembling, but somewhat distantly, the easier death of flowers. At the same time the modest denial of grief does indicate that the poet has passed beyond the tensions and excitement controlled in the second stanza.

As our attention is turned back, then, we observe that the development has confirmed the end but not the beginning of the poem, and that the development is one of tracing and refining the human responses to the flowers. The sense of smell carries the major burden of the comparison, but there are two other terms to consider. In the first stanza we have “poetic” time, “while the day ran by,” but also the specific time of “noon” and the personified abstraction, “Time did becken to the flowers.” In the second stanza “Times gentle admonition” strangely possesses the poet’s mind. But in the last stanza time is wholly naturalized, like the “sweet and wholesome Hours” which conclude Marvell’s “The Garden.” The poet bids farewell in the first line, “sweetly your time ye spent,” and it is this time which in the last line gently unites the sweetness of human life and the brief scent of flowers. The other term to consider is that part of the human response marked by the activity of thought. The flowers offer symbolic meanings, and the poet contemplates, reacts to, and clarifies these. In the first stanza he makes an oversimplified assertion in self-conscious language, but he also records the death of the flowers with un-self-conscious naivete. In the second stanza he gains his knowledge in an authoritative way and proceeds “without more thinking.” The mind now grasps its ultimate knowledge by a radically regressive integration as an organ of sense. But in the final stanza the intellect seems to be, like time, naturalized. There is no self-consciousness, no complex fusion, no naive or annihilating imagination. “I care not,” Herbert says, and that is all the conscious intellectual activity he admits. Though the weight of comparison moves from its physical basis to intellectual meanings established in moral discourse, if we
grant him the translations which tradition had made easy and for which his own poem has thoroughly prepared the way, we must acknowledge that the final statement expresses a mind extraordinarily at peace with itself. The basis of integration is perforce limited, but in the context of alternatives presented by the poem the limitation is deliberately achieved. The mind gives up its various eccentric powers to concentrate on the one function that the development of the poem can accept as being central.

By a parallel development the imaginative identification with the flowers finally limits itself to one central point, the humble, trusting acceptance of brevity—if only the human conditions of sweetness can be met. The ultimate equilibrium suggests that a precondition of moral sweetness requires coming to terms with time, toward which moment the whole experience of the poem leads. The restless intellectual activity, therefore, has been directed toward the ordering of itself by ordering its imaginative relations with time. Only the last stanza takes a position firmly in the present. There the poet can unite the past and future history of the flowers and, at ease with brevity, speak of his own future as present. The poem turns back on itself but not to close up the action, for brevity can be accepted only in a genuine present, where the final poise rests.

The moment toward which poems of complaint or praise or love aspire is one which seems to be free of effort, one which has assimilated the partitions of time into a felt present. The mind seeking integrity strives to create order out of that rich human chaos, the imagination of time. After its violent expansions and contractions, its movements up and down, "The Temper" (I) comes to rest in a poise of place, an "everywhere" that is always present. A movement of significant retreat in "The Crosse" acts with resigned helplessness toward the present, as if it were past; the final recovery moves toward a full acceptance of the present. In poems that contemplate a theme without formal conflict—such as "Death," "Mortification," "Life"—time is a subject with which the mind and heart have an ancient and continuing quarrel. Out of that quarrel, which does not need to be presented directly or even acknowledged, Herbert discov-
ers structural forms which order imaginative materials in depth. Within accepted beliefs which preclude conflict, such forms nevertheless oppose the common human desire to resolve difficulties in a flow of words. Furthermore, to straddle epistemological enigmas, these forms correspond to, or mediate, or make visible, concealed structures of thought which grant meaning and dignity to the common experiences Herbert values, and which he is consciously committed to valuing. Therefore, the subject of time, and its materials, can endow the poem with varied movements and tensions that are directly felt but not easily observed, and can support a sense of profound order in a resolution that claims no profundity.

"Mortification" and "Life" speak, in varied voices. "Vertue" sings, employing the voice in a manner that usually permits only the lightest burdens of thought. The lyrical "argument" is not designed to perplex. Two natural things are invoked and their mortality noted; the observation is then further extended and proves to be a general principle: therefore, the conclusion is that everything must die except the soul, which is immortal. The logic that furnishes the plot and the objects that establish the scenes are all familiar, accepted as tried and true. The route we travel does not need new turns and developments, nor, to spell out their message, do the scenes need to reinforce illusion with a sense of immediacy. Yet where so much seems almost able to take care of itself without invention, the poet is free to discover forms that will both deepen and extend the familiar propositions and the design. "Vertue" begins:

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridall of the earth and skie:
The dew shall weep thy fall to night;
    For thou must die.

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

The opening stanzas present one stage of the argument, but in two episodes that convey a sense of internal progression. The first line
celebrates what Cézanne somewhere calls the permanent shape by which the transitory is seen in a still moment that gives the illusion of permanence. The marriage of earth and sky is a splendid, momentary elevating of the illusion, a marriage consummated in death every day, and lamented by the more common illusion attributed to the dew, which does not suggest permanence. The day, whether we view it as an arrested moment or as a completed cycle, is not, like the rose, fully involved in the precariousness of time. The rose is a poignant image of man’s time, with no fixed term of duration. We contemplate the day, but we identify ourselves with the flower and with the “rash gazer” who responds to its coded message. His gesture constitutes all the recognition of beauty and lament accorded the symbolic rose, for what the root means presents itself as a simultaneous fact, with no addition, no lyrical flourish. We are not invited to linger regretfully over the loss; rather, the tempo of inevitability is accelerated, and we see one step in the cyclical process reduced when the refrain alters “For” to “And.”

The third stanza brings together the images of life which in their separate presentation have led to death:

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

The image of spring includes, in a summary season of time, many days and many flowers, proving in the imagistic argument the rightness of its previous conclusions. As in “Mortification,” the forward movement of the general design is punctuated by periodic contractions as each stanza turns back to bring its particular statement into focus. Here, for example, spring is an image of life, an expansive image of large import to man’s feelings; but it ends by contracting, and is a mere unit of time, compressing all its comprehensive sweetness into one box—another “chest of sweets.” What happens to the leading image of spring is reinforced by other effects. We know from “Mortification,” “Life,” and other poems that flowers, which pre-
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serve the essence of their sweetness, are a familiar symbol of death, with special reference to the good death. But the metaphor is left "compacted": the fragrance may signal its message to the mind preparing to read the last stanza, yet the fragrance does not emerge from its abstract presentation to offer an intermediate appeal through the senses.¹⁸ The metaphor of music then follows, but the analogy is limited to its cognitive aspect and does not include the affective. Indeed, after the first line there is not much cantabile, and the refrain assumes a new character; it is a declaration, sustained and challenging, less a resolution of its own stanza than a bridge to the next. There is no "rash gazer" sensuously involved, but man is now more fully involved. The enlarging repetitions have at last framed his place at the center, no longer presented with natural objects, but with an art of human creation, a product of the mind, which does not simply offer itself for interpretation but demonstrates: "My musick shows."

An alternative is now expected, and that is the task of the last stanza:

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

The seasoned timber is also a natural object, but one that achieves its purpose after death—not as a tree but as wood. If it suggests the box which contains the season, that suggestion is little more than tangential. The seasoned timber speaks, like the fragrance of dead flowers and like music, to the moral intelligence. The overt point of comparison is that the unyielding soul practices philosophical rehearsals for death, and is, in the traditional metaphor, "dead" to the distracting

¹⁸ To this extent the imaginative procedure differs from what we observed in “Life” and also differs from “The Odour,” where saying the words “My Master” produces “An orientall fragrancie” with which “I do perfume my minde . . . ev’n thrust into them both . . . This broth of smells, that feeds and fats my minde.”
influences of the world. By virtue of its awareness, the soul is already seasoned before the death of the body.

Let us look at the comparison more narrowly. The first three stanzas invoke symbols and carefully control the specialized meanings they are allowed to present. The seasoned timber is neither a symbol nor invoked; it is introduced as a deliberate comparison, a simile. Like the spring it draws together previous representations of death, and like the music it "shows." The one expressed resemblance to the soul is that it "never gives," which implies its difference from transitory objects. A further implication lies in the reversal of the imagistic pattern that leads from life to death. Only the timber and the soul move from purposive death to life. But the timber and the soul are not identical. What the timber means must be created and controlled entirely by the context; it does not enter with symbolic credentials but is formally tagged as an illustrative comparison, which means that it is both like and unlike the soul—a product of human creation, as music is, and thus consciously addressing the mind.\(^\text{19}\) The life of

\(^{19}\) I cannot accept Ellrodt's interpretation (Les Poètes Métaphysiques Anglais, 1:282–84) that the seasoned timber is a symbol of the Cross and therefore of resurrection and immortality. Herbert's symbolic language, though subtle, glancing, and profound, hardly ever behaves like a private language. The syntax, like the argument, may demand of the reader intense imaginative cooperation, but he is seldom forced to depend on connections that seem arbitrary even when he knows what the symbols mean. (A rare exception is the third stanza of "Frailtie," which reads like a rough draft that never had his final revision. There he undoes the careful preparations of the first two stanzas, both overcrowds and loosens the syntax, and puts too much sudden weight on the symbol of Babel, which, however public, he is using in ways that are partly personal.) Nothing, of course, prevents us from remembering the Cross at this point, and we may also recall that Herbert can think of the Cross as a symbol for music. But we had better not press our reasoning too far. Herbert is not likely to think that such music demonstrates a "dying fall," and to make the Cross a symbol of moral unyieldingness would be to show a strange dislocation of religious and philosophical values. Furthermore, if the Cross enters the poem at this particular place, the "like" must signal a misleading comparison. For we should need to understand that the comparison was actually a complete identification—with the third person singular referring not to the soul but to the soul-like-the-Cross. We had better not think of the Resurrection of the Cross on the last day.
timber and the life of the soul are similar to a point and then different. We are not to think of the green tree, or of the virtues required in dealing with our fellow man, but only of the relations between "metaphorical" death and "real" life. The "not giving" is a limited comparison, like the "not burning." Even if we think that seasoned timber burns well and has a kind of second life in its coals, the parallel will not last. The end of the soul is not metaphor but myth, believed implicitly without regard for the laws of matter. But Herbert seldom disregards the laws of tact. Conscious discrimination, which characterizes the discipline of the soul and the discipline of the poem, is firmly recorded at the last moment; at the day of doom the soul is different from everything else but not from itself and its previous history: there is no break but a progression when it then "chiefly lives." (I realize that some of these observations are over-compressed; I shall return to "Vertue," and especially to the last stanza, in the following section.)

4

Herbert's country parson "values Catechizing highly," for the art of questioning both delights and teaches. As for teaching, Holy Scripture, "when it condescends to the naming" of common things by way of illustration, demonstrates how familiar things may "serve for lights even of Heavenly Truths." As for natural truths, "by questions well ordered" Socrates "found Philosophy in silly Trades-men." The "plain and easie framing" of questions, the progress toward understanding which moves by steps from the known to the unknown, the delight in an argument that teaches by proposing the right questions in the right order—these are familiar properties of plain style, and they entered Christian tradition without having to sever all of their connections with earlier history. Herbert observes that "when one is asked a question, he must discover what he is"; therefore, "Sermons come short of questions" in teaching. But questions, as the orator knows, "cannot inflame or ravish, that must be done by a set, and laboured, and continued speech."20

20 A Priest to the Temple, pp. 255–57.
Poetry also delights and teaches, and its language illustrates one thing by another. Herbert’s remarks are not, of course, directed toward poetry, but it is worth trying to translate them. Though the questions in poems of spiritual conflict are often implied rather than stated, the characteristic development is dialectic: propositions are advanced, tested, and then rejected or refined. In speaking of discursive thought Herbert stresses the importance of conceptual structure: “First, an aim and mark of the whole discourse, whither to drive the Answerer, which the Questionist must have in his mind before any question be propounded, upon which and to which the questions are to be chained.” We have not encountered a poem that lacks a conceptual design; therefore, we cannot doubt the relevance of this description to poetic discourse, and especially to the poems that dramatize conflict. But we cannot fail to observe that these poems differ in one essential way from the prose discourse which Herbert has in mind: they are not directed to the spiritual novice; they aim at personal discovery and assume in advance a high degree of self-knowledge. So these poems will not be limited to that kind of philosophical dialogue which requires a “plain and easie framing” of questions.

It will be clear from these qualifications that the parallel with “catechizing” must be a modified one. Furthermore, we have been looking at poems that do not develop by open conflict or dialogue, and it is not easy to believe that the complex tensions arising from the play of imagery and the expressive movements of the verse belong in any simple way to an order of preconception. Still, Herbert’s definition is illuminating when applied to many poems that are meditative and analytical in development. For instance, the last two words of “Prayer” (I), “something understood,” are the “aim and mark of the whole discourse.” The first two quatrains differ radically from each other, and the sestet is composed in a wholly new metaphorical style. Yet a central conception imposes order on the extreme variety, even on those vehement images that in their immediate context threaten imaginative discontinuity. Some unusual patterns of phrasing seem to strain the metrical structure, but by their cunning repetition they in effect provide an unobtrusive means of ordering the apparent freedom and turbulence. Note, for example, “returning,” “th'
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Almighty,” “transposing,” “which all things,” “of spices,” and also, “the Churches banquet,” “the Christian plúmmet,” “reversed thunder,” “Exalted Manna,” “in ordinárie.”21 Obviously, metaphors and phrasing are not subject to systematic determination in advance, and even less so are the smaller forms made by their collision or conjunction; yet in this poem the local immediacies, however dazzling, do respond to the “foreconceit.” Much of the difficulty of the poem lies in what is held back until the last words are in place.

Another poem, “Miserie,” is based upon a concealed dialogue between man’s folly and God’s love. The “Questionist” would seem to have two “aims” which, significantly, do not meet. Man’s folly moves from the bravado of knowledge to grudging will to inadequate performance. In the pivotal stanza of the poem, the seventh, the greatest gap is marked when man tries to revere his God, for God also partakes in the folly of relationship and is bound to it as much as man.22 Then the poem goes all the way back to the beginning, to start a new inventory which includes a contemplation of the original paradise. The general aim discovers no hopeful solution and is a full review of human failure. But Herbert has another, more personal, aim, which is marked by the management of personal pronouns. These move from “he” to “they” to “we,” back to “he” to “thou” to “he,” and then the final admission: “My God, I mean my self.”

“Redemption” is “a set, and laboured, and continued speech.” Its questions are translated into a quest, and the design surprises the listener into identifying himself with the slow-witted protagonist, to “discover what he is.” The allegorical narrative proceeds with fine adherence to the perspective of its fictional character, the “tenant” trying to get out from under the old law. All of the circumstances are


22 This is an aspect of divine love that escapes Miss Tuve’s attention and is not quite covered by references to the security Herbert feels in God’s love. The thought that God “cannot” let man go is one that can produce its own fertile tensions, as in mystics like Eckhart.

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filtered through his personally awkward, stubborn vision: “In heaven at his manour I him sought.” But the ways of the high and mighty are not easy to understand:

They told me there, that he had lately gone
About some land, which he had dearly bought
Long since on earth, to take possession.

The leisure of the fiction (extraordinary in a sonnet) begins to grow crowded as the humble petitioner searches in likely places: “In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts.” Then there is an astonishing scene of recognition, and a peremptory brevity:

At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
Of theves and murderers: there I him espied,
Who straight, Your suit is granted, said, & died.

When the discourse reaches its “aim,” the discovery, its attractive, leisurely fiction suddenly disappears, used up all at once.  

In poem after poem Herbert invents a new way to “drive” the answers which are the “aim and mark of the whole discourse.” Every poem studied closely here demonstrates his power to invent original designs. We may note correspondences but not repetitions. In poetry the art of the “Questionist” can find “Philosophy in silly Tradesmen,” or “tenants,” or in the talented servant of God striving to clarify his knowledge. At the same time poetry can “inflame or ravish” by its “continued speech.” For poetry is not “chained” to literal questions. Every expressive element and every form can discover imaginative questions that create, as it were, a dialogue between the structure and the texture of a poem—questions that expect to be answered in kind, that is, precisely, in the language of movement and

feeling, which can swiftly ask and answer questions that the more rigorous language of critical thought must arrest if it is to study the transactions.

Before proceeding to my final examples, “Love” (III) and “The Flower,” let me turn back to illustrate the relevance of the present perspective to some earlier observations. One of the assumptions of the last chapter was that poetic answers prove their validity and life only when they renew the questions they are called upon to settle. I argued there that for Herbert God’s love has the effect of a continuous question that evokes a great variety of human replies: complaint, praise, prayer, efforts to escape or force love, and campaigns against God that turn many replies into self-questioning. The spiritual conflicts reveal strange metamorphoses in which extremes like pride and humility, or answers and questions, grow into each other. A powerful statement of the remoteness of God, for example, may have the apparent shape and finality of a statement, but it becomes a question if it registers an anguished sense of personal loss that cannot rest without an answer.

Nor is acknowledged conflict necessary for such metamorphoses. “Mortification” and “Vertue” present the contractions of death as thematic questions leading to a similar answer in each stanza. The “aim” of both poems is to “drive” the answer to a point where it must be felt as a question. Man, who is obliged to live, and obliged to order his life, is driven to produce a two-fold reply. His ultimate answer invokes faith and the world of grace; the examples of death-in-life are merely the symbolic dyings that show the way to life-in-death. An intermediate answer invokes God’s help and instruction, and what the poet offers in his own voice will make audible the presence of human thought and the uncertainties of human effort, for materials transformed into a resolution may still keep some edge of their previous resistance. “Let me not love thee, if I love thee not” is one such resolution. Not seldom one might say of the human answer, “The note is sad, yet musick for a King.” In the conclusion of “Life” one may hear an intermediate answer composed of the tentative, the metaphorical, and the assured:
Since if my sent be good, I care not if
It be as short as yours.

In “Vertue” a day, a rose, and a spring—whose illusionary aspects are responded to, interpreted, and given a summary answer—are all opposed by the simple example of a virtuous soul:

Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
Like season’d timber, never gives.

Illusionary aspects are not, however, entirely dropped. When the soul is declared to be like seasoned timber, the purposive, controlled, and limited illusion of figurative language replaces those natural images of time which are characterized by their appealing appearances and are destroyed by its passage. The soul, like seasoned timber, is figuratively “dead” to the distractions of living and is thus unyielding. The “never” is a “never” limited to the figurative case and exactly applicable to the moral, not the temporal, order. The virtuous soul and seasoned timber are characterized by never giving so long as they are what, within the controlled illusion of figurative speech, may be truly named a virtuous soul and seasoned timber. Outside the figurative case timber may rot; after the death of the body the unyieldingness of the soul will no longer be a pertinent characteristic. The “never” of the limited case, then, does not directly and fully explain the examples of mutable appearance leading to real death. But I have not been pursuing this kind of analysis in order to demonstrate Herbert’s mastery of illogic, and to see what he is really saying we must look at the whole metamorphic structure of question-and-answer.

In each of the first three stanzas the opening two lines propose a lyrical subject. Each third line provides an individual answer: to the day the dew, to the rose the root, and to the spring what music shows. The fourth line drives home the individual answer by repeating, intensifying, and enlarging a comprehensive answer: “For thou. . .
And thou. . . And all must die.” The fourth stanza begins with a different kind of proposition, one that seems to open out as a positive
answer which makes the preceding answers feel like questions. An argument that keeps responding “death” to the displays of life comes finally to the place where the man convinced must cry out: “Then what shall we do?” But these first two lines on the virtuous soul, though a retrospective answer, also introduce their own proposition that must in turn be answered. As we have already observed, these lines, though they break from the established pattern and assume the external form of a complete pronouncement, nevertheless present their own “questionable shape”—that of figurative language (a limited, incomplete resemblance) and that of a “never” which translates the question of universal mutability into the answer of a particular moral case. Such a turn of argument reverses the expected logical procedure. The authority for such a reversal derives from both religious and philosophical traditions of reasoning and proceeds from the accepted premise that the moral order is superior to the temporal. Accordingly, the answer to time and change is to assert a prior obligation to a superior order and to remain fast, as it were, in a limited but essential way. But the final justification of this liberty with logic must anticipate the end of the temporal order and the ultimate solitary rule of the eternal order to which the soul is dedicated. Only then will the “never” of the sweet and virtuous soul become an unlimited “ever”; only then will what is questionable in the pronouncement be entirely answered.

In the preceding stanzas the third line has had the task of presenting an individual answer and the fourth line has then driven home the general answer. But now the third line answers the day, the rose, and the spring by carrying their images of death to the end of time: “But though the whole world turn to coal.” As an answer it pre-empts the position that has belonged to the fourth line and enlarges a thrice-repeated answer to a universal conclusion. What the third line does not do is fulfill the expectation that it will provide an individual answer to the proposition of the preceding two lines. Equally unprecedented is the fact that the third line is an incomplete statement in the form of a conditional proposition that will itself need to be both completed and answered by the fourth line. In prospect, then, the third line is a kind of question; in retrospect it is unmistakably an
answer, one that, however syntactically incomplete, calls up the full imagery of the familiar cyclical myth. Indeed, the fire of the Last Day has only to be mentioned to complete the “imagistic sentence” begun by the invocation of the “Sweet day.” As an answer the reference to the Last Day is terribly final yet strangely tentative, expressed so as to record the presence of careful, discriminating thought: “But though the whole world turn.” (To point up some of Herbert’s discrimination one may think of the coarser line that Walton reported: “But when the whole world turns to coal.”) As an answer, universal death raises one of the greatest and most persistent questions for faith.

With the last line, “Then chiefly lives,” the metamorphic structure produces its most authoritative answer. The moral “never” is translated into an eternal “ever,” and all the smaller questions are left with their smaller answers, which were sufficiently comprehensive. But the last line, though not metamorphic in terms of question-and-answer, does change the established progression from particular to general and directs its universal answer to the individual soul. (May one infer, encouraged by the lack of waste motion in the poem and by the break with logical procedure noted earlier in the stanza, that the altered order signifies that in eternity there is no distinction between the particular and the universal?) The absolute finality of the answer is remarkable for its preservation of a modest human idiom. “Then” signals the time which transcends time but is also the clear indication of a rational process, the pivot of consequence by which the virtuous soul becomes part of the eternal order. The “chiefly” both affirms and denies—denies any break in the continuity of never-giving and ever-being. What was really alive in what only looked like death at last enjoys a distinction, not in kind but in degree; it now primarily, above all, enters into the order of complete life, with no constraining appearances.24

24 In view of the vast literature of speculation on the subject, it would be more prudent, far, to attribute nothing bold to a mere poem. But I should like to offer some brief comments even though I can claim no professional knowledge in these deep matters. Formal statements on the Resurrection draw heavily on the eloquence of rhetorical contrast, imagining the final blessed state in terms of its radical difference from everything we plainly see around us.
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“Love” (III) and “The Flower” “propound” their questions more overtly. What these poems ask and answer is expressed in the language of movement and feeling but is based on the art which finds and its less striking difference from those valuable things we darkly glimpse. Augustine, distinguishing between the incompleteness of spiritual vision and the finality of intellectual vision, describes the latter as a state in which “the manifest truth is perceived without any material image as intermediary. No shadows of opinion obscure. There is no labor of the soul. Temperance does not need to bridle desire, and there is no work for fortitude, justice, and prudence to do. Virtue consists in love and felicity in possession. There the blessed drink at the very fountain, with no more of restraining pleasure, enduring adversity, relieving the poor, and resisting the false. God will there be seen in all clarity, not as in the limited visions of Moses, Isaiah, or John” (I have been translating, freely, with some omissions, from De genesis ad litteram 12. 26. 54; PL, XXXIV, 476).

Now let me offer an example of Donne’s pulpit eloquence (The Sermons of John Donne, ed. E. M. Simpson and G. R. Potter [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1953–62], 9:127–29). Summarizing received opinion on the state of blessedness, Donne begins with a certain pedantic diffidence which is due to the fact that the wrong church has already canvassed these grounds. In summary, blessedness consists in a vision of God which includes union, love, knowledge, and joy.

I shall have an un-interrupted, an un-intermitted, an un-discontinued sight of God; I shall looke, and never looke off; not looke, and looke againe, as here, but looke, and looke still, for that is Continuitas intuendi. There my soule shall have Inconcussam quietem; we need owe Plato nothing; but we may thank Plato for this expression, if he meant so much by this Inconcussa quies, That in heaven my soule shall sleep, not onely without trouble, and startling, but without rocking, without any other help, then that peace, which is in it selfe; My soule shall be thoroughly awake, and thoroughly asleep too; still busie, active, diligent, and yet still at rest.

The contrast between imperfect human sleep and heavenly repose, if not an outright indecorum, is at the least a disproportionate comparison which makes human interest linger too much on the wrong subject. Far more successful is that contrast between the broken looking, “as here,” and the Continuitas intuendi. But Donne’s most powerful expression is that which describes the perfected soul as both active and at rest—reconciling two related, but specialized and conflicting, ideals of human existence, those of action and contemplation. Here Donne is, like Herbert, speaking of the perfection of the soul as a continuity, a difference in degree, not kind, and the simple images of waking and sleeping serve both worlds. Donne, like Augustine himself in the passage
"Philosophy in silly Trades-men." The language of criticism is discursive and must always keep trundling its apparatus into position. But since in these poems more imaginative questions are out in the open, and since, I trust, the relevance of the critical questions no longer needs to be argued, I may spare many of the efforts that "Vertue" called forth.

"Love" (III) is a dialogue in which symbolic questions, answers, gestures, and silences are exchanged.25

quoted above, speaks through the illustrative images of "spiritual vision," which connects the visible and the invisible orders. But Herbert does without an image. His "lives" draws its meaning from "intellectual vision" (and from the philosophical credit of human arguments on being which do not need to be mentioned). There is no image, nothing illustrative or tentative, in the verbal expression. Yet we approach that ultimate vision through transitions that are as characteristic of human idiom as any images: "Then chiefly lives."

The subject is one that, between the extremes of silence and transport, is hard to modulate with dignity. Most of the expressive opportunities lie in contrasting the two states; the resources of human existence provide more than enough material, and it comes ready charged with disappointment and hope. Most of the easier modulations are to be discovered in treating the unperfected soul, for even though the changes are to be absolute the things to be changed are intimately known in their human context of relationship and degree. Where the modulations are most difficult is in the task of expressing transitions between the two states, their difference in degree, and the unbroken similarity in their difference. The sweetness in Herbert's modesty of expression is one kind of triumph, and I have quoted another in the passage from Donne. But Donne's grudging acknowledgment to Plato illustrates how hard it is to express a genuine good that is to be transcended, or a likeness that is to graduate to essence—and to do so without imagining the final act as a kick of liberating ascension. But there are worse things, as when the likenesses have to be praised. Then even a great master of expression like Donne may sound like any other ecclesiastical hack trying to blow life into the authorized images of similarity and degree: "How glorious is God, as he looks out amongst us through the King? How glorious in that Image of his? How glorious is God, as he calls up our eyes to him, in the beauty, and splendor, and service of the Church? How glorious in that spouse of his?" (p. 129).

25 Hutchinson points to the illuminating parallel of a passage in Southwell, which Martz amplifies, pointing also to the connection with secular love poetry and with the Imitation of Christ (pp. 196–97, 319). In the wit of its repartees and in some of its method the poem also recalls Herbert's own "Dialogue," "Time," and "Hope." The last of these conducts most of its witty argument by the silent exchange of symbolic objects.
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Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
    Guiltie of dust and sinne.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
    From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
    If I lack'd any thing.

The poem begins with an entrance already accomplished. The how and why are not recorded, but only the first motion of resistance; and that motion is attributed to the consciousness of "dust and sinne," which are literal, but are also conceptual symbols the private and public meanings of which are stable but not fixed. Love, the host, is busy and follows up his welcome with the movements and language of polite service. His gestures are definite and characterizing, but their effect is complicated by his question. On the one hand, what he asks translates itself into a statement, signifying an immediate readiness to serve. (What service really means, in the traditions of social and religious rituals, in the exchanges symbolized by the common acts of humble and exalted figures—this is a concealed question that we may see coming, but that never fully emerges.) The question itself not only states and assures but points toward an ultimate awareness, widely accepted in philosophical and religious thought, that all creatures are by definition incomplete and that what they "lack" is the source of their being. If they know themselves they will recognize this longing as the true source of all their desires. But the "Answerer" does not respond to this aspect of the question.

The stanza ends and there is a formal silence. The immediate reply expresses only the consciousness of dust and sin:

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
    Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
    I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
    Who made the eyes but I?

Love is a humble host-servant until resisted. When he replies, "You shall be he," the statement is astounding. What in ordinary speech

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would be an assertion of willful fancy, a common imaginative fiat, is here a statement of fact proved true by human experience. The transforming power of love can do this, can make worthy the unworthy. Nor is the power limited to the miracles of divine love; the records of human love also apply. The polite human rhetoric has offered the repartee of an easy disclaimer, a verbal clench. But the divine repartee goes straight to the mark, cutting through the human evasion begun in the very first line.

Consciousness of guilt, however, cannot be disarmed with a single thrust. It defends itself with a stubbornness worthy of the protagonist of “Redemption.” Sin and dust fall back behind the shield of unnaturalness and ingratitude, and advance with another gesture of evasion, a protestation of love but humble incapacity: “I cannot look on thee.” The answer begins with a touch and a smile, the most elementary forms of assurance, and then offers the ultimate reason for assurance: “Who made the eyes but I?” The wit is benevolent, but again it cuts through the evasion. Human love, in the beholder’s eye, may transform, but this is Love, the Creator, referring to the full implications of the primal act.

The stanza ends with an ultimate question that goes beyond the fiction of present politeness, but the narrator snatches at that part of the question that seems best to defend his guilt:

Truth Lord, but I have marr’d them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.

This is the climactic disclaimer, and it partially breaks away from the terms in which the soul has been courted, those of the host-guest relationship. As the invitation of Love goes beyond present gifts and

26 Love’s repartees are always accurate and concise, going to the heart of the matter without verbal cleverness. Something of the same ideal governs many of the speeches of Milton’s hero in Paradise Regained and of Marvell’s Resolved Soul in his “Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure.”

27 It is possible that Love’s answer releases a delayed meaning in the narrator’s last reply. To look away because unworthy is a familiar action in the annals of human love; on the other hand, not to be able to look at God is, according to report, a standard condition even in heaven, at least until after Judgment Day.
benefits to the original gift, the narrator willingly shifts his defense to these larger terms and strives for disengagement on the basis of having violated the primal relationship. The mind’s eye can acknowledge ingratitude and the spoiling of gifts, but it can also intimate the unexpressed, for the intensity with which the larger terms are grasped is a silent indication of the soul’s bewilderment. Reminded of the history of Love’s power, the soul proposes that it be turned away. But in this dialogue, which takes the form of a contest in courtesy and humility, the soul cannot see where humility leads. The reminder of creation implies redemption, and Love’s answer finally reveals the “aim” of the discourse: “And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?” The soul’s only remaining answer is the retreatig quibble of the humble guest who asks to share the privileged humility of the host: “My deare, then I will serve.” But Love is the perfect Host and becomes the body of Christ in the Eucharist:

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
   So I did sit and eat.

In other poems the human desire for absolute independence, in various disguises, obstructs the full giving of love. That range of human reluctance is one of Herbert’s great themes, and he explores it with powerful and subtle originality. In this poem he presents, with disarming simplicity, the other side of the problem: the human reluctance to accept love as a gift entire. In other poems we have had to observe the imaginative scrupulousness with which Herbert maintains the differences within the similarities that images propose. Time and again, this disciplined control of differences-and-similarities—this imaginative capacity to increase or diminish the differences or to transform them—creates the finer tensions and their resolution, the forms of movement and feeling which are the poetic figures for questions and answers.28 In “Vertue” we noticed that the tact of the poet does

28 It will be apparent that I cannot accept M. E. Rickey’s emphasis on the simple “precision and orderliness” and “tightness” of Herbert’s metaphors. Such an account tends to regard “precision” as an accomplishment which needs only to be recognized and admired, not questioned. Nor do I think it helpful to present Herbert’s growth as a “gradual retreat from the simile,” by which
not encourage us to identify the soul with the seasoned timber; the soul, even as it moves beyond imaginative figure to become part of an authoritative myth, does not quite give up its fine distinctness. In “Love” (III) all the elements of the fiction are more than transformed. The end of the dialogue is reached when the meaning of the final question is felt. But Love’s final word and man’s final act do more than complete a chain of reasoning. The particular fictive scene and debate are revealed as a ritual that re-enacts a religious mystery of timeless recurrence. When the union is consummated, so is the poem—not finished, not even transformed, but in effect consumed. Our otherwise useful terms—equilibrium, closed form—seem utterly inadequate; one might as well say that the poem disappears. It is no wonder that Herbert, who was going to write this poem, expressed occasional impatience with the limits of art and the division between truth and beauty. This poem is a perfect example of what Eliot called “poetry standing naked in its bare bones.” But it is more than that, and more than “poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem points at, and not on the poetry.” It is one poem that simply does, without apparent effort (no small difference), what Eliot adumbrates: “this seems to me the thing to try for. To get beyond poetry.”

29 “the poet calls attention to the fact that the likeness which he draws is at most tentative . . . referring only to highly selective qualities of the things compared” (see Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert [Lexington, Ky., 1966], pp. 110–12). I am reminded at this point of my occasional disagreements with Rosemond Tuve which, to me at least, indicate how much is at stake in what one sees and values in metaphor. To be brief, in her Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery Tuve does not neglect the traditional flexibility of metaphor to propose dynamic likenesses which may approach or retreat from full identity. But in the book on Herbert metaphors are chiefly symbols, and symbols are compressed myths believed in as true. So the desirable aesthetic response, after the homework is done, consists in seeing and feeling the identity between the likeness proposed and the truth behind it. Not a little of Tuve’s trained capacity to see differences has been diverted to the purpose of pointing out the gulfs between Herbert’s language (in the larger sense) and ours.

29 Quoted by F. O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot, rev. ed. (New York, 1947), p. 90. The essential resolution of “Love” (III) is clear even if one reduces the intellectual and psychological content to the
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“The Flower” is one of the greatest lyrics in the language, and it responds marvelously well to the kinds of detailed questions already asked of “The Temper” (I), “Death,” “The Crosse,” “Dulnesse,” “Gratefulnesse,” “Mortification,” “Life,” and many other poems. But those demonstrations do not need repeating; if they have not

“bones” of the barest verbal signals: “Then I will”—“You must”—“So I did.” Or, looking back, one may see how much the eloquence owes to the transformation of “then” to “so.” As for getting “beyond poetry,” I do not find myself attracted by this particular mystery and have nothing to add on the subject—except to mention the record of one extraordinary response to the poem. In 1938 Simone Weil discovered it and recited it to herself during periods of extreme physical pain, “fixing all my attention on it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines.” The poem became a prayer and, more than that, the unexpected bridge to a mystical experience. See the account in Richard Rees, Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait (Carbondale, Ill., 1966), p. 58.

Perhaps it will be useful if I add a retrospective comment at this point. In debates where man clearly takes the initiative, as in “Dialogue” and “The Collar,” God’s answers may deliberately choose to ignore the terms man lays down. Yet one could say of these poems, as of “Love” (III), that man’s clumsy, determined efforts to assert himself do have the effect of producing from the “world of grace” an answer that shows God a “new creatour” and man, as it were, newly created. The allegory of “Redemption,” taken as a model of translated dialogue, exhibits the same strange failure and success. Another such “model” is “Prayer” (I). Prayer as “God’s breath in man returning” but also as the violence against God, “Christ-side-piercing spear,” and as the varied, self-displaying, imaginative experiments of the sestet—all these images exhibit the range of the necessary human effort and initiative. But the lines of initiative in “Love” (III) are not clearly distinct. On the one hand, the Host subtly controls the argument and leads the questions to their simple answer. On the other hand, the Guest’s feelings of reluctance and evasion move by their own “natural” steps and call for increased counterpressure by the Host. The role of the divine Questionist is enlarged in this poem; his knowledge, skill, and authority exceed those of Socrates—or so, I believe, we are expected to observe. But so is the role of the Answerer enlarged; he is no wiser than in other poems, but he is more deeply divided between passionate fear and hope, and more cooperative in turning the strength of his inventiveness against himself. As a result, the dialogue is fuller; its movements and countermovements are both freer and more completely responsive to each other. The action registers as fresh and immediate in every detail—while every turn of the action fulfills established laws and reproduces the known history of relations between God and man.
been persuasive the argument they serve cannot be rescued at this last moment. So I shall approach “The Flower,” as I did “Love” (III), mainly to ask what its form tells us of the art of the “Questionist.”

The first stanza celebrates the return of God’s presence:

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! ev’n as the flowers in spring;
To which, besides their own demean,
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.
  Grief melts away
  Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.

The lyrical immediacy of the moment also takes note of the contributions made to simple joy by the complex human awareness of time, an awareness that converts, heightens, registers, and suspends that which is “as if.”

The second stanza proceeds to the history before the moment of recovered joy:

Who would have thought my shrivel’d heart
Could have recover’d greenness? It was gone
Quite under ground; as flowers depart
To see their mother-root, when they have blown;
  Where they together
  All the hard weather,
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

It is a simplified history, in which human awareness concentrates on those details which mark the similarity between the heart and flowers. Most of the imaginative traffic moves in one direction, though “Dead to the world” may have particular human reference, and “keep house” draws modestly upon human credit.

The third stanza summarizes, explains, and introduces a decisive contrast:

These are thy wonders, Lord of power,
Killing and quickning, bringing down to hell
And up to heaven in an houre;
Making a chiming of a passing-bell.

We say amisse,
This or that is:
Thy word is all, if we could spell.

The wonders are those already described and those about to be described. They are now translated into terms which concentrate their human reference: hell, heaven, the conversion of a death bell into "a chiming." The images of God's power are presented without regard for the human feelings. These "wonders," the record of peremptory exchanges between death and life, answer the imaginative efforts of the preceding two stanzas by making them seem leisurely and personal, the product of indulgent fancy. The judgment is that "We say amisse" and spell God's word to suit ourselves.

An effort must be made to answer the questions raised by the display of God's power. But the next stage of the poem begins by turning back to wish for an imagined state:

O that I once past changing were,
Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!
Many a spring I shoot up fair,
Offring at heav'n, growing and groning thither:
Nor doth my flower
Want a spring-showre,
My sinnes and I joining together.

Once that deep human longing symbolized by paradise has been got out into the open, then the poet can turn to his main imagistic effort. If he cannot spell God's word he can spell his own and can make a personal display of saying "amisse." The fourth stanza mocks itself gently—echoing, among other things, those imperious gerunds of power, "killing," "quickning," "bringing," "making," with its fainter human participles, "offring," "growing," "groning," "joining." The pretenses are openly admitted in the fifth stanza:
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But while I grow in a straight line,
Still upwards bent, as if heav’n were mine own,
Thy anger comes, and I decline:
What frost to that? what pole is not the zone,
Where all things burn,
When thou dost turn,
And the least frown of thine is shown?

But though the display of God’s power wholly dominates the image of man as a flower, still that image survives the faults of its own making and saying, and endures the unanswerable images that record the power of God’s word.

The climax of the poem comes quickly and simply:

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: O my onely light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.

In spite of all the errors of a human consciousness handicapped by an elementary ignorance, there is a persistent rightness in the flower as an image of the human feelings. The inadequacies of man’s word have been spelled out, but the comparisons and admissions have not negated something authoritative in his expression. Even though the poet has moved to the threshold of a clarifying definition, the “aim” of his final stanza, he has not been driven there by a fixed order of reasoning. On the contrary, just as he seems to have exhausted the relevance of his flower image, having displayed the follies of his personal attachment, and having abandoned the figurative language of spring and winter for the absolute expressions of God’s judgment—suddenly the human spring is felt again. The joy of the first stanza returns, without an “ev’n as” or an “as if”; though the poet presents himself in actions and responses that reflect a human imagi-
nation of flowers, the joy owes nothing to the contributions of imagi-
native self-consciousness. The sense of being alive “After so many
deaths,” and the sense of pleasure in writing—these are intellectual
perceptions that offer themselves as natural feelings. All of the com-
plex human awareness of self is concentrated at one point: the diffi-
culty of feeling oneself to be the same person in the morning of joy as
in the night of grief, though both extremes derive from God.

The last stanza now takes up the task of discovering a retrospective
order in the implied questions and answers:

These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
To make us see we are but flowers that glide:
Which when we once can finde and prove,
Thou hast a garden for us, where to bide.
Who would be more,
Swelling through store,
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

The answers of the God of power revealed the incompleteness and
the limitations in the human sense of the interchanges between life
and death; the answer of the God of love reconciles the apparent
differences. If one essential correction is made, man can truly “spell”
God’s word without giving up the natural language of his own
feelings. The God of power may overpower, encouraging man to
mock himself without finding a way out of his bewilderment. But the
wonders of the God of love authenticate what was felt in the sixth
stanza, and supply the missing key: “To make us see we are but
flowers that glide.” “Glide” is a precise answer to the full display of
flower movements in the poem. No less important is the simple word
“but.” We are flowers like and not like the lilies of the field, for we
must learn what we are: we must know and act upon our knowledge
that we are human beings who “are but flowers that glide.” That
accomplishment will free man, not from the immediacies of change,
but from his own excessive reactions, and will point him toward the
paradise represented by its image hopelessly invoked in the fourth
stanza.
Though the final answer illuminates and orders, it points beyond the poem to the necessity of controlling that answer. “The Flower” does not, like “Love” (III), “Death,” “Life,” “The Temper” (I), and “Vertue,” for instance, demonstrate by the final action the clear possession of that control. In effect, “The Flower” turns back to comment on its process of development, which has “found” this happy answer but has not “proved” it. The last word of the poem opens on a further question. We may note also that, as in “Mortification,” “Life,” and “Vertue,” the argument with time orders imaginative materials in depth and discovers its answer in a felt present. And as in many poems, the very persistence of the human feelings provides the necessary materials and invokes the saving counterforce. “The Flower” offers no “plain and easie framing” of questions. The poem is “a set, and laboured, and continued speech” based upon a concealed dialogue which finds philosophy in the “silly” imaginations that derive from man’s affective nature—a “continued speech” that achieves great freedom of movement and the sense of lyric spontaneity, and is able to arrest and discover while it demonstrates.

We come now to some final considerations. Wherever possible we have tried to draw on Herbert’s own thoughts concerning the problems and aims of expression. Even if he were not so articulate on the subject, we could hardly miss the evidence that marks him as one of the most self-critical artists in the language. But the most valuable

If what I have said of the flower image is persuasive, then a theological distinction must also follow. For the Augustinian formula of the human love which “uses” and the higher love which, by deriving from and referring to God, “enjoys” does not seem to provide much room for a free human contribution. But in this dialogue Herbert dares to “please” God, not by repeating such “borrow’d” language as “Thou art still my God,” but by writing “fine and wittie” in his own words and voice—as the stubbornness of the human feeling works out its own personal method of justifying God’s ways. We may also be reminded here of the special privileges and personal hopes that are allowed, and that Herbert exercises, in the poetry of complaint. And the passionate immediacy of the climactic stanza, which leads to clarification, recalls the somewhat similar movements in “The Pearl” and “Death.”
things Herbert says about poetry he says in poems, which are not sterile containers for delivering messages. Besides, the moments of a lyric poet must be varied and individual; the poems together convince us of their constitutional similarity by first convincing us one poem at a time. The boys who "step into their voluntarie graves" carry several messages, none literal and none affirming that "childhood is health." The sweetness in love needs only to be copied, we hear, and the poem is not embarrassed by overlooking other means of recording love—by lament or praise, by seeking to escape, by the excesses of humility or pride, by the strenuous efforts of dialogue. What is said in a poem must be judged by what is done in that poem, and by what is said-and-done in other poems.

Much of our evidence, to be sure, does not depend on statement at all, but is no less present in the poetic language than, say, the messages of imagery or emphasis. One may miss or misread these messages more easily than those of simple statement, for the subtleties of style and form depend on glancing interactions, complex and always in movement. And so what Herbert thought and felt as a poet requires the critic to develop his own art of asking questions. For in one respect poems resemble Socrates' "silly Trades-men": the finer knowledge they contain must be sought.

These remarks are intended to introduce my last topic, Herbert's attitude toward imagination. Almost every poem would offer evidence, but the points I have in mind are limited, useful chiefly as part of a final perspective. In "A true Hymne" the heart "runneth mutt'ring up and down," repeating a few words that have not yet become a hymn. In "The Elixir" the poet prays,

Not rudely, as a beast,
To runne into an action.

In both instances he is describing a preliminary stage of understanding, one traditionally associated with the lower range of sensuous imagination. Though in "The Elixir" he seems to be preparing for a

"The Elixir" in the Centuries (2. 69) Traherne contrasts loving rationally, "in the Image of God," and loving "in a Blind and Brutish maner, as Beasts do; by a
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visionary ascent, with the eye of the mind passing through glass to a vision above the senses, the transforming scene is one of humble action—sweeping a room. The imaginative solution is deeply characteristic in its not striving to free thought of sensuous content. The spiritual clarity at the end of "Death" is expressed with nonchalance, not elevation, and in a language of common objects. Many aspects of Neoplatonic thought touch Herbert, but he seems relatively uninterested in the general assertion that the most valuable truths cannot be recognized, much less communicated, through the assistance of imagination and sense.

In "Conscience" Herbert writes, "My thought must work, but like a noiselesse sphere." That musical harmony of peace, to which

meer Appetite and rude Propensitie." The governing idea and the image have a long history in philosophical and religious thought. For a brief illustration we may turn to a medieval concept of mind distinguished for the extended range it allows the imagination. In his Benjamin Minor Richard of St. Victor emphasizes the sensuous base of all knowledge: "If it were not for the imagination the reason would know nothing" (Patrologia Latina, CXCVI, 4). The lowest range of mental activity derives from the imagination we share with all animals when we respond to whatever we see right in front of us and, without deliberation or purpose, "run aimlessly hither and thither with a vague mind" (p. 11). In Benjamin Major this rudimentary imagination furnishes the materials for cogitatio and is characterized by evagatio, that undirected action of the mind which we know best in Milton's great pejorative word, "wandering." "Cogitatio strays through byways aimlessly and roves at random" (p. 66: "per devia quaeque lento pede . . . passim hac illucque vagatur . . . serpit"). Cogitatio is effortless and fruitless, while the disciplined, purposive reason of meditatio is laborious and fruitful; in contemplatio the liberated intellect is also effortless, but fruitful (pp. 66-67). In its higher range, the imagination is linked to the order of contemplatio; being effortless, it attempts to solve nothing by process of reason and is content, being aimless, to marvel at the manifestations of God's greatness. For in imagination "the free mind," not unlike "the vague mind," may "run aimlessly hither and thither" wondering at large (p. 70: "libera mens nostra hac illucque discurrat, quo eam in hoc spectaculorum genere admiratio rapit"). Mutatis mutandis, the effortless imagination may come down to Keats's "negative capability," in which there is no "irritable reaching after fact and reason." Fewer changes are required to recognize the imagistic line persisting when Hobbes or Dryden talks about the lower imagination, and fancy runs hither and thither like a spaniel.
thought retreats from the babel of words, represents a traditional attitude immensely influential and appealing—a symbol for poets, a goal for contemplatives and mystics, a basic premise for philosophers. If thought approaches the higher truths by virtue of corresponding to their silence, immobility, and immateriality, it follows that the most important functions of intellect will divest themselves of imaginative movement, feeling, and sound. One may be reminded of such moments in Herbert, when his “wranglers” are finally quieted—when, after a complex struggle, an authoritative clarification is marked also by its apparent effortlessness. To the concept of “a noiselesse sphere” we may attribute those clear moments when Herbert disparages the whole enterprise of expression, or his own immediate possibilities. But it hardly needs to be argued that in the main he turns away from these traditional attitudes. Most of what he has to say to God and himself is relatively unhandicapped by the forbidding prestige of pure intellect.

He does what all poets do, and shapes the flow of sound by an expressive punctuation of silence. Occasionally silence may contribute to metaphor—as when the brilliant clatter of invention in “Prayer” (I) moves toward its expressive aim, “something understood,” which is one part silence. Indeed, some of his resolving gestures, like “Making our pillows either down, or dust,” are more than quiet; they represent an integration that, in the language of “The Elixir,” has made God “prepossest.” They are eloquent in their silence, but their tribute can seldom be thought a contemplative offering. No poem of Herbert’s makes more valuable use of silence than “Love” (III), but the values are expressive, not philosophical. One may say much the same of the beautifully contrived stammering at the end of “Affliction” (I). Herbert’s grasp of the subtleties in pride no doubt left him not a little diffident toward the claims made for the divested intellect. Part of the argument in “Frailtie” turns on the blindness to which even approved intellectual positions are subject: “Lord, in my silence how do I despise.”

32 One secret of his mastery here, as often, is that he makes the words plain and unassuming; the actions represented by the words, and what the actions themselves represent, release the latent power.
Questions of Style and Form

Toward another traditional view of the imagination (much commented on by the Stoics) he shows a discriminating awareness which does not, however, inhibit his own practice. Occasionally he employs the kind of imagination characterized by its easy departure from external reality and by its power to move freely, making strange and unprecedented combinations. Herbert makes a conscious display in “The Pearl”:

I know the wayes of Honour, what maintains
The quick returns of courtesie and wit:
In vies of favours whether partie gains,
When glorie swells the heart, and moldeth it
To all expressions both of hand and eye,
Which on the world a true-love-knot may tie,
And bear the bundle, wheresoe’re it goes.

In “The Collar” there is a companion piece, not so staggering in its overburdened fertility but no less wild:

Forsake thy cage,
Thy rope of sands,
Which pettie thoughts have made, and made to thee
Good cable, to enforce and draw,
And be thy law,
While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.

But Herbert is not intimidated by the false work of imagination. It is an indispensable instrument in sorting out the contrarieties he discovers. Nor does he embrace the fantastic only to reject it. “Love unknown” is a full exercise in fantasy, and some of his allegories create surprising interchanges between the familiar and the fantastic. Out of a faculty of mind formally explained away for centuries, granted only minor and peripheral activity, often despised and never seriously defended, but still the humble pleasure of artists and those they entertained, Herbert gladly creates many of his most impressive images: the groans that are “countrey-aires” which God loves no less
than the "better tunes" of celestial music, groans that fly and sing like larks, skeletons that cannot fly but are "The shells of fledgè souls left behinde," skulls agape that cannot sing, the soul that desires to "roost and nestle," infants diapered in shrouds, sleepy boys stepping into their graves which are also vessels journeying quickly on the waves of "successive nights" toward death, man surrounding himself with a home in order to make love to the coffin, the mind smelling its "fatall day."

The free play of the fantastic imagination, its power to combine, is not limited to the making of images. We have noted many strange moments created by the illusions of arrested movement and by expressive oppositions joined together. When the rhythmical flow of emphasis controls and directs meanings, it resembles metaphor in the service of the "cataleptic" imagination, presenting, clearly and distinctly, real objects of the mind. But the rhythms that discover new and unexpected meanings are like the metaphors of the fantastic imagination. For examples of both kinds of rhythmical metaphor I remind the reader of the third and fourth lines in each stanza of "Mortification," where we observed some remarkable effects. And in Chapter Two examples were noted in which the rhythmical management of release and contraction, the control of order, timing, and juxtaposition, created surprising movements of the meaning.

Furthermore, the structural development or "foreconceit" in some poems may operate partly under the license of the fantastic imagination. Here we may point to the strange exhilaration and sudden turns of "The Forerunners." Or we may note the forms of irrationality invented for poems like "Dulnesse," "The Collar," and "Gratefulnesse." But let us conclude the point with a fresh example, small and characteristic. In "Lent" Herbert argues the case for temperance. If we are successful in "starving sinne" we may hope for some radical shifts and recognition:

83 Quotations are from "Gratefulnesse," "Sion," "Death," "The Temper" (I), "Mortification," and "Life." Herbert is not, to be sure, always in perfect control. One piece of unsuccessful writing I do not recall seeing discussed is the second stanza of "Vanitie" (I).
Questions of Style and Form

That ev’ry man may revell at his doore,
Not in his parlour; banquetting the poore,
And among those his soul.

The reveling is converted to a spiritual sense; the change of location is both literal and symbolic. The poor will be “banqueted” even by a modest meal provided out of cash savings from the parlor budget, and will no doubt draw spiritual nourishment from the kindness intended them. The soul will also join in that banquet, not as a regularly invited guest (not one of the hungry poor but one of the hungry rich)—discovered and recognized, as it were, in the casual throng putting away their victuals and registering their individual satisfaction. It is a strange moment, turning inward and outward, freely mixing its modes of imagination, and centering like a painted scene on that axis which connects the host and his unexpected guest. Part of the value of such an example is that it demonstrates how easily Herbert escapes the usual categories of analysis we advance. The literal and the imaginative move in and out of each other. As we note a movement of expansion, as of open form, it contracts, and vice versa. What the scene owes to fantasy is converted from invention to discovery—not of the esoteric but of the common, which is most easily forgotten, obscured, or ignored. The humor is grave, like groans that sing; the grotesque is refined and brought home to ordinary human concerns.

Herbert’s ways with imagination reflect his basic approaches to artistic expression. The poet who does not suppress or overlook the reluctances in himself when writing about man and God, whose major theme is the mystery of God’s art with man, does not stifle his talents for imaginative expression. His themes are limited in range, though not in depth, but few if any poets more fully use all their resources, or more intimately reveal themselves by the special grace of artistic freedom-in-discipline. One of his personal resources and talents everywhere observable is a native good humor, the matrix of his individual wit, that play of mind which is in turn a discriminating instrument, a personal recreation, and an offering. “My God must have my best, ev’n all I had.” “And if I please him, I write fine and wittie.”
GEORGE HERBERT'S LYRICS

Nor does he need to restrict the natural play of his mind, fearing that he will please only himself. His artistic and personal seriousness combine gravity and grace in deliberate play—not seldom as if he were David dancing before the Ark.

He is a splendid master of that basic illusion upon which his poetry depends, that the language and forms of art are only another, if better, way to talk naturally. And he is a master of the mysterious unity of style and subject, so that moving thoughts appear, as if spontaneously, to assume the language that gives them expression, so that the words, if one looks back, seem casually inevitable and yet reward the closest study; but if one does not choose to look back the words remain inconspicuously graceful, right, and modest, so perfectly does what they say shine through them. He cultivates plainness, but rarely with the self-conscious belligerence, and never with the pride and sense of alienation, that few heroes of stylistic humility escape. As a stylist he is aristocratic, serving both humility and asceticism with a sure sense of grace. The beauties of the natural world are celebrated in "Vertue" and not despised; nor are they set up merely to be trampled upon: they are assimilated into a higher purpose, but with becoming tenderness. He does not lecture stiffly on the urgency of the message; he rejects without scorn, and the feelings to be disengaged are his own, which he treats gently and generously, with imaginative courage. The accord he seeks does not outcry the resistance of human nature and art, for he grants resistance the dignity of being real. Though he prefers the muttering of a reluctant, or sad, or wondering assent to the ready answers of selective omission, his most valuable answer is to transform, by tempering, the affections. The categories of style, if pedantically applied, are sure to be misapplied.°

We learn to hear many voices, and even the false ones do not register themselves as pure inventions. The varieties of egocentric rebelliousness are all specialized projections of a voice that we sometimes hear expressing its earnest passion with full resonance.

° Herbert can say almost everything he wants in his own versions of plain style, which do not call attention to their triumphs. He assimilates adornment as a matter of course, and without overt classicizing he achieves the grace and compactness that English poets admire in the best Latin lyrics.
As for the questions on which most of this chapter has turned—involving aspects of conceptual form and prior beliefs and involving the smaller forms produced by the immediacies of expressive invention—they were not proposed as pseudo-questions. They do not, however, lead to full answers in their own terms, though they are helpful in making intermediate discriminations. In many poems the smaller forms do not so much oppose the main design as quicken it by bringing in their own significant moments of tension and relationship. These moments are often individual and complex, not “chained” together, answering an “aim,” but positioned so that they speak like questions across controlled intervals of silence. They create overlapping forms that, whatever else they do, by their existence authenticate the main design and its claim on us. The experience presented in such poems, though familiar and common, though grounded on argument, will seem less demonstrated than revealed—by the imaginative form taking shape in the process of being discovered. The illusion of simultaneity produces its own characteristic tensions, and one cannot draw a firm line between demonstration and revelation, which in the strange discourse of poetry consort well, to mutual advantage, saying what neither alone could say, and varying the relationship unpredictably. We must perhaps be content to mark differences in proportion, emphasis, and degree—as when we observe the influential contributions of “unexpected moments,” or of the imaginative materials of time or consciousness, to the main design. What we cannot fail to recognize is that Herbert’s best poems never lack such a design.

The conflicts work within clearly established values and limits. They are not less remarkable for the imaginative power which breathes the individuality of poetic life into prior beliefs and predetermined arguments. The subtlety, range, and bulk of modern criticism are admirable. We have made and consolidated many advances, while brightening not a few lights which had gone dim. But prepossession with our own problems has been, as may be expected, both help and hindrance. To come to the point: we have grown so used to admiring those poetic conflicts which convince us that their issues, and the values on which they are based, are wholly in doubt that we are in some respects not well prepared to see the finer tensions of a mature
poetic conscience that can be absolutely scrupulous in its imaginative expositions of fixed values.

But one does not need to rebuke modern attitudes, as if we were incapable of appreciating Herbert. He shares with Donne and Marvell a reputation and living influence which speak for themselves. Nor do I regard any of the major points made in this book as outside the range of modern interest. To cite some examples: the dignity and force of human desire which is felt in Herbert's acceptances; the quality of the effort he makes to arrive at a fully imagined present; the intellectual discipline which brings him to a Socratic balance, having purged folly and ignorance; the spiritual discipline which brings him to a perfect religious poise; and the distinctness within the unity of the overlapping forms, which not only authenticate the main design but achieve their own intellectual and aesthetic poise, giving to and asking of the reader a fresh sense of all the internal movements of a poem as both separate and related.

All true lyric poets, one may believe, stand naked behind their enabling fictions, behind the cultivated deceptions of verbal art. They are not satisfied by the superficial discoveries of ordinary candor but search for the deeper points of personal understanding, or revelation, which will not yield themselves to direct ways of thinking or saying. And all poets take chances when they submit the honesty of their intelligence and feelings to the judgment of art. Herbert's range, his talent for dramatic projection and objectivity, his mastery of expression on any subject he undertakes; his power to make the common seem distinctive and the uncommon immediate, to make the ordinary seem invented and the unusual seem discovered—these are gifts that merit our interest and attention. He invites us to go much further: the poems that are most widely admired, and those that deserve wider recognition, convince us that their fictions, their inventions of wit, rhetoric, and imaginative play, are more than in earnest, as we understand nonfictional seriousness. They convince us that they are imaginative expressions by which the poet confronts and attempts to master his own life or death.