The monasteries and churches of William Camden’s *Britannia* (see Chapter 1) exemplified how religious architecture might carry associations for the early modern reader or viewer that had nothing to do with its Calvinist, Catholic, or Laudian allegiances. Camden often valued such buildings as repositories of local history, and they served as occasions for stories that, like the country house narratives, represent the characters, desires, interests, expenditures, failures, and virtues of individuals’ lives. This chapter offers a specific example in the architectural setting of George Herbert’s poem “The Church-porch.” As a community center where important social events and rituals were supervised and recorded, the parish church porch provided Herbert with a way of addressing both the history and the character of his imagined auditor’s life. The relationship between church architecture and the details of human history inspired the poem’s didactic content and shaped its proverbial style. This reading of “The Church-porch” supports my argument that architecture—even church architecture—might be viewed from local and historical, rather than doctrinal, perspectives. In fact, as traditional centers of local history, religious buildings were particularly susceptible to this sort of interpretation.

While many of the devotional lyrics in George Herbert’s *The Temple* have attracted sustained critical attention over the past several decades, “The Church-porch” has lain in comparative neglect for at least a century. At 462 lines, this is by far the longest poem in the collection, and it is the one Herbert chose to introduce the book, yet it would be difficult to collect 462 lines from anywhere in “The Church” that have been so resolutely ignored by modern scholars.
recent years, the poem’s few sympathetic readers have been far outnumbered by those who dash quickly over it or skip it entirely; in many major studies of Herbert’s poetry, “The Church-porch” barely earns a mention in the index.¹ Other critics have condemned the poem or apologized for it, admitting either that they themselves do not like it very much or that they do not expect readers to do so.² Compared to the intense personal agony and original introspection of Herbert’s shorter devotional lyrics, the proverbial sentiments and smug didacticism of “The Church-porch” present readers with a stylistic challenge delightfully described by Joseph Summers, who imagines the poem “lying like a large and worldly dragon before the portals” of “The Church.”³ In Summers’s opinion, though, it is not worldliness but inculcation that turns modern readers away. He posits that “most of us today are initially suspicious of any overtly didactic discourse,” because we assume it to be manipulative and insincere.⁴

Summers is probably not off the mark, but the modern critical aversion to “The Church-porch” is not simply a result of our unwillingness to hear Herbert preach. Our difficulties with this poem arise from significant limitations in the way current literary studies contextualize the post-Reformation English church. Strangely, it is the poem’s lack of obvious difficulty—it’s lack of contradiction and tension—which has made it difficult for modern scholars. It has by now become almost automatic for critics to set any literary reference to church architecture in post-Reformation England against a background of Reformation controversy, plotting its author on a spectrum from Puritan iconoclasm to Laudian uniformity. Following influential readings by such scholars as Louis Martz, Barbara Lewalski, and Richard Strier, recent readers of Herbert have turned for context to pamphlets, sermons, ideological treatises and theological debates.⁵ Less consciously, I think, criticism has relied on categories and search terms generated by these polemical works. The result is that we have come to view post-Reformation churches through a fractured lens, their architecture crazed and battered by contested relationships between visible and invisible conceptions of the church or between private and public forms of worship.⁶ These approaches have often been fruitful; doctrinal controversy provides plentiful evidence about how early modern viewers interpreted altar railings, statues of saints, and church ornament.⁷ Concerning the church porch, however, it provides almost none. Viewed through a polemical lens, the church porch becomes invisible—not in the controversial sense that distinguishes visible and material church architecture from the invisible church of the heart, but in the sense that it simply does not appear in this literature at all. It makes sense, then, that readers steeped in Reformation doctrinal debate would choose to circumvent “The Church-porch” altogether
and throw themselves directly on “The Altar,” or enter “The Church” through “The Windows.”

What all these approaches overlook is a historical environment for “The Church-porch” that has been hiding in plain sight: the parish church porch itself. A feature of nearly every English parish church, this local and familiar structure would surely have provided the poem’s first association for Herbert’s contemporaries. “The Church-porch” was Herbert’s most-cited poem through the end of the seventeenth century, suggesting that early readers did not find it as unwelcoming as modern scholars have; and despite its near invisibility in polemical literature, the church porch would not have been at all invisible to seventeenth-century parishioners. As ecclesiologist Stephen Friar writes “there are many instances of porches which appear to be far too large for the churches to which they are attached. But their very size is indicative of their importance as centres of community life.” Indeed, the first sentence might describe literary scholars’ general opinion of Herbert’s poem. N. J. G. Pounds confirms Friar’s impression, calling the tower and the porch “the most visible parts of the fabric of the church.” In order to restore “The Church-porch” to our critical consciousness, we must restore the history of the parish church porch. Herbert writes in a style appropriate to the place. The language and content of the poem are shaped by the architecture that frames them; moreover, the location inspires the poem’s didacticism, suggesting a practice of reading which the speaker both teaches and demands of his readers. In this communal site, language functions differently than it does in the intimate scope of individual devotion, and the poem’s familiar adages are valuable precisely because they are not the original coinages of a unique mind. Instead, they represent the commonly valued currency of a community. Historically, the church porch was not just an entryway. It was also a site for meetings and exchanges and the place where bonds and contracts were formed between individual and community, between parishioners, and between the religious and secular worlds.

Rather than ignoring a poem that does not present church architecture in the anxious way controversial literature has conditioned us to expect, we may attend to its differences. Whether or not “The Church-porch” speaks to modern readers as poetry, it might speak to us quite eloquently in other ways. To explore the past of the parish church porch is to rediscover a strain of religious history that literary scholars have often forgotten. The porch’s former religious and secular functions—which continued through the seventeenth century and often long afterward—have been well studied and documented, but not by literary historians. Because its uses were more parochial than polemical, the church
The porch has remained an object of interest to ecclesiologists—such as Friar and Pounds—and local historians, while to most Herbert scholars in the academy, it has faded from view. When we turn from theology to ecclesiology, however, from academic theorists and critics to the works of church historians and local history societies, and from ideological categories to the details of parochial life, the desolate proverbs of “The Church-porch” appear suddenly to be set in populous and vibrant surroundings. Relocated to this original architectural setting, the poem also provides a way of reading church architecture that persists quietly outside the contested ground of Reformation polemic. Here, the material and spiritual dimensions of the church exist in intimate conspiracy, not constant antagonism. Like the historical functions of the church porch, “The Church-porch” does not depend on a progression from material to spiritual, nor does it assume any opposition between the two. Rather, it teaches the reader that these categories are inseparable; one folds perpetually back into the other, and expanses of eternity are woven through the histories of daily life.

While the porch remains a common feature of the English parish church, the structure no longer fulfills the broad range of religious and secular needs that it once did, with the result that Herbert’s poem gestures beyond itself to a setting of which many modern readers have only the barest sense. To perceive the art of Herbert’s “Church-porch,” then, requires that we linger, with some care and curiosity, in the parish church porch itself, taking time to observe its crucial position between sanctuary and community, to search out its histories, and to rediscover the remnants of its past. The size of the church porch and, consequently, the extent of its customary functions varied from community to community, and it is certainly not my contention that the tiny porch of Herbert’s church at Bemerton served all of these purposes. Even if, as Amy Charles postulates, Herbert wrote “The Church-porch” in 1614 with his younger brother Henry in mind, the poem addresses a wider elite male audience, giving instructions for several duties and occupations. The poem need not have been written to correspond with a single church any more than with a single reader, and in examples drawn from throughout England we are able to trace clear patterns and to arrive at a detailed picture of the associations the church porch would have had for a seventeenth-century reader.

From at least the thirteenth century, the porch had several ritualized liturgical functions, and although some were abandoned at the Reformation, modified versions and evocative material evidence of these ceremonies lasted well beyond the seventeenth century. Originally, the opening parts of the baptismal and marriage ceremonies took place in the church porch. Francis Bond discovered
cases in which the porch was actually identified by its role in these events: In 1527, William Webster of Northampton “left his body ‘to be buried in ye churchyarde of Sainte peter before ye crystynynge dore.’” A fifteenth-century testator from Hull also wished to be buried in the porch, but “Latin fails when he comes to translate ‘wedding porch.’; ‘corpus meum ad speliendum infra wedding porch.’”

As the “sprinkling” of Herbert’s “Superliminare” recalls, the baptismal font was usually placed just inside the church door, to complete a ceremony begun in the porch and to reflect the principle that baptism itself is a symbolic entry. The Edward VI Prayer Book was the last to direct that the candidate for baptism be received “at the church door,” but royal proclamations and episcopal directions through the seventeenth century commanded that the font not be desecrated, sold, or used for baptizing livestock.

In the medieval church, the legally binding part of the marriage ceremony, including the exchange of rings, also took place in the church porch. Bond located this detail in the official records of aristocratic marriages, and church historians are fond of quoting the boast of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath: “Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve.” In the porch of Brigham Church, Cumberland, Isaac Fletcher discerned in 1880 a curious weathered finial whose genealogy was chronicled in the memory of the parish clerk: it represented “a male and a female kneeling and holding hands,” and had been carved to commemorate an important aristocratic marriage of c. 1390.

In Herbert’s day, even after the main ceremony was moved inside the church, the custom of a prenuptial blessing in the church porch remained. J. Charles Wall quotes as evidence a short poem from Robert Herrick’s *Hesperides* (1648), “The Entertainment: or, Porch-verse at the Marriage of Mr. Hen. Northly and the most witty Mrs. Lettice Yard.”

Before the Reformation, other forms of ritual blessing and induction might also have taken place in the church porch. In many churches, the holy water stoup was on the porch, where entrants would sign their bodies with a cross “as an act of self-consecration and spiritual cleansing.” In some porches, these reminders of pre-Reformation practice were still visible centuries later. More recent churchgoers might find directives for more practical forms of reverential cleanliness in the porch. Wall found at Stoke Albany the following inscription, representative of similar ones remembered by nineteenth- and twentieth-century churchgoers: “TAKE NOTICE, MEN ARE DESIRED TO SCRAPE THEIR / SHOES & THE WOMEN TO TAKE OFF THEIR PATTENS / BEFORE THEY ENTER THIS PORCH.” And where parishioners had been blessed, baptized, and married, they might at last return, for the church porch was not an uncommon place to be buried. Numerous wills specify this final resting place, and often, sepulchral slabs remain.
Bond notes that gravestones are sometimes found on the thresholds of church or porch doors, in “a possible reference to the text, ‘I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of ungodliness’” (Psalms 84:10).

While most of the formal liturgical functions of the church porch were suppressed at the Reformation, the performative and socially binding nature of such rituals as baptism and marriage characterized many secular uses of the porch, which were little affected by shifts in England’s national religious identity. Like baptismal and marriage ceremonies, these uses had to do with moral or practical education, social surveillance, and the preservation of parochial histories. For instance, it was usual for debts, bequests, and dowries to be paid in the porch, where the event could easily be witnessed. Records of this custom are numerous, with many dating from the seventeenth century. F. Thistleton Dyer records a Lancashire deed of 1641 in which “Alice Sidgreaves agrees to relinquish of James Sidgreaves certain lands on condition that he pays £130 on a certain day ‘att or within the south porch of the p’ishe church or chappell of Goosnargh.’”

A letter to Notes & Queries mentions “a deed relating to land at Cottesbrook [Northamptonshire] and granted to Oliver Cromwell, 9 Feb., 1633, when it was agreed that the rent charge should be paid ‘in the porch of the parish church of Cottesbrook twice yearly, Michaelmas and March.’” Examples are noted through the eighteenth century.

Bond reports that in 1712, a testator in the Diocese of St. Asaph, Denbighshire, left “the interest of £5 . . . for the purchase of flannel for four old men and women, who were to draw lots or throw dice for it in the church porch.”

In the south porch of St. Peter and St. Paul in Eye, Suffolk, Henry Creed notes the presence of a “dole table,” at which debts, tithes, and church dues would have been paid.

Porches were also used for public displays of charity; there are numerous records of the indigent, homeless, and sick being allowed to shelter there. As late as 1854, the rector of West Tofts, Norfolk, reported that “a poor woman . . . came the other day to ask whether I, as a magistrate, could render her any assistance” after “she and her family had become houseless, and were obliged to take up their abode in the church porch.” When a man was outlawed, the initial decrees were promulgated by the sheriff in the church porch. In some cases, the porch was also a site of public penance, and Bond recounts a representative instance from 1593 in which a woman was forced to appear in the church porch on three separate Sundays “clothed in a white sheet down to the ground, and having a white wand in her hand . . . beseeching the people that pass into the church to pray to God for her and to forgive her.”

Anderson describes a frightening instrument chained to the wall in Wateringbury, Kent, which had “a spike on one end and a
ring at the other and was carried by the head man of a tithing . . . when empowered by the Court Leet to search for goods unlawfully concealed.” According to Anderson, the mace was in use until 1748.29

By the early sixteenth century, many porches had grown to two or even three stories. Before the Reformation, some of these upper chambers evidently served as chapels, and Alec Clifton-Taylor notes that in a few cases they were used for the exhibition of relics.30 Other uses persisted well beyond Herbert’s day.31 In some cases, surviving fireplaces and furniture seem to indicate that they provided living quarters for a priest, churchwarden, or sacristan.32 It was common for village children to be taught their first lessons in the church porch. The seventeenth-century diarist John Evelyn remembers: “I was not initiated into any rudiments till neere 4 yeares of age; and then one Frier taught us at the Church-porch of Wotton.”33 Schools are recorded in the porch chambers of St. Sepulchre’s, London, in 1592, at Colyton in Devonshire in 1660, and at Malmesbury in Norfolk as late as 1879.34 It is perhaps this practice, as much as the epigrammatic and morally instructive nature of Herbert’s poem, which accounts for its popularity through the seventeenth century and beyond in children’s books. Raymond Anselment uncovers unmistakable borrowings from the poem in a seventeenth-century primer, and in a 1932 issue of Notes and Queries, Professor G. H. Palmer wistfully seeks an edition of “The Church-porch” by E. C. Lowe, who, years earlier as headmaster of Hurstpierpoint School, had required all entering pupils to memorize the entire thing.35 “It was a rich endowment,” Palmer says, “equipping a youth in all points of good morals and manners.”36

In addition, these upper chambers could provide secure repositories for the common property and public records of the parish. There are reports of standard weights and measures being kept there, and they were frequently used as armories, muniment rooms, treasuries, or libraries.37 R. J. Brown explains that “in most cases, the church would have been the only substantial building in the village. . . . It seems probable that valuables were kept in these upper chambers, for it is not uncommon for the door to be completely iron-clad.”38 Literary scholars might remember that in the upper chamber of the north porch of St. Mary Redcliffe (Bristol) the young Thomas Chatterton discovered a cache of medieval manuscripts that inspired his elaborate forgery of the works of Thomas Rowley.39 In the church porch, then, the life of the parishioner was recorded in its particularity, even as it joined with other stories and other lives to form the longer and more enduring history of the parish.

Turning back to “The Church-porch” with the church porch in mind, I will argue that history and ecclesiology, more than theology, illuminate the poem’s
structural integrity; its organizational patterns, along with its content, style, and imagery, are inspired by the historic location and functions of the architectural setting itself.\(^\text{40}\) Recent critics have tended to imagine “The Church-porch” as merely preliminary, a unidirectional passage from common ground to sacred space.\(^\text{41}\) But this progress is not accomplished without what Martz describes as “some eddying and repetition,” and to look in only one direction—toward the sanctuary—is to read against the grain of the poem, sixty-six of the seventy-seven stanzas of which are dedicated to aspects of parish life that take place outside the church.\(^\text{42}\) John M. Adrian has noted of \emph{The Country Parson} that, in contrast to Laudian strictures for uniformity in worship, “Herbert’s communal bonds . . . derive more from human interactions, and often take place outside of church.”\(^\text{43}\)
This statement might also be made of “The Church-porch,” and this initial outward focus also reflects the position of most porches, which had as much to do with the community as with the church. While porches most often appear at the south doors of churches, because that side provided the best protection from the weather, there are many exceptions to this pattern, and the chief consideration in the placement of a porch seems to have been that it face the village and manor it served. In the pattern of Sundays and weekdays, in the progress from baptism to marriage to burial, and in the days appointed for annual payments or the fulfillment of contracts, the church porch was worn by generations of footsteps and repeated return. “The Church-porch,” like its eponym, is not structured by progression from one space to another; it centers on the threshold itself. The poem looks outward first, then in toward the sanctuary; but worldly and otherworldly concerns are never separated from one another, and that is the point. The poem, indeed, suspends us in an eddy, where the current swirls constantly back into itself, mixing the divine with the secular and the secular with the divine.
The most direct connections between poem and porch are established by Herbert’s repeated references to events that would have taken place in the church porch. As a group, these events enfold moral and spiritual significance into the course of a parishioner’s life; they have to do with the affirmation of religious responsibility or the inculcation and surveillance of socially useful virtues such as charity, thrift, and truthfulness. In the first line, the address to the “sweet youth” suggests the education of children, and this theme reappears in lines 97 through 99, which lament the “education” provided by those who “till their ground, but let weeds choke their sonne” or “mark a partridge, never their childes fashion.” The second and third stanzas look backward and forward in the life of the youth to baptism—“Beware of lust: it doth pollute and foul / Whom God in Baptisme washt with his own blood” (7–8)—and to marriage—“Abstain wholly, or wed” (13)—and line 33 imagines the man who, in unfettered drunken violence, “Is outlawed by himself.” Many of the precepts are concerned with financial transactions of the sort that might have been executed in the church porch, lending, as
Bond puts it, “greater sanctity as well as publicity to a bargain or agreement.” Lines 103 through 114 relate the development of “a mast’ring minde” (104) to the prudent distribution of allowances and estates; line 119 exhorts the listener to honor promises and bonds: “who breaks his own bond, forfeiteth himself”; and lines 175 through 180 warn against debts that cannot be repaid: “By no means runne in debt: take thine own measure.” Later stanzas cast friendship and kinship in terms of debts and bequests: “Thy friend put in thy bosome... If cause require, thou art his sacrifice” (271–273) is followed by “Yet be not surety, if thou be a father. / Love is a personall debt. I cannot give / My childrens right, nor ought he take it” (277–279). Further on, Herbert deals with the generous yet prudent distribution of alms—“In Almes regard thy means, and others merit” (373)—and the ungrudging payment of tithes—“Restore to God his due in tithe and time: / A tithe purloin’d cankers the whole estate” (385–386). Finally, after sixty-six stanzas, the Verser prepares the reader to enter the church by removing not pattens but hat: “When once thy foot enters the church, be bare” (403).

This list by no means accounts for all of the topics covered in the poem, many of which—drinking, dressing, and dining, for instance—do not seem to have any connection to the place. And yet, the matter and style of these sections are equally shaped by the poem’s architectural site and the concepts of liminality and exchange that it suggests. Critics have aptly described the style of the poem as proverbial, and its similarity to biblical Proverbs, to Jewish Wisdom literature, and to Herbert’s own collection Outlandish Proverbs (1640) has been well noted. However elevated their ancestry, though, the proverbial qualities of “The Church-porch” are precisely what have caused it to fall short in the estimation of modern readers. Summers, for instance, suggests that the poem’s pat instruction “violates many popular modern notions concerning both poetry and religion,” while James Boyd White describes its sentiments as “all too true, and boring.” What these remarks reveal is an inherent incompatibility of much poetry with proverbial wisdom. While most poetry, no matter how devout or deferential, displays the original talents of an individual writer, the proverb ideally appears to have no author, to be so worn and sensible and common that it cannot be limited to the description of one person’s experience. As Chana Bloch notes, “The very form—terse, rhythmic, with the ring of long-acknowledged truths, of wisdom passed down from generation to generation—carries a certain authority, and does part of the work of persuasion.” But it is architectural setting, more than textual inheritance, which explains why Herbert might choose this uncharacteristic style for this particular poem. In its commonness, availability, and resilience, the proverb is not what we expect from the language of poetry,
but it does resemble the language exchanged in the ceremonies, contracts, and promises that took place in the church porch. It is not only that the words of social contract and direction—the marriage ceremony, the bequest, the first lessons of a child—need not be original or verbally intricate; it is that they must not be. In such circumstances, words are valuable insofar as they are repeated and repeatable, mutually recognized, agreed upon, and understood. As in the fulfillment of a social or legal contract, words are binding, and originality is less important than the capacity to come true. Thus, if “too true, and boring” is a damning charge when leveled at a poem, it might favorably describe the language of proverbs, contracts, and bonds.

To compare the sentiments of “The Church-porch” to proverbs is to describe them in general terms. Really, many of Herbert’s adages belong to distinct subsets of this group, sharing characteristics that are not intrinsic to the genre itself. As Summers, Bloch, and Jeffrey Powers-Beck have noticed, the poem as a whole is set in “a dense and particularized social world.” For a seventeenth-century reader, then, “The Church-porch” would have attached common sense and common values to immediate and recognizable surroundings. Ronald W. Cooley has explored Herbert’s social commentary in the sixteenth stanza (91–96), which refers to enclosure and the wool trade, and subsequent stanzas re-imagine other popular proverbial topics in circumstances which would have been close to home. Line 43 depicts the reader among drunken “Gallants”; later, he is exposed to the wisdom of “Old courtiers” (185). Lines 99 and 100 decry excessive devotion to partridge shooting and lament the practice of educating children by “ship[ping] them over.” Inside the church, the reader finds the arms (perhaps his own) of the local parish gentry in a stained-glass window (197–198), along with the pins and silk stockings of parishioners’ Sunday best: “Kneeling ne’re spoil’d silk stocking: quit thy state” (407) is followed by “O be drest; / Stay not for th’other pin” (410–411). And he is warned to leave his weekday occupations at the door: “Bring not thy plough, thy plots, thy pleasures thither” (422). Thus, like Herbert’s direct references to the functions of the church porch, these sentiments tie the poem to the world of the seventeenth-century parish; they are commonplaces attached to a common place.

Yet it is not the social particularity of Herbert’s proverbs that has made the poem inhospitable to modern readers of Herbert’s poetry. It is their refusal to be metaphors. Some proverbs speak in terms entirely figurative. Proverb 693 of the Outlandish Proverbs—“It’s a bold mouse that nestsles in the catts eare”—is not actually a warning to mice, and some of the aphorisms of “The Church-porch” follow this pattern: “He pares his apple, that will cleanly feed” (64) is not a di-
rection for food sanitation but a metaphor for cleaning up dirty or profane jokes before telling them again. But throughout the poem, many of Herbert’s proverbs remain anchored to their own literal referents—the “third glasse” (25), the debt paid (175), the pin abandoned (411)—and admirers of the virtuosic conceits in such poems as “The Flower,” and “The Pulley” have found themselves un-equipped to deal with words that really do mean what they say. In “The Church-porch” they often do: don’t drink too much, pay your debts, come to church on time. Without ever abandoning the world of the quotidian, however, the objects and transactions of the poem constantly point toward more abstract and less quantifiable ideas and truths: they both really are and aren’t really about pounds or pins or payments. Appropriate to their architectural setting, then, these proverbs are themselves a liminal kind of utterance. Standing between the particular and the ostensibly universal, they join the world of ordinary things to other-worldly consequences, and their effect is to locate the threshold to eternity in the details of daily life.

For some readers, the poem’s attachment to common language, mundane objects, and practical affairs—what Arnold Stein has characterized as its “coarse or flat colloquialism”—has seemed to limit its scope and its complexity. To equate familiarity with flatness, however, or commonness with simplicity is exactly to fail at the interpretive activity that the poem both teaches and asks of its reader. As much as it limits the figurative possibilities of language by tying its precepts to the local and physical world, the poem unfolds the significance of daily commerce and common things. For the successful reader of “The Church-porch,” eternity is accessible through the quotidian, and enduring consequences of daily conduct are always present, always found. This process of discovery is not always reassuring; often it is startling and abrupt. In lines 25 through 48, for instance, to drink the third glass of liquor becomes an act of desecration: “The drunkard forfeits Man, and doth devest / All worldly right, save what he hath by beast” (35–36). Thus, to refuse the “third glasse” (25) is to see man in God’s image: “Stay at the third cup, or forgo the place. / Wine above all things doth Gods stamp deface” (47–48). In lines 79 through 84, idleness becomes a form of spiritual blindness:

Flie idlenesse, which yet thou canst not flie
By dressing, mistressing, and complement.
If those take up thy day, the sunne will crie
Against thee: for his light was onely lent.
    God gave thy soul brave wings; put not those feathers
Into a bed, to sleep out all ill weathers.
The familiar pun on “sunne” here turns daylight to Christ’s light—both are given and used, but never possessed—and the contemplation of common frivolities mirrors the interpretation of the pun itself: there is always a double meaning. To squander time on women, fashion, or sniveling will indeed wear out the light of day, but to indulge in these activities is also to waste, even deny, the light of Christ by failing to perceive or acknowledge it. And the couplet discovers in the soft feathers beneath a supine body the intangible wings of a rising soul. In lines 169 through 174, the money uncounted by avarice opens onto a view of uncountable stars:

What skills it, if a bag of stones or gold  
About thy neck do drown thee? raise thy head;  
Take starres for money; starres not to be told  
By any art, yet to be purchased.  
None is so wastefull as the scraping dame.  
She loseth three for one; her soul, rest, fame.

Later, deference to the sins of “great persons” (253) in hope of social advancement makes the reader accomplice in a greater fall: “Feed no man in his sinnes: for adulation / Doth make thee parcell-devil in damnation” (257–258). Throughout, the poem reviews the daily affairs of the parish in a way that simultaneously increases and depreciates their value. The reader reaches the rewards of the soul, not by looking down on the things of this world or even by looking past them; instead, he must learn to look through them. Viewed in this way, common words and objects come to resemble the church porch itself as they stand at the limit of secular and religious meaning. And like the doors at each end of the porch, they give access to both at once.

By framing the poem in the church porch, Herbert reminds the reader that common use and availability have at least as much capacity to re-create meaning and value as to fix them. Historically, the church porch staged acts of transfer and agreement. While sums or names might vary from record to record, the church porch solemnized the moments at which things or words were traded, when money or promises or vows were passed between one person and another. And it is in these repeated moments of negotiation and reinvestment that things and words might express new intentions and desires; they might be put to new uses or traded with the expectation of different returns. As a result, the poem’s many financial transactions—which have seemed to some critics out of place in a volume of religious poetry—become opportunities for complex interpretation and instruction. Herbert is able to explicate money as one might a poem or bib-
lexical verse; placing it at the boundary of concrete and abstract significance, he
expounds the kinds of value which are created and discovered in the practice of
giving and taking, carefully parsing the moments in which old words and trite
currency become the perceptible expressions of a living heart. For instance, he
writes:

Play not for gain, but sport. Who playes for more,
Then he can lose with pleasure, stakes his heart;
Perhaps his wives too, and whom she hath bore;
Servants and churches also play their part.
Only a herauld, who that way doth passe,
Findes his crackt name at length in the church-glasse. (193–198)

In replacing the monetary tokens of the wager with the gamester’s heart, Her-
bert signals the interdependence of financial and moral stakes, of legal tender
and human tenderness. Here, the bet measures not only the gambler’s commit-
ment to a game but his lack of commitment to family and church. Herbert also
unfolds the imprudent moment temporally, making it the intersection of past
and future. As the cracked arms in the church window record the gambler’s pres-
ent short-sightedness, they also recall a virtuous, respectable ancestry and in-
scribe a future of social and spiritual disintegration.

Similarly, lines 373 through 384 represent almsgiving, not as a price tag for
heaven, but as an index of the parishioner himself. At the alms table, the reader
makes both financial and spiritual investments:

In Almes regard thy means, and others merit.
Think heav’n a better bargain, then to give
Onely thy single market-money for it.
Joyn hands with God to make a man to live. (373–376)

Summers worries that in such passages “the appeal to self-interest is so nakedly
direct that a reader may misunderstand,” and he clarifies that Herbert “does not
mean to imply that he thinks salvation is something we can ‘purchase,’ ‘bargain
or not.’”56 The following lines ought to assuage this anxiety though. They re-
veal that alms are valuable insofar as they indicate the absence of financial self-
interest and produce a sympathetic disavowal of the self. Strier writes that, in
this stanza and the next, “alms open heaven’s gate. . . . There is no subtlety or
irony to be missed.”57 Already, though, the lines gesture toward the complexity
of this “bargain.” As the hand that is conventionally clasped to seal a financial
deal is replaced with the hand of God, the “man” of the last line acquires a dou-
ble meaning: he might be either the recipient or the giver of the alms, depending upon whether we understand “live” as referring to bodily or spiritual welfare. The couplet completes the erasure of social and financial difference between benefactor and beneficiary: “Give to all something; to a good poore man, / Till thou change names, and be where he began” (377–378). This odd biography effaces its subject only to clear the slate for the following stanza, where the “poore man”—now either the giver or the recipient—is stamped with a new identity: “Man is Gods image; but a poore man is / Christs stamp to boot: both images regard” (379–380). The value of a coin laid on the alms table is here displaced onto parishioners themselves. By embodying the values of humility and charity in the conditions of human existence, alms reflect Christ’s own humanity, laying a path toward the spiritual consequences which, in the poem, suddenly ensue:

God reckons for him, counts the favour his:
Write, So much giv’n to God; thou shalt be heard.
Let thy almes go before, and keep heav’ns gate
Open for thee; or both may come too late. (381–384)

It is not exactly, as Strier says, that “alms open heaven’s gate”; at least, it is not that simple. Rather, they indicate an understanding of earthly life which would have led there anyway. From the alms table, then, the pupil glimpses another threshold. Alms “go before” to stand at a “gate” from which the giver can review both financial and spiritual accounts, as well as the present and future states of his soul. Alms acquire a double nature that reflects both the church porch and the embodied divinity of Christ; they function at once in both earthly and eternal lives.

Even in transactions that might, on the surface, seem less morally charged than gambling or almsgiving, the poem assigns intangible and spiritual gains and losses to the transfer or exchange of material wealth. More than once, Herbert insists that the value of money rests not in itself but in its capacity to be exchanged. In lines 151 through 156, we read:

Be thriftie, but not covetous: therefore give
Thy need, thine honour, and thy friend his due.
Never was scraper brave man. Get to live;
Then live, and use it: els, it is not true
That thou hast gotten. Surely use alone
Makes money not a contemptible stone.

“Use”—a surprising reversal of the way the word is generally used in connection to money—is the way that money accrues significant value in moral and human
Here use is tied to vitality itself—“then live, and use it”—as it is diverted into multiple channels of human community and experience: “thy need, thine honour, and thy friend.” Lines 165 through 168 also warn against accruing money, this time with stronger threats:

Wealth is the conjurers devil;
Whom when he thinks he hath, the devil hath him.
Gold thou mayst safely touch; but if it stick
Unto thy hands, it woundeth to the quick.

Wealth cannot be possessed; it can only be touched as it passes from one hand to another, and the poem gives many examples in which the value of money is determined by the particular ways in which it might be given and received. In lines 103 through 108, for example, Herbert writes:

Some great estates provide, but doe not breed
A mast’ring minde; so both are lost thereby:
Or els they breed them tender, make them need
All that they leave: this is flat povertie.
For he, that needs fi ve thousand pound to live,
Is full as poore as he, that needs but fi ve.

The following stanza continues in this vein: “The way to make thy sonne rich, is to fi ll / His minde with rest, before his trunk with riches,”(109–110) for “if thy sonne can make ten pound his measure, / Then all thou addest may be call’d his treasure” (113–114). Later, all sums become equally worthless to the “curious unthrift”: “Who cannot live on twentie pound a yeare, / Cannot on fourtie” (176–177). In such examples, sums of money are reassessed—small amounts are suddenly worth more, and apparent wealth turns to poverty—based upon the understanding of the people who give and receive them.

A similar logic, in which value or meaning is determined through the process of use and exchange, extends beyond the financial advice of the poem and structures Herbert’s view of parish life more broadly. Forms of the word “give” appear sixteen times, and the number increases if we account for synonyms or variations such as “lent” (82), “provide” (103), “leave” (106), “fi ll” (109), “addest,” (114), and “restore” (385). Forms of “take” occur ten times, not including roughly synonymous terms such as “pick out” (235, 430), “embrace” (363), and “counts” (in the sense of “accepts,” 381). “Get” (nine uses) and “gain” (six uses) are also common, as are words relating to purchase and payment. And spiritual and material acquisition are always balanced by the consequences of foolish or selfish
investment: forms of the word “lose” appear at least twenty times. In lines 355 through 358, Herbert sums up much of the poem’s advice:

All forrain wisdome doth amount to this,
To take all that is given; whether wealth,
Or love, or language; nothing comes amisse:
A good digestion turneth all to health.

The lovely parallelism of wealth, love, and language is so fluid that it is easy to miss, or to dismiss as a casual linking of incongruous terms; but once again, the poem’s architectural location helps us to discover its integrity: what wealth, love, and language have in common is that all are traded, forming bonds and relationships as they are taken and given between one parishioner and another. Further, the phrase “forrain wisdome” anticipates Herbert’s own title Outland- ish Proverbs, perhaps specifying the sort of commonplace, proverbial knowledge the poem itself offers. In their very disparity, wealth, love, and language reflect the varied transactions of the church porch itself. The exchange of marriage vows or blessings, the payment of a debt, and the witnessing of a contract are accomplished through different means and with different ends in mind; yet all of these exchanges, like the poem’s financial transactions, express intent and commitment. The value of words and of love, like that of money, is created and re-created in the process of trade. For instance, in lines 205 through 210, words traded in conversation are meaningful only to the degree that they truly represent the qualities of the speaker:

In conversation boldnesse now bears sway.
But know, that nothing can so foolish be,
As empty boldnesse: therefore first assay
To stuffe thy mind with solid braverie;
Then march on gallant: get substantiall worth.
Boldnesse guilds finely, and will set it forth.

Subsequent stanzas deal with uses and abuses of wit, which depend equally on the intent of the speaker, the discretion of the recipient, and the object of the jest. The reader is told that “the wittie man laughs least: / For wit is newes onely to ignorance” (229–230) and “Make not thy sport, abuses: for the fly / That feeds on dung, is coloured thereby” (233–234). The next stanza warns against “Profane- nesse, filthinesse, abusivenesse,” which are “The scumme, with which course wits abound: / The fine may spare these well, yet not go lesse” (236–238). Then, indiscriminate wit becomes tasteless and dangerous: “Wit’s an unruly engine,
wildly striking / Sometimes a friend, sometimes the engineer” (241–242). Later, in lines 289 through 306, conversation is benevolently tailored for the benefit of the listener: in “discourse” (289) the reader is told to “draw the card; / That suites him best, of whom thy speech is heard” (293–294). The topic continues in the succeeding stanza, which begins, “Entice all neatly to what they know best; / For so thou dost thy self and him a pleasure” (295–296). Finally, dominating a conversation becomes a violent form of excess: “If thou be Master-gunner, spend not all / That thou canst speak, at once; but husband it” (301–302).

Throughout the poem, however, it often turns out that neither financial success nor artful conversation is entirely the point; the Verser seeks, by perusing these topics, to cultivate the ability to discover and exchange love, which is described as being given and taken the way wealth and words are. In lines 307 through 312, words traded in argument are valued according not to their persuasiveness but to the sympathy and motives of the disputant:

Be calm in arguing: for fiercenesse makes
Errour a fault, and truth discourtesie.
Why should I feel another mans mistakes
More, then his sicknesses or povertie?
In love I should: but anger is not love,
Nor wisdome neither: therefore gently move.

In lines 283 and 284 we read, “If thou be single, all thy goods and ground / Submit to love.” Lines 328 through 330 impress on the reader the rewards of active kindness:

Finde out mens wants and will,
And meet them there. All worldly joyes go lesse
To the one joy of doing kindnesse.

Soon after, we are told, “Slight not the smallest losse, whether it be / In love or honour: take account of all” (343–344), and then, “Scorn no mans love, though of a mean degree; / (Love is a present for a mightie king)” (349–350).

Once we become attuned to the ways in which value is both constantly reassessed and actively re-created in the course of human communication and exchange, it is easier to perceive the poem’s pedagogic goals. Strier has argued that “‘The Church-porch’ does not aim to transform its audience,” and here I would agree. If the poem transforms the reader, it is by teaching him to find and transform the value of the life he is already living, in the world that already exists around him. It is not only the Verser who—as the etymology of his name
suggests—exchanges one kind of value for another, or “turn[s] delight into a sacrifice” (6). To begin with, it is indeed the verse which “finde[s]” the pupil who has flown from the sermon to the pleasures of secular life (5). Ideally, however, the pupil himself learns to find moral and spiritual value outside the sanctuary and to turn the common words and material objects of parish life to sacred kinds of currency. Forms of the word “turn” appear only twice after the first stanza, and in both cases it is the listener who is instructed to perform the action: once in line 358, quoted earlier—“a good digestion turneth all to health”—and once in line 441—“Then turn thy faults and his into confession.” Forms of the word “make,” in the sense of “render” or “transform,” however, appear far more often, at least twenty-nine times in all. At first, it is the Verser who will “make a bait of pleasure,” but as the poem continues, it is repeatedly the listener who is either to bring about or prevent the change (4): In lines 49 and 50 he is told, “Yet, if thou sinne in wine or wantonnesse, / Boast not thereof; nor make thy shame thy glorie”; in lines 119 and 120, “Who breaks his own bond, forfeiteth himself: / What nature made a ship, he makes a shelf”; in lines 211–212, “Be sweet to all. Is thy complexion sowre? / Then keep such companie; make them thy allay”; in lines 259 and 260, “Envie not greatnesse: for thou mak’st thereby / Thy self the worse, and so the distance greater”; and in lines 287 and 288, “God made me one man; love makes me no more, / Till labour come, and make my weaknesse score.” Without re-creating himself or the world, the successful reader of “The Church-porch” learns to change and create the spiritual value of his own secular affairs.

It is thus not a willingness to reject the world but a readiness to understand it which prepares the reader to enter the sanctuary. In lines 397 through 450, the Verser at last turns his attention to the interior of the church, mirroring spatially the turns between secular and religious that structure the earlier part of the poem. To the limited understanding, we discover, the sanctuary is no more religious than the secular world. Once the reader has learned to see everywhere the convergence of earthly and spiritual values, it ought not surprise him that the transition from social to sacred space is characterized more by continuity than difference. Sundays, like the weekday world, require the reader’s interpretation; even in the sanctuary, he must actively perceive in the conditions of mortal life the conditions of eternity. Throughout this section, the familiar ideas of gaining and losing, making and turning, reappear. In line 411, quoted earlier, he is warned against tardiness: “Stay not for th’other pin: why thou hast lost / A joy for it worth worlds . . . Thy clothes being fast, but thy soul loose about thee” (411–414). Similarly, if he ogles the finery of other parishioners, he “Makes all their beautie his deformitie” (420). Instructions for listening to the sermon also clearly recall
earlier sections of the poem: it turns out that interpreting the Word is not very different from interpreting words. In lines 427 through 432, the reader is told:

Judge not the preacher; for he is thy Judge:
If thou mislike him, thou conceiv’st him not.
God calleth preaching folly. Do not grudge
To pick out treasures from an earthen pot.
   The worst speak something good: if all want sense,
   God takes a text, and preacheth patience.

This stanza echoes line 63, which is about hearing and telling jokes (“Pick out of tales the mirth, but not the sinne”), and lines 235 through 240, also quoted earlier:

Pick out of mirth, like stones out of thy ground,
Profanenesse, filthinesse, abusivenesse.
These are the scumme, with which course wits abound:
The fine may spare these well, yet not go lesse.
   All things are bigge with jest: nothing that’s plain,
   But may be wittie, if thou hast the vein.

In each case, it is not the quality of the verbal material, but the quality of the reader that makes the difference, and to hear either a joke or a sermon properly might demand the ability to turn something base and “earthen” into something rarer. Lines 439 through 444 convey a similar message, this time about mocking the preacher:

Jest not at preachers language, or expression:
How know’st thou, but thy sinnes made him miscarrie?
Then turn thy faults and his into confession:
God sent him, whatsoe’re he be: O tarry,
   And love him for his Master: his condition,
   Though it be ill, makes him no ill Physician.

The topic of uncharitable jesting recalls lines 233–234, (“Make not thy sport, abuses: for the fly / That feeds on dung, is coloured thereby”), while the word “turn” and the images of bodily health might remind us of line 358: “A good digestion turneth all to health.” The startling statement in line 429, “God calleth preaching folly” seems to refer to 1 Corinthians 1:18: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God,” or perhaps 1 Corinthians 1:21: “it pleased God by the foolishness
of preaching to save them that believe,” and the allusion reappears in line 449: “The Jews refused thunder; and we, folly.” Both instances raise the stakes of the interpretive practices the poem has been teaching all along: the ability to draw spiritual benefit from the flawed materials of earthly life is no longer the means of differentiating wit from foolishness, but of sorting the saved from the damned.

In the final two stanzas, the interpretive lessons of the sanctuary lap gently back over the business of everyday existence, and scrutiny of the sermon is replaced with self-scrutiny as the poem draws to a close:

Summe up at night, what thou hast done by day;
And in the morning, what thou hast to do.
Dresse and undresse thy soul: mark the decay
And growth of it: if with thy watch, that too
    Be down, then winde up both; since we shall be
Most surely judg’d, make thy accounts agree.

It is now the life of the reader, not the world of the parish, which mediates between secular and religious forms of meaning. Cristina Malcolmson has argued that this stanza completes the poem’s earlier sartorial instructions by concluding that in the end “the secular . . . is defined as a kind of clothing that needs to be removed so that the soul can be spiritually ‘dressed’.” I would argue that while this is the conclusion we might expect from a religious poem, it is not the one we get. The action of the final stanzas is to interfuse matters of body and soul, not to strip them away from each other. These lines describe a life which mirrors the church porch itself: it is lived at the threshold of material and spiritual experience, of earthly and eschatological time. From this point of view, the values of this life and the next are indistinguishable; they are possessed and perceived simultaneously. In the end of a day lies the End of Days, the watch becomes both the object that marks the minutes of the day and the vigilant mind that marks in those minutes the approach of God’s judgment, and to dress and undress the body is to bare and equip the soul. In the familiar financial language of the final line—“make thy accounts”—the reader does not “make” one thing into another, nor is there any longer an explicit distinction between spiritual and monetary kinds of accountancy. But the poem has taught us that one does not preclude the other; in fact, both are inevitably present.

In the final stanza, the reader surveys a life lived in hours and minutes, in investments and payments, in friendship and charity—the life which the poem so attentively describes—all the while perceiving himself at the edge of a life everlasting:
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.

The stanza begins by distinguishing mortal from eternal time; “In brief” refers at once to the summation of the poem and to the moments in which one “play[s] the man.” The lesson here is familiar. Once again, the reader is warned against misestimating the value of the world; he must not “make” a “poore span” into a seeming eternity by “trifling in [his] wo.” The couplet, however, does not provide the consolation we might anticipate: the “poore span” is not replaced with eternal paradise, and there is no palliative promise of escape:

If thou do ill; the joy fades, not the pains:
If well; the pain doth fade, the joy remains.

In “The Church-porch,” the spirit is never released from the material world. These final lines thread the fate of the soul back through the sinews of the body as they register eternity in the language of mortal sensation. Summers points out that this sentiment is borrowed from the Stoic orator Cato the Censor, marking this conclusion as somehow “pre-Christian.” If the Verser has succeeded in his instruction, however, the reader will perceive both immediate and everlasting joys and pains here, and they are felt at once. Technically, as well, the couplet contains two kinds of time. In the repetition of sonorants and diphthongs, the words strain against their own terse expression. Counted like the minutes on a watch, the syllables are perfectly regular; in a less quantifiable way, they last and feel longer.

Before leaving “The Church-porch” behind, I would like to step, for a moment, back into the parish church porch and reflect again on the connection between poem and place. Inscriptions in porches are common, and in some ways, the precepts of “The Church-porch” are more at home among these architectural records than they are among discussions of Herbert’s lyric poetry. Frequently, the porch was inscribed not with polemical or even liturgical significance, but with lives of the individual parishioners who, in the course of their spiritual and practical affairs, crossed its threshold many times. For instance, the construction and maintenance of the porch were often accomplished through parishioners’ donations, and the arms or names of benefactors were recorded in its fabric, commemorating, like the poem, financial benevolence and social responsibility, even as they anticipate eternity. In the porch of St. Nicholas, Addlethorpe, for example, Wall found the following inscription:
Likewise, it was common to remember the dedication and service of churchwardens, as in the church of All Saints, Harthill, Cheshire, where the arms of the local gentry are surmounted by the inscriptions “Rondcull Prickett, Churchwarden ever since 1606 until 1611” and “John Webster, George Drake, Ch. 1779.”

Reflections on the relationship of earthly and eternal time, as well as financial and spiritual accounts, also resemble the lessons of the poem. In the porch of St. Bartholomew, Churchdown, Gloucester, for instance, Frederick Smithe observed in 1888 “a gaunt emblem of Death, having the long hair and breasts of a woman; the fleshless arms are extended, holding in one hand an hour-glass to denote the brief span of man’s life, and in the other hand, to signify the grave, is an asperge.” In 1883, the vicar of Thornbury Church, Bristol, noted an inscription beneath the sundial in the upper chamber of the south porch: “‘Pereunt et imputantur’—‘the hours pass away and are reckoned to our account.’” The sentiments and the imagery of such inscriptions recall the final stanzas of “The Church-porch.”

At last, I return to the dole table in the porch of St. Peter and St. Paul, Eye, Suffolk, above which several observers have remarked a more lengthy inscription, dated 1601. These brief verses seal the connection between Herbert’s poem and its architectural setting:

\[
\text{Seale not to soone lest thou repent to late,}
\text{Yet help thy frend, but hinder not thy state.}
\text{If ought thou lende or borrow, truly pay}
\text{Ne give, ne take advantage, though thou may,}
\text{Let conscience be thy guide; so helpe thy frend,}
\text{With loving peace and concord make thy end.}\]

As poetry, these lines are neither original or arresting. To readers of “The Church-porch,” however, their content and aphoristic style ought to sound familiar. Here, as in the poem, financial, social, and spiritual debts and invest-
Porch at St. Peter and St. Paul, Eye, Suffolk

Dole table in the porch of St. Peter and St. Paul, Eye, Suffolk. The inscription on the plaque above is still faintly legible (transcribed in text opposite).
ments intermingle. To ecclesiologists, the inscription obviously refers to the practical functions of the porch: on the dole table, contracts were settled, and debts, bequests, tithes, and church dues might all have been paid. To settle one’s accounts, or “truly pay” does more, however, than secure “loving peace and concord” among “frend[s].” In the final lines of the inscription, as in the final stanzas of the poem, “peace and concord” steal quietly from the fulfillment of a contract over the “end” or fulfillment of life itself. The dole table, like the porch, mediates between contract and Covenant: the parishioner who enters into social and financial bonds prudently and honors them conscientiously does not regret rash investments or decisions, and he also does not, in a more important sense, “repent to late.” Together, these inscriptions remind us that, unlike the introspective struggles of spiritual biography, the story of the church porch is not a univocal narrative; it is composed in the formulaic language of proverbs and common sense, of wills and contracts, of annual tithes, of marriages, baptisms, and epitaphs. It traces the histories of individuals within the history of a community, and it is not limited to the mind, or the life, of a single author. The histories recorded by the church porch, are, like Herbert’s poem, difficult to integrate with the strands of Reformation polemic, because they do not take positions. Nevertheless, as both poem and inscriptions remember, through days and years and generations, they quietly take place. Adam Smyth, for instance, has recently identified relationships between the entries in parish registers and biographical and autobiographical writing of the period, noting instances in which the former bleed into the latter, demonstrating the role of parish church records in the preservation of parish lives.

If this chapter has not succeeded in persuading the reader to like “The Church-porch,” I hope at least it has shown that the poem has much to offer. “The Church-porch” is about church architecture, yet it does not treat the visible and the invisible or the internal and the external as though they were irreconcilable categories, nor does it seem to anticipate a reader who will view them that way. The world of the poem is not merely material, nor is its matter indifferent. Instead, by explicating the proverbial pounds, payments, and promises of parish life, the poem surprisingly expatiates the significance of common things. “The Church-porch” provides access to a form of reading we have neglected and a strand of religious history we have too often ignored. Through sustained and respectful attention to the local and particular, to the worn words and necessary objects of ordinary lives, we might learn to see doctrine in a glass pushed away, in a pin abandoned before church, in the sum of five thousand pounds weighed against five.

In 1930, ecclesiologist A. R. Powys lamented that churches had lost many of the practical and communal functions which were once “so intermixed” with
their religious significance that it was “difficult to say, of many—‘This is of the church, this of the manor.’” Continuing, he speculates, “It may well be, that it is this material separation of the things pertaining to our daily bread from those pertaining to the soul’s welfare that now gives to some persons a sense of unreality and of an emphasis on a worship unrelated to life when they visit churches, and especially those which have no long parochial history.”

Powys’s overt religious investment in his subject may set him apart from many contemporary literary critics. Nonetheless, his concept of “material separation” identifies a real divergence in the study of religious history, a separation which has, in turn, affected our study of literature. In the academy, ecclesiology has so often been pared away from theology, and the local details of a “long parochial history” from the history of ideas, that our reconstructions of historical context have in fact stripped churches of their own inveterate pasts. By writing The Temple into the history of the Reformation, we have erased it from the plain and familiar view of seventeenth-century life. In “The Church-porch,” Herbert resists the “material separation” between church and manor, spiritual and practical, insisting instead on the material and linguistic integration of secular with sacred and quotidian with divine. Rather than ignoring “The Church-porch,” then, or apologizing for its defects, we ought to approach it as a poem which requires—and teaches—its own interpretive logic.

In the local historians and ecclesiologists who have continued to study the church porch (and from whom I have gathered much of my information) we might see the direct descendents of early itinerant antiquarians such as John Leland, William Camden, and John Stow. In fact, a recent collection entitled The Changing Face of English Local History begins with chapters on Camden’s Britannia and Stow’s Survey of London. As much as he differs from these early chorographers, and from their modern successors, Herbert also looks at church architecture with an antiquarian’s eyes. For him, the church porch told the stories of a local community, and in its attention to the parochial and particular, “The Church-porch” fits more comfortably among these historical texts than it does among the pages of doctrinal controversy. As the histories of the church porch are recovered, “The Church-porch” also becomes more accessible to us. We might now appreciate its remarkable features and come to admit that we have, all along, been in too great a hurry to enter “The Church.”