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Approaches to Teaching the Metaphysical Poets ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Book Review)

Robin McAllister
Sacred Heart University

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BOOK REVIEW

Approaches to Teaching the Metaphysical Poets, ed. Sidney Gottlieb. New York: Modern Language Association, 1990. xii + 177 pp. \$34 cloth, \$19.50 paperback.

by Robin Louis McAllister

Approaches to Teaching the Metaphysical Poets, part of the *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* series published by the Modern Language Association, is one of the first to which teachers of this subject turn for guidance and a sense of how these poets can be taught in today's academic climate. Although in former years the metaphysical poets were unhesitatingly accepted as the subject of a college English course, many today might question their relevance, values, and importance. In some ways the idea that an entire semester should be devoted to "white male" poets with an intense, intellectualized religious faith and an outmoded concept of science and cosmology owes itself to the influence of one "dead white male" poet and college professor, T.S. Eliot. He almost single-handedly elevated Donne and the other seventeenth-century poets to canon status, and their poems about fleas that turn out to be sly come-ons would seem obvious candidates for "relaxation" to the inquisitorial stake if not just exclusion from the canon.

The essays in Professor Gottlieb's book are divided into two parts, "Materials" and "Approaches." The "Approaches" section is further divided into an "Introduction," "General Discussions and Backgrounds," "Course Contexts," and "Approaches to Specific Poets." The diverse points of view thus presented are impressive and do justice to both the complexity of the metaphysical poets and the different critical approaches to them. It is also appropriate and necessary for a book designed to help teachers of metaphysical poetry that these essays represent the current critical consensus and approach to these poets. Annabel Patterson's essay, "Teaching against the Tradition," is an excellent choice, therefore, as the keynote

“Introduction” essay through which all readers of this book are invited to approach the diverse essays that follow. Patterson writes: “The most problematic aspects of the metaphysical idea – its internal incoherences and its major exclusions – can render it an effective tool in the classroom, provided one teaches *against* the tradition” (p. 36).

For a scholar and reader like myself, however, trained in the traditions Patterson questions, this essay is the eye of a needle through which it is difficult to enter her pedagogical Kingdom of Heaven. It forces me to confront the question of how and why the metaphysical poets should be taught to students today. In the discussion that follows I am going to deliberately contrast the implicit assumptions in Patterson's essay to those assumptions that underlie the approach I was taught. In doing so I shall deliberately exaggerate the implications of Patterson's argument, but I do so for the sake of discussion, not out of disrespect for a colleague who displays a mastery of the scholarship and traditions she herself criticizes.

Patterson represents herself as a rebel against the academic Establishment taking on the dragons of the Ivy League and New Criticism. She attributes the creation of a “school” of metaphysical poets to New Critics, whom she implies privileged “style” over “larger cultural determinants” and whom she asserts maintained “that every text is self-determining and intelligible in terms of its own structure” (p. 35). The tradition she argues against, however, has nothing to do with the critical assumptions she attributes to New Criticism. Whether or not New Criticism in its reaction against an earlier biographical and historical approach ever asserted the anti-contextualist approach she attributes to it, scholars outside this critical movement in the 1950s and '60s had already rejected or modified this acontextualist assumption long before Derrida appeared on the scene. In uncritically repeating this deconstructionist myth about American literary criticism, Patterson ignores and depreciates the contributions of Marjorie Hope Nicolson, Rosamund Tuve, and Rosalie Colie, to name just three major academicians, her predecessors in critically examining the presuppositions underlying our readings of the metaphysical poets as well as her predecessors in opening the doors of the Ivy League to women professors. Patterson's deconstruction of Grierson's and Eliot's role in establishing the metaphysical poets within the literary canon had already been

performed by Nicolson and Tuve, whose scholarship and criticism have nothing to do with the premises of New Criticism, but everything to do with "larger cultural determinants" (p. 35), notably the disciplines of philology, history of ideas, and iconography.

These earlier women scholars, while anticipating, at least in the case of Rosalie Colie, Patterson's concerns with the role of women in academics, would not have shared her suspicion and rejection of erudition. They did not assume that their students would automatically reject the metaphysical wit she dismisses as "excessive or gratuitous learning . . . all too easily connected with academic pedantry" (p. 37). They recognized that an unusual concept, particularly when embodied in an esoteric term, can often be more easily remembered as a result and often has explanatory power for a student far beyond the immediate context of a particular poem.

Patterson might accuse my own teacher and mentor, Rosalie L. Colie, of excessive or gratuitous learning when Colie relates Donne's flea to his secularization of a mystical tradition of Scriptural language: "Rhopographical' images, that is, images of 'insignificant objects, odds and ends,' or 'rhyphological' images, of low and sordid things, as practiced in Hellenistic painting, become by Dionysius' argument appropriate to attempt comprehension of the divine essence. Against this background, several things become clear, among them, the curious habit of devotional poets' using 'low things' in immediate juxtaposition to the highest, such as Herbert's likeness of Christ to a bag, or of God to a coconut, and Donne's of the flea's triple life to the Trinity" (Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966], p. 25). But how does Patterson escape a similar charge of pedantry and gratuitous learning when she recommends "teaching against the tradition" so that, for her students, "The concept of paradigm shift is made easily accessible, and the student is freed to decide independently what to make of Donne and his contemporaries"? (p. 37).

Whether or not students can profit more from "paradigm shift" than from "rhopographical images," her premise that students must be "freed to decide independently what to make of Donne" may be a mixed blessing for students and for metaphysical poetry. A "paradigm shift" has occurred between academic generations of scholars like Colie and Patterson, and to understand what that shift in assumptions

entails, let us turn to Patterson's use of Donne's "The Flea" in her classroom discussion:

I find that students are genuinely amused by the outrageousness of "The Flea." . . . They can also see instantly that there is nothing particularly learned or difficult or esoteric about it, that the central metaphor is, on the contrary, bodily and mundane Students can easily detect both the intentional misfit between the randy associations ("It sucked me first, and now sucks thee" [l. 3]) and sacramental claims ("yea more than married are" [l. 11]) and the sudden shift in the male speaker's logic at the poem's conclusion. And all students are quick to observe that while the male speaker dominates the discourse, allowing his partner only reported speech, there is a real contest between them; male linguistic dexterity must shift its ground before female physical action: "Cruel and sudden, hast thou since / Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence" [ll. 19-20]. Nor does it escape a group engaged in matters close to themselves that the poem manages, at the point where the physical wins, a disturbing transference — enabling, if not requiring, them to see that the mention of cruelty, blood, and a nail makes the woman the violator in a drama of defloration of her own choosing, one that the male speaker (who had intended another defloration) is forced to articulate in the language of his own transgressive sacramentalism. All that without a single learned annotation; but it hardly escapes the student that the poem operates in one territory — sexuality — in which the relation between the physical and the conceptual is constantly being negotiated, that it is, in a sense they can understand, metaphysical. But we have not endorsed, after all, the idea of metaphysical poetry, that peculiar aggregate of the stylistic, the devout, and the masculinist approach to

literary value. The demonstration can be neatly rounded off by remarking that Grierson excluded "The Flea" from his original account of metaphysical poetry and by asking students why they think he did so. (pp. 39-40)

All this, without pedantry or a single learned annotation (although perhaps an annotation might be in order for "transgressive sacramentalism"). At least the student, once Patterson disabuses her or him of a "masculinist approach to literary value," is freed to "independently" decide what to make of Donne's poem.

Patterson implies that the concept of metaphysical poetry arises as a conspiracy among white male academicians to enshrine a poetry written by other dead white male poets who disguise their antipathy toward women by a show of wit that "resides in excessive or gratuitous learning" (p. 37), "essentializes" poetry, and functions as an elitist barrier to easy access for all readers: "And if the poetry has no historically specific message to bring to us, why do we insist on our students' making acquaintance with that alien language, unless it be for the satisfaction of demonstrating that the texts contain mysteries only we can unlock, that special skills are required for successful access to them?" (p. 39).

If, as Patterson suggests, students are alienated by the fantastic, learned quality of metaphysical poetry, then Patterson wants to assure her students that such learning is irrelevant to the understanding of these poets. She wants to encourage what she claims is her students' "suspicion of authority" (p. 37) and encourage a "healthy skepticism on the subject of the canon" (p. 37). These are appropriate pedagogical aims, but what Patterson encourages her students to reject as so much academic pedantry is precisely those traditions of scholarship and critical method that Nicolson, Tuve, and Colie employ as intellectual tools in order to accomplish the same aim. If, as Patterson believes, the New Critics "privilege" the poem at the expense of the reader's responses to it, Patterson does just the opposite. She privileges the reader's response at the expense of the poem and its traditions. Those allegedly outmoded metaphysical traditions are also the sources from which a student can discover reasons why seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry appears

“masculinist” and bizarre to late-twentieth-century reader.

What distinguishes Patterson from scholars like Colie and Nicolson is an assumption about how we understand poetry. The tradition Patterson rejects assumed that we must first try to understand a poet's work within its own historical context before we discuss its relevance to our own contemporary concerns. Speaking of George Herbert (in terms that explicitly reject a New Critical assumption), Rosalie Colie writes:

The poems of George Herbert, so transparent, so simple, do direct, have the distinction of being among the hardest poems in the English language to paraphrase. The more one tries to say something intelligent in explication of these poems, the more gibberish one tends to talk – about how the poems in *The Temple* approach that mysterious literary apogee, “pure poetry,” poetry that speaks for itself, poetry that is self-sufficient and needs no interpreter. For various reasons, statements like these are an inadequate solution to the problems raised by verse in general and by George Herbert's verse in particular: verse in general, as we know from linguists and others, cannot speak for itself any more than any other symbol system can, but takes its meaning from its contexts, both those to which it specifically refers and those which it attempts to exclude from the reader's attention.

(Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica*, p. 190)

This effort to situate a poem within its own cultural and historical context often resulted in our awareness as readers that our automatic responses to a poem are sometimes misleading. Such a “contextualist” approach fosters a healthy skepticism toward all readings of poetry rather than “privileging” a contemporary ideological approach. For critics like Patterson, the poet is both intentionally and unintentionally a propagandist, using poetry to impose established tradition on suppressed and oppressed readers. Colie and her own mentor, Marjorie Hope Nicolson, saw the poet as a critic of received

traditions.

There are at least two different Annabel Pattersons in her essay, one a critic of broad cultural assumptions, the "paradigm shift" critic, and the other an allegorist for contemporary gender politics in academia. In an allegorical reading her primary focus of interest is a concept or system of ideas that already exists and is formulated apart from poetry in the discourse of sociology or grammatology. Although the critic of "paradigm shift" reads poetry to deconstruct the hidden presuppositions that determine our readings or the value we attribute to certain texts in the canon, the allegorist explicitly projects her ideological preconceptions into the poetry she teaches. There is an affinity here with her critical position that privileges the reader's response over that of the poem as a locus of meaning and value determined by the contexts within which that poem is read.

If we reject the idea of studying the poem within its tradition and historical context, then we run the risk of privileging contemporary concerns as the measure of poetic meaning and value. This encourages intellectual condescension toward the past and blinds us to a kind of intellectual anachronism. We smile condescendingly at our "quaint" ancestors' unintentional anachronism in depicting scenes from the Bible as if they are taking place in medieval Italian or German villages, but we commit a similar anachronism ourselves when we read Donne as if his poems reflect our contemporary concerns over gender politics.

Much more than a handbook and guide to teachers, Professor Gottlieb's book raises two central issues for the professor of seventeenth-century poetry – How should the poetry be taught? and What should we expect our students to get from reading it? By privileging the student's response to poetry rather than the poetry itself, Patterson's approach, in my judgment, sends the wrong message to students. It may free the student from the burden of researching esoteric and difficult traditions of culture and language, but it may also free the student from examining his or her own unexamined assumptions in the mistaken impression that whatever prejudices, associations, and impressions he or she brings to the poem are already sufficient in themselves to understand the poem. Such an assumption is a parody and reversal of the position attributed to New Critics that the poem is self sufficient and contains in itself everything necessary

in order to interpret it intrinsically. Rather than a work of literature with its own structure and meaning within several traditions, the poem becomes a homogeneous, easily consumable artifact, not the object of reflection, difficult thinking, or critical skills gradually acquired from reading other poetry. If a student no longer needs to research "gratuitous" learning in order to situate the poem within its historical and cultural contexts, universities no longer need to maintain expensive research libraries. If such a student is not already aware of contemporary concerns and problems, the student can discover them by watching television or talking to others. Privileging the reader's response rather than the poem within its historical context may be an approach well adapted to some contemporary universities where the student is a consumer with a short attention span who demands instant gratification – and where the consumer is always right – but it is not an approach in the long term interests of teaching and learning poetry.