George Herbert's 'Vertue'

HELEN VENDLER

Vertue

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

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

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

Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
  Like season'd timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
  Then chiefly lives.[1]

FOR at least one of Herbert's critics,[2] the poem 'Vertue' is the touchstone by which one enters into Herbert's feelings and truly senses his poetry; anthologists (following Coleridge's taste) have felt the poem to be peculiarly expressive of Herbert's spirit; John Wesley adapted it for the common Christian worshipper to sing at services.[3] Though it seems an 'easy' poem, I do not find it easy to reconstruct Herbert's process of thought in writing it. Almost every line in it surprises expectation, though few poems in English seem to unfold themselves with more impersonality, simplicity, and plainness.

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[1] This text, like all other citations of Herbert, is taken from the *Works*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson, Oxford, 1941, pp. 87–8.

[2] Robert Ellrodt, *Les Poètes Métaphysiques Anglais*, Paris, 1960, I, 283.

[3] In *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley,* collected by G. Osborn, 1868, 1869, I, 10 (first published in 1739):

VIRTUE
Altered from Herbert

Sweet Day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
  The bridal of the earth and sky:
The dew shall weep thy fall tonight,
  For thou with all thy sweets must die!

When a reader attempts to imagine himself composing the poem, suddenly he finds his confidence in its simplicity quite gone. What, he wonders, led the poet to see the day as a bridal, and call the rose's hue an angry one; why did the poet gratuitously introduce a rash gazer; why should the music of the poet himself (since he has so far maintained his anonymity) provide the conclusive proof of the necessary ending of spring; and finally (a problem which has been reluctantly taken on by every critic of the poem) how did the seasoned timber make its appearance? There are other difficulties, but these perhaps first strike a reader trying to reconstruct the creation of the poem.

Critics have reached two extremes in accounting for the surprising elements in conceits. One is expressed by Dr Johnson in his suspicion that metaphysical poets were simply striving for effect, while the sympathetic extreme, in Rosemond Tuve for instance, finds conceits often appropriate granted certain special

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Sweet Rose, so fragrant and so brave,
  Dazzling the rash beholder's eye:
Thy root is ever in its grave,
  And thou with all thy sweets must die!

Sweet Spring, so beauteous and so gay,
  Storehouse, where sweets unnumber'd lie:
Not long thy fading glories stay,
  But thou with all thy sweets must die!

Only a sweet and virtuous mind,
  When Nature all in ruins lies,
When earth and heaven a period find,
  Begins a life that never dies.

A version depending on Wesley's (the first two stanzas are identical) was printed in *The Charmer: A Choice Collection of Songs, Scots and English*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh, 1752. The extraordinary last stanza offers sufficient evidence why Herbert, as he stood, was not congenial to eighteenth-century taste: Here are the last two stanzas:

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
  A box, where sweets compacted lie,
Not long ere all thy fragrant posies,
  With all their sweets, must fade and die.

Sweet love alone, sweet wedded love,
  To thee no period is assign'd;
Thy tender joys by time improve,
  In death itself the most refin'd.

canons of decorum (the grotesque, for example, can be in certain contexts 'decorous').[1] But both of these solutions seem inapplicable here. The poem is really anything but flashy, so little do its rather startling conceits disturb its harmonies of tone; and since the decorum ought to be one of praise (of the limited sweetness of nature and the unlimited sweetness and virtue of the soul), that decorum supports with difficulty either the angry hue of the rose or timber-like qualities of the soul, the latter seeming so awkward in its modification of something 'sweet' as well as virtuous.

There have been some *post-hoc* attempts to get round the seasoned timber: Arnold Stein has insisted on the formal nature of the simile, '*like* season'd timber', by which, he argues, the quality compared in soul and wood is strictly limited to a fugitive resemblance,[2] and Joseph Summers makes somewhat the same point in speaking of the 'limitation' of conceits: ' "Season'd timber" is limited to its one point of resemblance of the "vertuous soul" that it "never gives".'[3] This seems a weak acquiescence to the famous stanza. The real question is not what accommodations we can make *post-hoc* to the image but what made Herbert think of seasoned timber in the first place, and what effect this note, sounded at this point in the poem, has on the poem as a whole. I believe that Herbert is not arbitrary or wilful in his comparisons, that they rather tend to arise from a motive appearing perhaps *sotto-voce* in the development of the poem, but which helps to guide the poem from the beginning.

Mary Ellen Rickey has remarked that 'Vertue' is a *carpe diem* poem in reverse,[4] quoting the precedent that A. Davenport has shown in Ovid for a conclusion in praise of virtue rather than in praise of seizing the day.[1] However, the difference in tone between this poem and its erotic predecessors (a difference occurring not only at the end, as we shall see) seems to remove the poem almost entirely from its parent genre. That is, we would, if we were sufficiently responsive, sense from the beginning that this poem could not possibly end with a call to gather the roses of today, any more than it could end, as the passage in the *Ars Amatoria* does, with a total rejection of all natural solace.

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[1] Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, Chicago, 1947, Chapter IX, *passim*, 192–247.

[2] *George Herbert's Lyrics*, Baltimore, 1968, p. 176. Stein justifies the use of 'season'd timber' by saying that it 'achieves its purpose after death — not as a tree but as wood', and adds that the soul 'is, in the traditional metaphor, "dead" to the distracting influences of the world' (pp. 180–1). But Herbert's soul loves the world, in the best sense. And the unyielding never-giving function of the soul is useful only *before* death (its function after death is pure sweetness), so that to make us think of the previous 'death' of the tree that produced the timber seems no part of Herbert's intention.

[3] Joseph Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art*, 1954, p. 117.

[4] Mary Ellen Rickey, *Utmost Art*, Lexington, 1968, p. 21. Miss Rickey adds (p. 22) that 'the introduction of the soul upsets the entire well-realized effect of the foregoing lines'. I think, on the contrary, that the soul has been 'present' from the beginning, by implication, in attitude and tone.

The high resignation of the first stanza of 'Vertue' sets the initial theme, which, though it is ostensibly the death of a day, seems rather, metaphorically speaking, to be the immortal theme of the death of a maiden, etherealized into a virginal day. Herbert is struck, not by the sunny, earthly beauty of the day, but by its remoteness, its spiritual stillness; it is so cool, so calm, that it seems more heavenly than earthly, an appearance which engenders Herbert's metaphor making the day a bridge to the skies; it is, in short, the most innocent and celestial of earthly beauties.[2] We can scarcely doubt that 'bright' suggested 'bride': the Spenserian adjectives — 'so cool, so calm, so bright' — could only suggest a bride, but the suggestion is abstracted into a bridal, presumably to avoid confusion of the fall of night with the marriage-bed. But the weeping dew (it is of course the falling dew, or the nightfall, which led to Herbert's invention of day-fall) reminds us of what is usually meant by the 'fall' of something innocent to which we respond by weeping — a fall into corruption, which is a premonition of the fall to death. A stanza, then, which is apparently about Time's destruction of a day is, by virtue of its metaphors, a stanza about the fall of bridal innocence. This fall has not very much to do with Time, but everything to do with intrinsic corruptibility or, to use theological terms, with sin. Herbert has seen this day-fall before, and so his verb is prophetic, not factual (a tone later imitated by Hopkins in 'Spring and Fall', with a sister-recognition of the intrinsic (and not caused by time) nature of the 'fall' we weep for). The dew is the elegist of the day, the witness and mourner of its fall in an unmixed sympathy, and therefore stands as Herbert's representative in the stanza, a helpless and grieving spectator, dwelling 'a weeping Hermit, there'. The emotions here are very pure and unalloyed, since the apparently 'natural' character of the day-fall clears the day of any logical 'guilt' in its descent into night.

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[1] A. Davenport, 'George Herbert and Ovid', *Notes and Queries*, n.s., II, 1955, 98.

[2] Ellrodt, op. cit., says, 'Ce ciel est le ciel de la nature, le ciel païen ("sky" et non "heaven")'. Herbert, to my knowledge, never uses 'heaven' as a word of landscape, so it would be out of the question for him to choose to use it here. To suggest the quasi-spiritual nature of the day, Herbert shows it linking earth to the region of air, and since a bridal by its nature joins two *different* things, we may assume that the sky here is precisely *not* 'earthly'.

If Herbert's representative in the first stanza feels only grief at vanished innocence, his representative in the second stanza is suffering from the smart of the sensual world. The hue of the rose, on which he has so rashly gazed (not glanced), irritates his tender senses and brings involuntary tears to his eye. The beauty of the rose (as Herbert will say explicitly in his poem of that name) is accompanied by qualities that make the flower physically harmful and therefore, in the emblematic universe of this poem, morally inimical to man. The weeping dew is rather a female figure, appropriate attendant to the bridal day, but the rash gazer is clearly masculine, and so is the rose, angry in hue. It is a small duel they engage in, in which the rose pricks the eye of the one so rash as to approach him. The mutually symmetrical relations between nature and the spectator in the first stanza (the falling day, the falling dew, the clear day, the clear dew) become, then, mutually antagonistic ones after a seductive beginning in the gazer's rash love; and though on the surface the hostility is quickly passed by, it is nevertheless present in the little drama of the flaunting rose, the gazer's love, and the rose's retort. Herbert immediately takes revenge on the rose in a chilling statement, not of prophecy as with the day, but of fact, in which he insists, in an image which has nothing temporal about it at all, on the simultaneous death-in-life of the rose, which is, in a sense, as much dead as alive, since its root is *ever* in its grave.

The Book of Thel and 'The Sick Rose' are the Blakean parallels to the first and second stanzas of 'Vertue', and we may say that Herbert's feelings are considerably more mixed in respect to aggressive passion than in respect to necessarily-vanished innocence. Or we may say that he prefers the more feminine manifestations of nature (including his own nature) to the more thorny masculine ones. There was no need to make the rose masculine (its Romance predecessors having been by gender feminine) except to insist on the principle of aggression and unexpected harm in the encounter with passion. In fact, the real question raised by the second stanza is why the rose is called 'sweet' at all. If a reader, unacquainted with the poem, were to be shown the stanza, with the first word missing ('——— rose, whose hue, angry and brave', etc.) and asked to supply a plausible first word, the last adjective to come to mind, I presume, would be 'sweet'. Nothing else in the stanza supports the initial epithet, a fact especially striking because the sweetness of the 'sweet day' is so wholly borne out by the succeeding adjectives. Is, in fact, Herbert's rose sweet at all? Not, certainly by its angry hue, which is only a superior (because mobile) sort of thorn; not, certainly, by its entombed root; by its bravery, perhaps? But 'sweetness', in the conventional sense established by earlier poems on the sweet rose, and by the 'sweet' day and the 'sweet' spring here in the poem, is almost antithetical to 'bravery' in Herbert's sense. We are left with the notoriously unmentioned sweetness of the rose's perfume or nectar, what Herbert calls in another poem 'hony of roses'. No doubt this aspect of the rose is what Herbert includes in the next stanza with its 'chest of sweets', but all mention of perfume, the only thing that could make the epithet 'sweet' seem plausible, is suppressed in this second stanza.[1] The rose, in short, is not praised as the day was.

Let us, in an apologetic experiment, rewrite the second stanza so that it becomes a 'praise' like the first, expanding its first epithet logically:

Sweet rose, whose hue, so gently brave,
  Delights the gazer's tender eye,
Thy root, alas, is in the grave,
    And thou must die.

The first thing necessary, in such a rewriting, is to change Herbert's bold rhythm (so noticeable after the placid sweetness in the rhythmic conduct of the first stanza, with its perfect and famous partition of stress among all the words of its first line, and its subsequent iambic regularity). The markedly irregular rhythm of Herbert's first two lines about the rose mimics the encounter of rose and rash gazer, with two head-on shocks 'hue: angry' and 'brave: bids') and one slighter one ('rash: gazer'): the subsidence of this stanza into iambic rhythm can occur only after the duel of hue and eye has ceased.

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[1] It is significant that Wesley felt obliged to introduce 'fragrant' in re-writing the stanza. He altered the emphatic rhythm of the first and second lines, as well.

The third stanza, with its feminine rhymes, is always breaking into a dance meter, and here there is no difficulty at all about the initial epithet. Spring is indeed not only sweet but the quintessence of sweetness, at once its expansion and contraction,[1] and Herbert's rush of responsive feeling betrays the passion underlying the poem, hitherto kept at an impersonal distance. For the first time Herbert himself enters the poem, and again he denies, as he had in the stanza on the rose, that dissolution is basically a temporal event. With the rose, death was co-temporal with life; with the spring, we discover that ending is, on this earth, of one essence with existing. It is not because music exists in time that it 'has its closes'; it is rather because the beginning seeks the end, and makes no sense without it. All unities are also separations from other things, and therefore all earthly essences, whether in life or in art, have limits.

Because 'Vertue' has been seen so often as a poem contrasting the corruptibility of the natural order with the incorruptibility of the soul, and, consequently, as a poem about nature's subjection to Time, it is worth remarking on the fate attending each of Herbert's instances. The lovely day will 'fall' — almost a gravitational matter coinciding with the setting of the sun, and implying no real change occurring in the essence of the day itself; the passionate rose lives in its own grave, and comes closest, but certainly not by a Time-process, to 'death' in our usual sense; the spring, like music, comes to a close in a 'horizontal' ending that implies neither a burial nor a fall from a height. In fact, 'death' is thrice defined in the poem, and the only grisly death (like the only equivocal 'sweetness') belongs to the rose. The day dies intact, as effortlessly as it has lived; spring, like music, has a dying fall; but these declensions are sweet ones. The poem is not occupied chiefly with the *corruption* of nature by Time, only with the eventual (and philosophically necessary) *cessation* of nature.

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[1] See Stein, op. cit., p. 179.

Similarly, though the temporal question can hardly be excluded from the poem (given the presence of some temporal words like 'tonight' or 'spring' — I except the words 'ever' and 'never' as being eternal rather than temporal), the subject of each stanza, as it appears in the two initial lines, is conceived of not temporally, but solely in spatial or visual terms. The day is a span between earth and sky; the rose sends forth its pricking hue to the gazer through the ether; the spring is a box full of days and roses. The word 'day', itself, normally a temporal one, is transformed into a spatial unit by its alliance with the word 'roses' in the phrase, 'Spring, full of . . . days and roses'; the oddity of the link is not seen until we create a similar pair, say, 'full of weeks and oranges', or something similar. An addition of dissimilar things tends to assimilate one of the pair to the other, and here 'day' is clearly assimilated to 'rose', since both are, in the poem, things that can be put into a box of compacted sweets. We might say, given the visual stress, that these are objects which vanish rather than events which end; the poem, once again, is concerned not with time but with cessation.

When we reach the famous final stanza, we realize that there has been an abrupt break in format. The principle of inertial movement, transferred to poetry, suggests that Herbert might have continued the poem in the strict framework of its repeated construction: 'Sweet ——, thou must (or shall ——.'[1] The frame is one of direct address, coupled with prophetic statement about the future destiny of the thing addressed. If I may be forgiven another rewriting, a fourth stanza resembling the first three in syntactic form would give us something like:

> Sweet soul, thy vertue cannot rust,
> Like timber aged thou dost not give,
> And when the world will turn to dust,
> Thou'lt chiefly live.

The question I want to raise by this affront to the poem is not one of worth, but one of procedure. Why did Herbert depart from his 'Sweet X' format and his direct address? and why did he not put the future of the soul in the future tense? But I defer answers here in order to put another question.

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[1] See, e.g. the absurd ending in the version in *The Charmer*, given above in note 3.

If Herbert wanted to say that the soul was better than natural things, why did he not say that though natural things were sweet the soul was still sweeter? I again rewrite the final stanza:

> Only the sweet and vertuous soul,
> A honey'd spring perpetual gives,
> And when the whole world turns to coal,
> Then chiefly lives.

It is of course clear at once that the rewritten 'sweet' last stanza like the rewritten 'sweet' stanza on the rose earlier, is insipid in conception, and we must conclude that the smarting gazer, the angry-hued rose, and the seasoned timber have some common stiffening function in the poem. That stiffening function lies behind the pun present in the title of the poem:[1] the rose has 'vertue' in the sense of power, and the soul must be given at least as much resistance as the world has power. The poem, then, centres on both power and sweetness.

The customary Christian view is that to the seducing sweetness of the world must be opposed a stern and resistant power of the soul. Herbert is not unwilling to see the truth of this view, but he does not wish to adopt it at the cost of placing the order of nature and the order of spirit in radical opposition to each other. He wants to attribute to the soul a sweetness too. But as we might have asked what justification there was for the epithet 'sweet' applied to the armed rose, so we may well ask what justification is offered us for calling the soul sweet. The only things we are told about it are that it 'never gives' and that it lives now but 'chiefly lives' after the Last Day.[2] There are rather colourless phrases. Are we to conclude that Herbert is illegitimately counting on our extra-poetic assent to the soul's sweetness because we are good Anglicans? The sweetness of the rose, after all, is at least justified later in the poem by its implicit inclusion in the 'chest of sweets' of the elegiac third stanza, a ceremonial farewell to beauty paralleling the lines in 'The Forerunners':

> Lovely enchanting language, sugar cane,
> Hony of roses, whither wilt thou fly?

The soul, we think, needs its sweetness defined even more desperately, because it seems in so many ways opposed to the previous sweetness, of day, rose, and spring, found in the poem.

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[1] Miss Rickey points this out, op. cit., p. 93.

[2] Stein, op. cit., p. 182.

The soul, linked by the epithet which it shares with the other self-evidently sweet things, seems to be included as one member of the class of 'sweets'. However, it would be fatal to describe it, as I have done in rewriting the stanza, in terms of the sweetness of nectar, light, or perfume: it would then be in a natural subclass along with the day, the rose, and the spring. George Herbert Palmer, in his beautiful but sometimes misleading edition of Herbert, represents the subject of 'Vertue' as 'the perpetuity of goodness', and he adds that goodness is 'bright as the day, sweet as the rose, lovely as the spring, but excels them all in never fading'.[1] Surely the emphasis of this paraphrase is mistaken: Herbert's poem is not one which says, 'O Vertue, thou art beautiful as the day' in the first stanza, and 'O Vertue, thou art lovely as the rose' in the second stanza, and then 'O Vertue, thou art sweet as the spring' in the third stanza. If the poem had done this, we should have no trouble in believing in the sweetness of the soul; it would have been demonstrated for us thrice over. Herbert, on the contrary, establishes first the absolute priority (in the development of the poem) of the sweetness of nature, allowing for the bitter-sweetness of the rose, and only then begins to talk of the soul. We cannot presume, as Palmer seems to do, a knowledge of the end of the poem in reading the first stanza.

The sweetness of the soul, then, is not precisely the sweetness of air, of perfume, or of nectar. What, then, is it? It is not the experienced sweetness of the felt ecstasy of the soul. That, for Herbert, is represented in 'The Banquet', where indeed the soul, to express its ecstasy, resorts to metaphors of melted sugar, sweetened wine, and the fragrance of 'flowers, and gummes, and powders', but with the qualification:

> Doubtless, neither starre nor flower
>   Hath the power
> Such a sweetness to impart;
> Only God, who gives perfumes,
>   Flesh assumes,
> And with it perfumes my heart.

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[1] G. H. Palmer, *The Life and Works of George Herbert,* III, 334.

In 'Vertue' the sweetness of the soul is not immediate or felt, but only remembered or inferred, and this memory or inference creates the pathos of the poem. It is a poem of faith, not of love. Therefore Herbert cannot *say* anything sweet *about* the soul (as Palmer implies he does): he can only say that it *is* sweet, and trust us to believe that he knows whereof he speaks, having so elaborately assumed his credentials as a connoisseur of sweetness by the first three stanzas. He then, without any elaboration of the adjective 'sweet', immediately begins to illustrate the virtue of the soul — the Holdfast, the staunchness, the unyieldingness of it. The anchor and the optick of 'Hope' are the emblems of this poem too, and having said so much, we are tempted once again to think that while the poem succeeds very well in realizing the beauties of spring, it succeeds less well in realizing their brother-and-antithesis, the staunch soul.

The answer to this problem lies partially in the second stanza, where a type of sweetness is shown to give a sudden smart in the 'tasting' (a meditation continued, as stated above, in 'The Rose'). Our relishing of the day and the spring is impeded only philosophically, by reflection on their brevity, but the relish of the rose is physically impeded by the after-smart — it 'biteth in the close', either visually or physiologically. If things which seem sweet are not, then things which seem not may be. If the soul is sweet, it is with a hidden sweetness rather resembling the hidden smart in the rose, an 'aftertaste' in the soul which comes on the Last Day.

In most *carpe diem* poems, the direct address is made by the lover to his mistress (or he may address himself and her together, as in 'To His Coy Mistress' and 'Corinna's Going A-Maying'). If instances of natural brevity are given as proof of mortality, they are given in the third person. This convention is so strong, that the *thing addressed* (in a poem reminding us, as 'Vertue' does, of the *carpe diem* genre) unconsciously becomes, whatever its logical function, the poet's 'mistress' and by extension himself, since *carpe diem* poems addressed to a mistress are likewise, as Marvell and Herrick saw, equally *carpe diem* poems addressed to oneself; the poet wants his mistress to seize the day because without her compliance he cannot seize it himself. (In the special case of the elder poet counselling the younger, the elder is regretting his own lost opportunities and therefore symbolically and *a posteriori* addressing himself.) In a *carpe diem* poem, in short, the poet might say, 'O Rose, thou shalt die',[1] but he would be including himself or his mistress (his other self) implicitly in the statement: 'Since *we* are but decaying,' says Herrick. The profound object of commiseration is always really the poet himself.

The day, the rose, and the spring, then, are all figures which, to the extent to which he uses the tradition of direct address, Herbert means to represent himself: this seemingly so impersonal poem is in fact a miniature autobiography, which witnesses to the necessary cessation, in the order of Nature, of Herbert's original innocence, 'brave' passion, and rapturous youth. However, from the very beginning of the poem, the poet is also implicitly set against nature, not identifying himself *in toto* with it, though he certainly identifies elements of himself — his youth, his aggression, his passion — with it. The pathos of the poem comes as a result of this partial identification of himself with nature, but the strength of the poem comes from the means by which Herbert distinguishes other elements of himself from mortal nature. The day dies — but the dew of tears remains behind (with Herbert) to mourn its fall; the rose's root is in the grave even while it sends forth its angry dart — but the rash gazer, wiping his eye, remains behind (with Herbert) the wiser perhaps for his experience, to moralize on the eventual powerlessness of the rose's power; the spring dies — but Herbert's music remains behind (with Herbert) to exemplify the years that bring the philosophic mind. In each stanza, then, someone or something — the weeping dew, the rash gazer wiping his eye, a strain of music — stands outside the pictured death of nature, just as Herbert's voice, tender but stern in its prophecies, stands outside the events it foretells. This is a voice which 'never gives'. Though it yields to its own passion of regret in the rush of sensibility betrayed in 'Sweet spring, full of sweet dayes and roses, / A box where sweets compacted lie', it checks itself, recovers its equilibrium, and reverts, with the gravity of the seasoned soul, to the undeniable necessity for musical closes.

It is truly the voice of the sweet and virtuous soul which has been speaking to us all through the poem — sweet in its instant emotion of kinship towards all other sweet things (even to the point of being hurt by its own precipitancy) and virtuous in its response to the encounters with sweetness. It loves other beings of innocent sweetness and weeps their disappearance; it chastises itself for rashness after an encounter with the bitter sweetness of passion; and it acknowledges the philosophical necessity for all sweetness' coming to an end. The sweetness of the soul, however, is rather baffled by the end of the poem. It has watched the day die, the rose wound, and the spring disappear, and has reacted virtuously; but what to do with its sweetness when the whole world turns to coal? There is nothing left for the natural sweetness of the soul to turn congenially to; springs, days, and roses are gone; it is time for it to call on its other qualities, and to be staunch, to be stoic, to be seasoned timber. No image of sweetness would do in this all-consuming end. There can be no natural appeal to sweetness in the fire which 'solvet saeclum in favilla'.

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[1] I except the *carpe diem* poems which represent nature as cyclical, since they are irrelevant to Herbert's poem which represents nature as mortal.

Why this energetic holocaust at the end? Herbert is perhaps cavalier, we may think, in his over-severe 'punishment' of the beautiful, in burning up, in his penultimate line, the 'little world' of his poem. It is his day and his rose and his spring which he burns to coal, deliberately. His conflagration raises the very old question of the possibility of 'natural' virtue. Is unreflecting virtue, 'innate' virtue, we might say, virtue at all? As Newman put it later on, what has gentlemanliness, or sweetness, to do with holiness? What is the relation between natural virtue and 'real' virtue? Is it possible to do good without the intention of doing good? (Such is the 'virtue' that goes forth from herbs.) Shakespeare thought a flower could be said to be, in this sense, all unconsciously 'vertuous':

> The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
> Though to itself it only live and die.

The notorious ambiguity and bitterness that surround this statement in the *Sonnets* betray the difficulties of founding an ethic on beauty or sweetness or 'vertue' of the natural sort.

A possible stiffening, Shakespeare thought, can be added to sweetness by way of truth:

> O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
> By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!

Herbert hints at the deceptiveness of beauty in the 'untruth' of the rose, with its root hidden in death (though it is uninvaded by Shakespeare's canker or Blake's worm). But it is not deceptiveness in worldly beauty which is Herbert's main difficulty. The day he gives us is pure truth (unlike Shakespeare's 'glorious morning' which turns false under the 'basest cloud'), and Herbert's spring is a quintessence of pure sweetness with no lilies which fester in it. For Herbert, then, beauty does not so much need the complement of truth since it is so often of itself 'true'. It rather needs two other things: strength and usefulness. Beauty, for all Herbert's passionate sensibility, seemed frail to him; its action was no stronger than a flower, a 'momentarie bloom'. It needed some admixture of the masculine. When God first poured out his blessings on man, according to 'The Pulley', 'Strength *first* made a way; / *Then* beautie flow'd, then wisdom, honor, pleasure'. Perhaps this list represents Herbert's own scale of worth.

Are we convinced, then, by the end of 'Vertue', of the necessity of adding strength to sweetness, and if so, how? Herbert has regretted, in the poem, the perishing of his innocence and his passion, the passing of his springtime. If the selves of spring — the innocent self, the importunate self, the self full of 'compacted' potential — are gone, who is the Herbert who is left, and does he have any continuity with these vanished selves? The problem is one we generally think of as Wordsworthian, but it is first of all a human problem, and certainly antedated Wordsworth. Is there a natural piety binding together the past and present selves of Herbert?

The word 'sweet', applied to the soul, is the only verbal sign of identity between the later and the earlier selves. That identity is partly submerged by the dominant duties or possibilities of middle age: to be staunch, not to give in, to be useful. In youth one is beautiful, innocent, energetic, ravishing; in middle age one is to be a support, a piece of seasoned timber supporting the fabric of the world, like the just Sundays in Herbert's poem of that name:

> Sundaies the pillars are,
> On which heav'ns palace arched lies;
> The other dayes fill up the spare
> And hollow room with vanities.
> They [i.e. Sundays] are the fruitfull beds and borders

In Gods rich garden: that is bare
Which parts their ranks and orders.

Pillars are here identified with the fruit which follows the springtime of blossoms; to be useful or fruitful is the function of the seasoned soul. But as it would be presumptuous to attribute fruit to oneself, Herbert forbears to attribute to himself in 'Vertue' anything but staunchness.

Two things survive Herbert's holocaust of his blossoms and his spring days: the 'vertuous soul', of course, exemplified not only in the last stanza but in the voice which speaks the entire poem and expresses its final attitudes toward day, rose, and spring; but also, the order of music, which Herbert distinctly separates from the perishing order of natural decay. Its logical function is superior to the function of natural order, and its harmony allows it a spirituality near to the soul's own. 'My music' — it is all that the speaker of the poem tells about his present self, that he has music. Each purely natural element in the poem is characterized by one death-like attributed noun: the day by 'thy fall'; the rose by 'thy root . . . in its grave'; the spring by 'your closes'. The poet alone has a 'living' attributed noun: 'my music'. That music is part of the continuity of sweetness, contributing its sweetness to the virtuous soul, linking age and youth, and binding each to each.

If we now return to the earlier question of direct address, we realize that Herbert's delicacy forbids his making a blunt apostrophe to the virtuous soul. 'But thou, O soul' — it would seem his own soul he was invoking, and though he can tell us he has music, he will not tell us that he has a virtuous soul. On the other hand, neither will he use the usual form for abstract philosophical generalization: he will not say 'Onely *the* sweet and vertuous soul . . . never gives.' It seems that the indefinite article in such a case points usually to the speaker's having a particular case potentially in mind:[1] that the indefinite article, in brief, attributes a superior reality-value to the illustration. The reality-value of the soul is also increased by the reiteration of the epithet 'sweet', which links it to those supremely real examples of sweetness we have already been given in the poem, and which compares the soul, under that rubric, with the day, the rose, and the spring. It is true that the poem exists primarily to differentiate the soul from these, that the poem is, as Rosemond Tuve says, a 'definition by differences'[1] — but the soul would not need differentiation unless at first blush it looked to belong to the same order as the day, the rose, and the spring. What do we use differentia for if not to distinguish similar things? For this reason the soul must co-exist with its companions. It may indeed *chiefly* live after the last Day, but it certainly also lives[2] a life of sweetness, like its companions, now. When Wesley rewrote the poem into a hymn, he not only effaced Herbert's metaphor of timber, with its attributions of staunchness and usefulness, but he also virtually effaced the soul from existence in natural life, as Elsie Leach has remarked, quoting Wesley's final stanza:

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[1] M. Jacques Teyssier of the University of Bordeaux has made this distinction between definite and indefinite article for me. A mother will say, e.g. to a disobedient child, 'A good child doesn't do that', and not 'The good child doesn't do that'. The indefinite article makes it possible to have in mind a potential particular application: 'A cow needs grass, so I am buying land to pasture my cow in.' 'The cow is herbivorous,' on the other hand, is a statement of essence, and does not imply my possible ownership of a cow. 'A sweet and virtuous soul never gives, and so if my soul is sweet and virtuous, I shall remain staunch.'

> Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
>   When nature all in ruins lies,
> When earth and heaven a period find,
>   Begins a life that never dies.[3]

The firmness of the soul which, though subjected to the hammer-blows of life and death, never gives, is marked by Herbert's strong reversion to trochaic meter in his last stanza. If we cut the feet in iambics, the sense is badly served: 'A sweet / and ver- / tuous soul / like sea- / son'd tim- / ber nev- / er gives.' The more 'natural' way to read these lines is in trochaics, where the words fit easily into the feet: 'Onely a / sweet and / vertuous /

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[1] Rosemond Tuve, op. cit., p. 303.

[2] The verb 'lives', which closes the poem, is of course a hypothetical one, grammatically speaking, since it follows on the hypothetical case '*Though* the whole world *turn* to coal'. However, it rhymes with 'gives', which is in the present tense of habit (denied habitude, in this case). Consequently, we tend to take the final 'lives' as also a present tense. The effect of this 'deceptive' syntax — 'The soul lives now but chiefly lives then' — is to confer immortality on the soul as it preserves its 'present tense' through the Last Day. A future tense, to match the 'must die' (envisaging the future) of the other verses, would be wholly out of place predicated of a spiritual substance which cannot be subject to Time, or to changes in Time.

[3] Elsie Leach, 'John Wesley's Use of George Herbert', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, XVI, 1953, 199.

soul like / season'd / timber / never / gives.' The repeated strokes and lifts show the firmness of the staunch soul under attack. The tone in Herbert's last stanza, then, is not triumphant as we might have expected, but rather grave and judicious, largely on account of the limiting word 'chiefly'. Wesley's version is a far more triumphant 'religious' paean, and shows us strongly, by its contrast with Herbert, how careful Herbert was to express dogma only in so far as he could make it real in his own feelings and therefore in a poem. The distinction between the hymn writer, versifying doctrine, and the poet, expressing feeling, is nowhere clearer than in Wesley's revisions of Herbert.

'Vertue' does not go on to the time when the intrinsic sweetness of the soul, so followed in life by the natural sweetness which it must see die around it, will find a correspondence in heavenly sweetness. We end in the deprivations of judgement, with the soul sternly more alive, but lonely in its solitary immunity to fire, its strength taking precedence, visibly, over its sweetness. We are accustomed to poems ending in stoicism; we know them well in Wordsworth. What Wordsworth could not write of was the recovered sweetness of the redeemed soul. Herbert could not write of it in this poem, either, but he is the author of the most exquisite poem in English expressing the state in which faith and hope, the necessary virtues of middle and old age, are dissolved, and pure sweetness returns and remains: 'Love bade me enter . . . So I did sit and eat.' To write of the hoped-for future in the past tense, as Herbert does in 'Love', is only possible to a poet of a changeable temperament, who has already had the experience which he hopes to have again. If Herbert had not known so naturally the sweetness of the day, the rose, and the spring, and the different-but-similar sweetness of his own music and his own soul, he could not have imagined, in 'Love', the sweetness which, after the fire of the Last Day, should incorporate them all in a final banquet.