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Costly Monuments: Representations of the Self in George Herbert's Poetry (Book Review)

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unnoticed so that actors become available for new roles. Smidt finds such suppressions either inexplicable or signs of the playwright's confusion.

Following Smidt's arguments can be an exhilarating exercise in ratiocination: "One may hazard the guess It is not unreasonable to suspect There can be no doubt that All in all it is probably fair to say It is tempting to suppose It may not be entirely irrelevant to observe that In any case it seems likely enough It almost looks as if" But as soon as these guesses are read against the texts they are meant to explain, commonsense reading or simple theatrical visualization leads to the rejection of Smidt's hypotheses.

This is not to argue that the search for Shakespeare's process of composition is not important. Recent work, however, has been seeking evidence not in the disjointed plot lines which were conventional in so much Elizabethan and Jacobean drama but rather in those plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries which have more than one extant text. *Hamlet* for example has long been thought to embody authorial revision in its several texts, and the two texts of *King Lear* have recently begun to be read as early and late Shakespearean versions. Before conjuring Shakespeare's ultimately unknowable original intentions, any study such as Smidt's should base itself on the tangible evidence we have in the quartos and First Folio now being mined by textual scholars and on the valuable records of theatrical practice gleaned by theatre historians. Without any such foundation this work has little lasting value.

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK,
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Steven Urkowitz

Barbara Leah Harman. *Costly Monuments: Representations of the Self in George Herbert's Poetry*. Cambridge, Mass.—London: Harvard University Press, 1982. x + 225 pp. \$17.50.

The privilege and even the defining mark of a great poet is to be handled—and mis-handled—by critics of all persuasions. It was thus perhaps inevitable that George Herbert should sooner or later run the risk of, in a word, deconstruction. What was not inevitable was that Herbert should be so fortunate with regard to the deconstructing hands he fell into. Barbara Leah Harman's *Costly Monuments: Repre-*

sentations of the Self in George Herbert's Poetry may fail to convert anyone not already predisposed to accept deconstructive analysis, but will surely impress and usefully provoke many readers because of its intricate arguments and shrewd interpretations of a variety of poems by Herbert. One can disagree with *Costly Monuments* on nearly every page and still be extremely grateful for this valuable modern approach to Herbert.

Harman's focus throughout is on the ways in which "the self is formed, deformed, shaped, and 'fashioned' " (p. 35) in Herbert's poems. Self-representation proves to be a "vexed enterprise," an impulse not only "powerful" but also constantly "thwarted, and redesigned to suit what thwarts it, in enormously complex ways" (p. viii), and in order to describe the range of Herbert's response to the problems of self-representation Harman defines three sub-genres. A collapsing poem, such as "The Collar" or "Affliction (I)," constructs an elaborate story that seems stable and true until it is reinterpreted and overturned by the concluding lines. The ending dismantles a self that, however faulty or sinful, was at least coherent, and though it "gestures toward" a corrected self a collapsing poem, according to Harman, never adequately represents this new self. A dissolving poem, such as "Church-monuments" or "Mortification," similarly shows the disintegration of a self, but this is accepted as one's legitimate story and the lesson of dissolution enters into the poem not as a surprising ending but rather from the beginning, understood as a condition of "unobstructed access" (p. 129) to God. Finally, a typological poem, such as "The Altar" or "The Bunch of Grapes," allows for the representation of personal, idiosyncratic stories but only as they are rewritten as biblical stories; the self is preserved via "reconstruction as another" (p. 187).

Harman's approach to Herbert is knowledgeable and authoritative, but she has a tendency to overstate her points, and this coupled with frequently unexpected ways of interrogating a poem makes *Costly Monuments* open to controversy. One could go on for quite some time debating her many astonishing statements, such as the claim that "Affliction (I)" suggests "the compatibility of life and impaired consciousness, and the incompatibility of life and full consciousness" (p. 97), and that a crucial element of "The Collar" is its frame of silence and intimation "that the real event taking place before us has less to do with the meanings toward which the words

eventually point than it has to do with the fact that suddenly there is speech where there was none before" (p. 66). But rather than challenging a long list of these particular statements, it may be more worthwhile to make a few general observations on several arguable parts of Harman's critical method.

First of all, though she attempts to define her key word "self" carefully, it seems to me that Harman frequently uses this term in an unnecessarily strict way and while not always making clear how limited her definition is meant to be. The "self made manifest in writing" (p. 37) can never of course be the whole self, the totality of one's physical and spiritual being, including all one's actions and thoughts. But Harman cuts too much away, and "self" as it is normally used in *Costly Monuments* refers to a belief in the possibility and value of one's independent existence, an attachment to worldly things, and willful separation from God and all other masters. With "self" defined in this way it is no wonder that "self-representation is a vexed enterprise." There is little doubt that the notion of self as selfishness is persistent and that Herbert struggles with it throughout *The Temple*. But Harman seems reluctant to grant "selfhood" to anything that is not exclusively selfish and primarily concerned with the "space of one's appearance." As a result, the corrected, submissive, devoted "self" is problematic—much more so for Harman than for Herbert. Not surprisingly, *Costly Monuments* is one of the only major studies of Herbert's poetry that makes no mention of "Love (III)"; Harman's notion of self could not, I suspect, without great difficulty encompass or embrace the integrity of the person stating humbly but assertively "So I did sit and eat."

Secondly, though Harman notes early on that "The use of language for the purposes of self-presentation is what interests me here" (p. 201 n. 1), her lack of attention to the larger contexts, especially social, economic, and political, of self-fashioning leaves much of her commentary, however dazzling, somewhat ungrounded. She raises important questions about the dialectical relationship of persons and cultures that are too complicated to be answered by an analysis of texts alone. Her discussion of Herbert's poetics, supported by readings of the "Jordan" poems, is extensive and illuminating, but her premise that poetry is a "vehicle for self-manifestation in a world otherwise inhospitable to self-manifestation" (p. 43), though undoubtedly true, demands a closer study of the poet's world than we

get here. Other recent works point the way: because of their specific focus on a variety of disabling and enabling cultural circumstances that help shape texts, such studies as Daniel Javitch's *Poetry and Courtliness in Renaissance England* and Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* do for Spenser, Wyatt, and Shakespeare (among others) what still remains to be done for Herbert.

Finally, the major question remains of whether in turning traditional critics of Herbert on their heads Harman occasionally does the same with Herbert. We should be careful not to overestimate the novelty of *Costly Monuments*: throughout much of it Harman is exactly what she presents herself as in the opening chapter on "The Critical Controversy"—a mediator between Tuve, Summers, and Lewalski on the one side and Empson, Vendler, and Fish on the other. In fact, though this in no way diminishes the brilliance of her readings, as the book progresses Harman's commentary gets less and less controversial, and the concluding emphasis on typology, one of the oldest modes of exegesis, gives a surprisingly conservative cast to a study that begins by exhibiting one of the latest exegetical modes. But it is probably the opening chapters of *Costly Monuments* and the deconstructive readings of various poems that will, for better or worse, gain the most attention, and here, especially in her reading of "The Collar," she opposes most directly the common approach to Herbert. Rebutting Harman's carefully elaborated interpretation is no simple matter, but in some ways her argument that "the rebellious 'interior story' offers the only fiction of coherence and stability available to the speaker of 'The Collar' " (p. 88) is anticipated and answered by Herbert's own statement (in "Confession") that "fiction / Doth give a hold and handle to affliction" (ll. 23–24). Harman is certainly right to emphasize the presence throughout *The Temple* of fictions straining toward self-support and coherence, but Herbert provides evidence, in "Confession" and elsewhere, that despite their seductive appeal to the persona these fictions are temporary, even illusory, sometimes troublesome, and well worth giving over to achieve other kinds of coherence and stability.

Harman's approach is difficult and unconventional, but she takes great pains to explain, illustrate, and even repeat her main points; as a result, the reader is rarely confused or disoriented, even in the midst of the most complicated analysis. Furthermore, she maintains a sharp focus by relegating many allusive comments to her "Notes," a fasci-

nating twenty-five page section that allows her to continue her debate, point by point, with modern critics and also look briefly at works by such poets as Sidney, Donne, and Vaughan, thereby expanding on without interrupting the argument in her text. Her readings are rewarding ones, and *Costly Monuments* generally lives up to the words of praise Harman lavishes on G. H. Palmer's monumental edition of and commentary on Herbert's poems, from which she borrows her title: it is "rich in texture, rich in density, richly embodied" (p. 38).

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Sidney Gottlieb

A. N. Wilson. *The Life of John Milton*. Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. 278 pp. \$19.95.

The volume under review demands two reviews. For it is a biographical account of a well-known author, drawn from other printed biographical accounts, intended for a "popular" audience and as a readable one-volume understanding of that author and his works. One review should be concerned with the result of that intended form and treatment; the other, with its contribution to the subject and any substantive problems. As a popular account of the life of John Milton the volume being reviewed stresses the well-known episodes in his life—his college career when he was known as the Lady of Christ's College (Cambridge), his first marriage to Mary Powell, his service to the Council of State under Oliver Cromwell as Secretary for Foreign Tongues, his pamphleteering and the controversies in which he thereby became enmeshed, and his poetic career. It moves largely through the best known prose and poetry, offering readings of such works and quoting fairly extensively. Its substance is the popular view or interpretation of Milton and the works. The author, A. N. Wilson, is an award-winning novelist, literary editor of the *Spectator*, and popularizer of other literary subjects such as Sir Walter Scott. The style, language, and approach of the novelist are evident on every page.

Wilson offers some literary interpretation and sets up some of Milton's historical world, but the book is not long—only 259 pages of text—and so cannot give adequate examination to biography, literary reader, or context. Like a novel, it capsulizes an idea, a personality or interpersonal relationships, a contextual world, by a word or