The House of Death

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As Donne said, following scriptural example and the traditional understanding of that example, “No metaphor, no comparison is too high, none too low, too triviall, to imprint in you a sense of Gods everlasting goodnesse towards you” (Sermons, 7:369). His basic standard is that of conveying the “imprint” of God’s intention. The preacher using his own metaphors and comparisons derives support from another comparison: the analogy of how the Holy Ghost works, directly on the affections or indirectly on the mind, or both at once. It is “the principall intention of the Holy Ghost” in that place which authorizes and governs the meaning of the expression. So the story Donne has been telling, of a mother, a wolf, and a child, and then defending in the first quotation above, is called not a fable but a parable. The story is charming but is defined by the moral intention. Elsewhere Donne notes with admiration the appropriate and delightful use of words in the Scriptures, and we know from reading him the many strong or delicate ways by which Donne knows how to register meaning, or how shades of meaning may be lightly intimated or deliberately placed. We have already noticed how Donne’s account of “the way of Rhetorique” tells a story based upon unadmitted similitudes, and I remind the reader of the related examples from Ficino and Paracelsus that tell a story like a reasoned argument. But let us leave for a while the practices of religious expression and turn to some other sources.

“Cowards die many times before their deaths.” The confident pronouncement by Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar (2.2.32) is a familiar kind of limited figurative truth which easily overextends its credit. In dramatic expression the limited truth has many valuable functions, not least of which is its pointing toward alternative potentialities in every pronouncement. “Be absolute for death,” says Duke Vincentio in a grand set speech of Measure for Measure (3.1.5–41). Shakespeare’s Cleopatra,
among her other accomplishments in variety, combines pagan eros with both pagan and Christian thanatos. “She hath pursu’d conclusions infinite / Of easy ways to die” (5.2.358–59). She can say, almost in the same breath, that “The stroke of death is as a lover’s pinch, / Which hurts, and is desir’d,” and that the despised world “is not worth leave-taking” (5.2.298–301). And she can reject the world of change and illusion in terms that, out of context and as far as they go, the most severe theologian might commend:

Which shackles accidents and bolts up change;
Which sleeps, and never palates more the dung,
The beggar’s nurse and Caesar’s.

(5.2.6–8)

For the moment I mention the dramatic example only as a reminder that recognizable potentialities of great scope did exist. The lyric obviously must deal with its limited truths and latent alternatives differently and within a narrower compass. Yet almost all of the familiar ways of thinking about death, including the profession of limited truths and the contemplation of standard subjects, could be turned to yield a lyric discourse answering particular circumstances and expressing the individual character of the poet.

First, by way of illustrative example it will be useful to recall the topic of time again. In the lyrics confronting personal death, time emerged as a central subject only for Tichborne and for the Raleigh of “Even such is time.” But time is not in the same way central in Raleigh’s “The Passionate Man’s Pilgrimage,” Donne’s “Hymne to God my God in my sicknesse,” and Herbert’s “Death.” In these poems the imaginative encounters with time are indirect, instrumental to talking about something else, but nevertheless most powerful and widely ranging. In many lyrics, however, ones that take time or an aspect of time as a direct subject, both the scale and the immediacy of the imaginative experience are less; so are the conceptual grasp and the quality of the ordering.

For instance, that valuable injunction of the love poets, carpe diem, lent itself to the purposes of lyric argument because the promised rewards were backed by the alternative threats of punishment. Poets had little difficulty in making the rejection of present pleasure appear to be the deliberate choice of consequent pains, and these could be drawn variously and suggestively from aspects of the character of time. The most threatening images evoked thoughts of death or euphemistic substitutes appropriately veiled. “For having lost but once your prime, / You may for ever tarry” is a mortal thought (spinsterhood as an image of dying) gently presented “To the Virgins” by Herrick
(H-208). “Corinna’s Going A-Maying” saves for the last stanza a summary statement of the alternative to making the most of our brief time and then partly softens, with no retraction, the penultimate word of “Then while time serves, and we are but decaying” (H-178). Daniel exploits the conventional reluctance of women to think of age and threatens “Delia” with a darkness her vanity will be forced to prefer, as a cosmetic concealment:

And Delia, thinke thy morning must have night.
And that thy brightnes sets at length to west:
When thou wilt close up that which now thou showest:
And thinke the same becomes thy fading best,
Which then shall hide it most, and cover lowest.  

These were ways of construing the lessons of time to love’s advantage. There were, of course, other ways. The absence of time from Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to his Love” is not overlooked in “The Nymph’s Reply,” which deserves its attribution to Raleigh. Though questions of sincerity are raised, the chief points of wit depend upon the “reckoning” time exacts in a world where joys are not without “date” nor age without “need.” “Time drives the flocks from field to fold,” and the “pretty pleasures”

Soone breake, soone wither, soone forgotten:
In follie ripe, in reason rotten.  

Edward Herbert, while making the conventional argument to “the April of your youth,” draws up his either/or in ways calculated to express more than the art of persuasion:

Then think each minute that you lose, a day,
The longest Youth is short,
The shortest Age is long; time flies away,
And makes us but his sport;
And that which is not Youth’s is Age’s prey.  

And one further example. The conclusion of Donne’s “A Lecture upon the Shadow” is entirely different. It does not aim at a carefully limited point but at something central in the conflict between love and time. The effect is that of an apparently categorical answer that has the power to delay for a moment and then release threatening questions that turn back on themselves:

Love is a growing, or full constant light;
And his first minute, after noone, is night.
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Love is and is not time’s fool. The images prove adaptable, and this is the main point I wish to emphasize and shall return to. For the chosen aspects of the poetic subject, or the controlled limitations imposed upon certain familiar truths—these may be made to serve personal circumstances or purposes while other considerations linger about the edges of the subject in varying states of potentiality and may or may not be engaged. The images prove adaptable, and they are mostly simple ones, inexhaustibly used: day, night, the seasons, objects produced by the seasons and enduring objects held up for confirmation or contrast. Governing them all, in frivolous or serious ways, is what the poet wishes to think, or needs to think, or wants his reader to think, as he interprets the reflections made available by his images. The seasons provide a large encyclopedic entry with a major section on flowers. The rose is best for love; the lily is a special flower for other uses:

“Behold, O man, that toilesome paines doest take. . . .
The lilly, lady of the flowring field. . .
Yet nether spinnes nor cards, ne cares nor fretts,
But to her mother Nature all her care she letts.

Why then doest thou, O man, that of them all
Art lord, and eke of Nature soveraine,
Wilfully make thy selfe a wretched thrall.”

(Faerie Queene 2.6.15–17)

In the “love lay,” the excerpted lines of which suggest the familiar plot, the lily is standing in for the rose in Spenser’s calculated temptation. Yet the lily also represents a deceptive image of human life escaping from “toilesome paines,” for man may consider the lilies of the field while secretly longing to kiss the image of his death. “Gather the rose of love whilst yet is time” is the burden of the “lovely lay,” which Spenser enters on another page:

So passeth, in the passing of a day
Of mortall lifc the leafe, the bud, the flowre,
Ne more doth flourish after first decay,
That carst was sought to deck both bed and bowre
Of many a lady, and many a paramowre;
Gather therefore the rose, whilst yet is prime,
For soone comes age, that will her pride deflowre:
Gather the rose of love, whilst yet is time,
Whilst loving thou mayst loved be with equall crime.

(2.12.75)
But accompanying the song, and heard most clearly in the opening lines, is an underside of the message—the sung brevity of life, which blossoms into bright reasons for gathering “the rose of love” but has no word for the dark desire to forget about time “whilst yet is time.”

Spenser is not speaking for himself overtly, but we may think that the unacknowledged feelings are valid and that the orchestration allows them to be heard under the formal dominance of the main theme. What is heard is a reflection of mortality, though mortality here is not the formal subject of the reflection.

In the usage I am sketching and introducing, reflections of mortality are not for the most part directed toward the subject of death in general but toward dying—and, again, not toward the act itself but aspects of the act, the figurative meanings that may be won from considering the reflected instances of dying outside and inside the self. In moral theology this dying constitutes the discipline of “mortification,” preparing soul and body for actual death by rehearsing the mind, emotions, and will. One may practice “dying to the world” on a regular schedule or from time to time, dying to particular sins on the official lists, or one may follow a more personal order of priority; or one may single out for special attention aspects of that which is deemed illusory or excessively attractive or distracting. The spiritual discipline, like its informing similitude of “dying to,” proved applicable and useful in expressing human responses to analogous circumstances—those, for instance, produced by the stimulus and perplexity of love, ambition, and the like, and the unlike. So reflected instances of dying might be evoked with no apparent purpose that answered to the direct aims of spiritual mortification.

I come to my main set of examples, a brief review of George Herbert’s procedures which will both illustrate the problems of my subject and, I trust, make some gains in clarity.

“The Church” contains many poems that are formal mortifications. Most of the thoughts, themes, and images are part of a long European tradition and could be catalogued as such. By their proved history, Herbert’s poems are public and didactic. They instruct others, but their success depends, like that of much good teaching, on a valuable effect that convinces because it does not aim only to do so. The poems are personal, they speak for and teach the poet himself, they are no less overheard than heard. Given the nature of the subject and its long history, no new basic ideas had been overlooked by predecessors, but Herbert’s temperament and lyric genius, his resources for speaking the personally imagined truth for himself, could express the intimations of mortality in fresh and moving ways.
Death holds no dominion over his thoughts and feelings. In this respect two poems I have considered, “The Forerunners” and “Death,” are reliably characteristic. Those poems of Herbert’s which take up the subject of exemplary “dying” do so with many of the kinds of distinction expressed in his other poems. They too are singularly free of morbidity and the alluring excesses of self-regard.

Herbert’s personal standards appear to be laid down most directly in “The Church-porch,” where he counsels against “trifling in thy wo.” And he often treats aspects of dying as no more than the summing up at night which balances the books in preparation for the morning’s activities. Judgment is coming, “make thy accounts agree,” neither neglecting nor striving to oppose the familiar ways by which time rules over human affairs and life itself: “Dresse and undresse thy soul: mark the decay / And growth of it.” The last stanza counsels the kind of balance he recommends to others and tries to practice himself—if one accepts the lyric poet’s privilege to express occasional feelings with an intensity that matches their rule over him, and if one observes how moments and poems conflict with, dare, and encourage one another as they compose a full and true record of the inner life. Here he is quietly summing up in a discursive way, but it is noteworthy that two images of dying—the transiency of pleasure and the brevity of life—are subordinated to the privileges and dues of living:

In brief, acquit thee bravely; play the man,
Look not on pleasures as they come, but go.
Deferre not the least vertue: lifes poore span
Make not an ell, by trifling in thy wo.
If thou do ill; the joy fades, not the pains:
If well; the pain doth fade, the joy remains.
(lines 457–62)

I shall first briefly survey five poems of mortification. Throughout I shall be mindful that I have already discussed many poems at length in George Herbert’s Lyrics and considered one whole group as mortifications. The frame and emphasis of the present discourse are necessarily different.

The poem entitled “Mortification” accords a single stanza to each of five stages of human life marked by ceremonies that reveal the anticipation of death. The message is a clear one:

Yet Lord, instruct us so to die,
That all these dyings may be life in death.
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From infancy to old age, aware or unaware, we practice dyings. Herbert’s wit imposes itself masterfully from without and discovers to our greater surprise, from within as it were, correlations between the stages of life and their individual acknowledgments of death. Each scene is complete and perfectly separate, at once a framed episode and a linked sequence indispensable to the whole. The point of view is directed as lesson toward man in general. The achievement, considered only as mastery of style, engages powers of character and art in flowing grace and minute precision, as if the poetic art itself were wholly natural and any man might think and speak and act so. The last stanza opens the point of view and brings in the inclusive “us” for whom the poet has been acting as personal spokesman.

My second example, “Church-monuments,” tightens the address and alters the quality of detachment. The physical scene is located in and held to one place and time. These are not, however, particularized, and the poem admits brief mental excursions that involve episodes touching on three kinds of indefinite future: when the body will grow “wanton in thy cravings,” when death which “Drives all at last” will bring about “thy fall,” and when the monuments themselves will “fall down flat” and be indistinguishable from the remains “which now they have in trust.” The soul is praying in church among monuments but pauses to instruct the body, which is “entombed” by the act of prayer. The detachment of the soul is more impersonal and rigorous than the poet’s detachment in any stanza of “Mortification,” where the scenes imagined are allowed some free and sympathetic expansion in their own existence and in their claims on our interest. Here the speaking soul treats the body as an alien “other,” which must be schooled hard, as if incapable of learning through gentler methods.

The rigor of attitude matches the strict attention to the objects that reflect, not the admonitions of dying which may serve as guidance to living, but the single compendious lesson of death. The objects are the dust of those already dead, their crumbling monuments, and the living body that will join that company. Although there are small touches of wit, they do not deflect or lighten the rigor. At most their minor extravagances add some play of light and shadow to the substantial invulnerability of the lesson. Throughout, the rhythm is restless and driving; pauses come irregularly, not when they are anticipated and never at the end of any stanza but the last. The rhymes, being widely separated (abcabc), accommodate themselves to Herbert’s rhythmic design, and the design carries its own contributing message—of life driven by time, careering toward its end always in the control of an outside force.
That flesh is but the glasse, which holds the dust
That measures all our time; which also shall
Be crumbled into dust.

The lesson is a limited one, strictly limited, with no departure permitted from the course of time leading to death. What lies beyond is here only dust returning to dust.

Since the schooling is deliberately elementary, a spelling lesson for the body learning its elements, all of the distracting complexities of more advanced instruction are excluded. Among these are that side of the process which otherwise might include the first divine animation of the original dust, the episodic recurrences of “life,” and the hopes and promises thereunto subscribed. The body listening is one episode in a closed system, an orderly procedure in a single direction, and the rhythmic signature is that of death’s “incessant motion.” It is a microcosm in which “the good fellowship of dust” seems like a brief, punctuating eccentricity; the governing truth is best discerned in the certainties that “dissolution” plainly demonstrates. It is a microcosm in which sin seems to be the sole executive of time, and death the prime mover. The images are memorable in their power, and they gain from what they are free to exclude by their concentration. And yet at least one touch of unacknowledged wit does allow an entrance (if not an exit) for Herbertian mirth. The soul’s remarkable virtuosity in lecturing is only an aside, simple instruction to the rigid body kneeling obediently, an aside while the soul is chiefly engaged (or will be, we cannot tell) in her devotion—“Deare flesh, while I do pray, learn here.”

In “Vertue” the soul is distinguished, not from the body, but from everything else in the created world. The evidence of death is, however, now more varied; an important exclusion is part of the record, and the speaker includes himself and also the natural attachments of human feelings. The representative examples illustrating the principle that “all must die” are, with one major exception, drawn from the common world of nature: the day, the rose, and springtime. The manmade art of music is the exception and concludes the series: “My musick shows ye have your closes.” Each object is accorded a tender, elegiac celebration, appropriately individual, as it is filed in testimony. The day is a “bridall,” and dew “shall weep thy fall to night”; the rose “Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye.” Only the virtuous, constant soul will be more alive at the last day. No mortification could be more gentle in accepting death and its rules while expressing human affections for the mortal.

My fourth example is “Dotage,” a poem that never mentions death but teaches the strict lessons by another method. The objects considered are drawn from a summary human experience of pleasure and
pain, and these are locked in a juxtaposition for which, it becomes clear, some easing remedy must be sought. As an argument based on the deceiving illusions of life, nothing could be more familiar and—from our impatient perspective in time—equally disposed to convince or to bore. But Herbert is the kind of scrupulous artist who almost never becomes passive and insensitive when deploying familiar materials. The poem acquires an unusual power from staccato phrases of compressed brilliance and passion which are also phrases of definition and do the work of the precisely drawn scenes in “Death” and “Mortification.” False pleasures are, among other things:

Shadows well mounted, dreams in a career,
Embroider’d lyes, nothing between two dishes.

Sorrows are:

True earnest sorrows, rooted miseries,
Anguish in grain, vexations ripe and blown,
Sure-footed griefs, solid calamities.

The necessary answer is that men pursue and prefer “griefs in earnest, joyes in jest” because they center themselves “here.” But perhaps the greatest severity of the poem is an underlying one that is, we know, contradicted elsewhere in Herbert. The pleasures are unqualifiedly false but the sorrows are, however multiplied and intensified by folly, nevertheless true—less true than the delights of heaven, yet joined to these along an axis from which pleasures are excluded.

Finally we come to the priest’s own mortification, “Aaron.” Only in its limited scope does it bear resemblance to “Church-monuments”; everything else is different, and “Aaron” has nothing to do with the natural facts of death. Nor does the poem so much as recognize as an issue the turning away from the pleasures and pains of life. But if one is willing to overlook its kind of concentration and its purpose, “Aaron” does resemble “Mortification” and “Vertue”—at least insofar as it proposes a disciplined process by which thoughts related to death may be made to influence the course of living. The subject is not death, but as most often in Herbert the subject is purposive “dying,” the discipline and directions to be acquired from thoughts of death and applied to the thoughts and acts of living. In “Aaron” the intensity and concentration are unrelieved; the same materials and rhyme words ring out their repetitions in the same place in each stanza, while absolute contrasts are made by substituting a few key words, many of them the smaller parts of speech: pronouns, prepositions, and adverbs. Dressing and undressing are not, as in “The Church-porch,” imagistic advice to the soul, but
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an image for the infallible measuring of the true, and all departures and returns as well. Music, which in “Vertue” reflected only its message of finality, varies and transforms the issues of life and death.

Holinesse on the head,
Light and perfections on the breast,
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To leade them unto life and rest:
Thus are true Aarons drest.

Profanenesse in my head,
Defects and darknesse in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest:
Poore priest thus am I drest.

Onely another head
I have, another heart and breast,
Another musick, making live not dead,
Without whom I could have no rest:
In him I am well drest.

Christ is my oncly head,
My alone onely heart and breast,
My onely musick, striking me ev’n dead;
That to the old man I may rest,
And be in him new drest.

So holy in my head,
Perfect and light in my deare breast,
My doctrine tun’d by Christ, (who is not dead,
But lives in me while I do rest)
Come people; Aaron’s drest.

If we let these five poems represent the general range of Herbert’s treatment of the subject, we may find in many other poems echoes and variations that extend the range and strengthen the texture of his thought on the purposes of imaginative dying. For instance, Herbert’s delight in the art of narrative makes of “The Pilgrimage” a story of outward and inward movement and response which is a complete parable of seeking death along a path marked only by emblematic objects. The rightness of the conclusion has been well demonstrated: “After so foul a journey death is fair, / And but a chair.” Two departures from the standard emphasis of Christian thought seem to suggest more than a momentary or wandering interest on Herbert’s part, but we may only
note these in passing. “Content” deals with the restlessness of life and the war of “mutt’ring thoughts” by counseling a “gentle measure”—one by means of which life and death are contemplated with philosophic calm. The seeking and the finding are both directed inward to the self. “Decay” looks not at individual but at historical life, celebrates the “sweet days” of the good Old Testament, and concludes that “the world grows old” and toward its end of time.

“The Flower” is one of several poems that compose a full personal conflict within a single lyric. The continuous point of reference is that standard object for symbolic reflection, the flower: in its winter death (“dead” only to the world, but keeping “house unknown” at the root), in its springtime of true pleasure, in its summer pride, painful oppressions, and mysterious budding again amidst the joys of dew and rain. The flower is more than contemplated; the lessons of its history reflect the poet’s, and advise. The most important lesson is that of mastering, as “but flowers that glide,” the wonders of love and life while obeying the wonders of power and death. “Life,” another sustained contemplation of flowers, limits itself to flowers that wither in the hand and to a simpler human analogy (“deaths sad taste,” “my fatall day”). The personal reference is made authentic with brief imaginative power, and the concluding identification, while balancing matters of smaller scope than “The Flower,” achieves a kind of purity and state of graceful indifference which may bear comparison with the ending of “Death”:

I follow straight, without complaints or grief,
Since if my sent be good, I care not, if
It be as short as yours.

Altogether different is the sustained analytical contemplation of “The Rose,” which produces witty and original variations for a standard rejecting of “this world of sugred lies.”

Images, I say again, prove adaptable, and the imaginative encounters with aspects of time which mirror death at some distance are characterized by their flexibility. Their disposition and use can be varied for any occasion. Thus images may simply be stationed for mute notice where they are to be passed on the way to or from another subject. So in “The Collar” the invoked flowers, fruit, and other seasonal signs are less distant than they may appear to be from the death’s-head and fears that are desperately rejected. To illustrate another inventive variation: in “The Answer” images related to death enclose a mental landscape that dissipates energies similar to those grimly concentrated in “Church-monuments.”

Herbert’s inventiveness is hardly in dispute, but it is worth dwell-
ing, at least a little longer, on examples of imagistic adaptability. In “Church-rents and schisms” the image of a rose represents the church in its miserable state: “Brave rose, (alas!).” Dust in “Longing” and “Frailtie” has meanings and functions but distantly related to the dust of “Church-monuments.” In the latter poem the image of monuments that “fall down flat” in dissolution anticipates a surprising image of destruction in “The Jews,” when “the Church falling upon her face” performs a vitalizing, restorative office. Time itself in “The Discharge” is relieved of the larger part of its customary burden and does not “encroach upon death’s side.” The central optimistic doctrine is that “Man and the present fit”; all the calm wisdom is directed against anxiety over the future. But wholly absent from consideration are perplexities drawn from the past, which do not go unremarked elsewhere.

In addition to the vocabulary of images that Herbert shares with other poets, his religious intentions make available the particular symbols of ecclesiastical tradition and of the church calendar and practice. Another large source, partly shared by secular poets but with obvious differences in application, is certain states of mind which by familiar usage acquire emblematic currency. Thus the desire to escape from oppressive longings can reflect the experience of the love poet or the religious man’s conflicts, in which both the longing and the desire to escape are figures related, however differently, to actual and analogical instances of dying. That simple formula can contain many variables and their combinations. So too the states of languishing, or dullness, or glib hopefulness. So too the storms of nature from without, and the storms within, and those produced by the beloved. Thoughts of God’s justice can evoke extended images of terror or hope (“Justice I”), or directly demonstrate the record of inner dissipation in outward efforts (“Justice II”). “Miseric” can undertake a full inventory of its nature, causes, and lamentable effects—all described with righteous passion but from a detached and privileged point of view. The last line reconstrues the whole discourse: “My God, I mean my self.”

Because of his religious and poetic gifts and discipline and the sensitive responsiveness of his common humanity, Herbert is admittedly a special case. Still, what he shows is not different in kind from what other poets do. He can be “absolute for death,” as in the rigorous concentration of “Church-monuments.” At the other extreme he can apply some of the lessons of death with more than a token sympathy toward the limited but just claims of life in this world. They too, as the simple joys and the griefs and the sympathies of living, are sanctioned by God. One stanza of “The Flower” tells that story best:


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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.

Like other writers, he can explore the many and differing reflections of an image, or base his lyric discourse on the implications of an unstated similitude such as "mortification," the practice of purposive "dying," a free imitation expressing what passes between considerations of death in life and life in death.

His uniqueness does not lessen the value of his example. No one in English has so combined these three great powers: that of the inspired prophet or psalmist; that of being able to speak to God with perfect courtesy in a range that extends from the common to the exalted; that of commanding a sensitive personal art of veracity.

Expressed so, my admiration for Herbert declares a large optimism that may seem to reduce real difficulties—in the general subject of this book as well as in the use of images. We must not let Herbert's achievement overencourage our optimism, but also remember the exacting standards that govern his poetic methods and his personal art of veracity. As poet he draws on the more general sources of lyric: longing, apprehension, the desire for release. As a religious lyricist of the highest order he shows himself to be at once magnanimous and scrupulous in recognizing and honoring the dignity inherent in the particular truth of the individual occasion. This I believe to be close to the very center of his effective power over lyric feeling. To which I would add: the known answers, which are to be obeyed, do not stifle the truth of feelings which are to be composed.

In other writers, and not only in their didactic and hortatory works, the adaptability of images may become an invitation to abuse privilege. The literature of death is rife with images as with arguments that dominate expression by the unmitigated power to select, and to omit or divert some reflections in order to concentrate only those reflections that serve the chosen purpose.6