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## Herbert's Prayerful Art (Book Review)

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by his own willingness to be judged by worthy judges and by the poems which establish his submission to the proper bonds of familial love (pp. 67–71).

Finally, in the lyric collections as in *Volpone*, Wiltenburg must turn to the reader to supply the certainty he cannot always locate in the text. He admits that the coherence and wholeness of the *Epi-grammes* consists in “juxtaposition rather than synthesis, leading to affirmations that are, taken as a whole, partial and suggestive (all now depends upon the reader, who must both understand and act upon his understanding) rather than resounding and unequivocal” (p. 90). The uncharacteristically awkward syntax here, I think, reflects uneasiness about this appeal to the reader as the ultimate locus of the moral certainty Wiltenburg would rather find in author and text.

For what happens when the reader is unable or unwilling—as many will be today—to “understand” Jonson’s works in this way? Wiltenburg several times (especially in footnotes) dismisses a new historicist or post-structuralist reading as involving a failure to grasp Jonson’s moral intention, a failure, for example, to realize that “in Jonson’s moral economy, ideas precede and control material facts” (p. 107). But what of readers who believe that ideas *cannot* so easily control the material? Must such readers simply dismiss this book as out of date? Not necessarily, if they are willing to take the book on its own terms. Such readers might learn from its many moments of inspired close attention to meter, punctuation, and nuance of meaning. Or they might be reminded that there is another set of assumptions about literature, which many readers still hold and which can yield a coherent (if ultimately unsatisfying) account of a text. Whether a book truly contributes to Jonson studies if it refuses seriously to engage the best and most recent work is a question each reader must answer individually.

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Mary Thomas Crane

Terry G. Sherwood. *Herbert’s Prayerful Art*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1989. 190 pp. \$45.

Terry Sherwood is too concerned with celebrating what he describes as “Herbert’s prayerful art” to structure his book as an extended critical diatribe against modern writers who find Herbert to

be worried and worrisome. Nevertheless, barely beneath the surface, of what is often a moving reverie on Herbert's devotional artistry, is a sustained and insistent attempt to reposition Herbert in some kind of *via media* beyond the reach of such recent critics as Stanley Fish, Barbara Harman, Barbara Lewalski, Richard Strier, and Gene Veith. These critics tend to emphasize recurrent evidence in Herbert's poems of human insufficiency, unstable self-representation, and the pains and rigors of even a life of faith. Sherwood treats his critical adversaries generously (though very briefly), but his Herbert is radically different from theirs, and for him the poems tell tales of human powers strengthened, not overwhelmed, by God, a devotional self affirmed rather than called into question by prayer and poetry, and grief subsumed in an exhilarating feeling of delight.

More than any recent critic, Sherwood attempts to approach Herbert through an erotics rather than a hermeneutics of art (to use Susan Sontag's compelling distinction), examining the sensuous components of *The Temple* and focusing particularly on the devotional form and effect of the poems rather than their strict theological "meaning." He shares with Louis Martz and Rosemond Tuve a sense of the continuity between Herbert and earlier theologians, primarily Catholics, who stress the physical joys of personal and communal religious love, and he shares with Heather Asals a deep belief that for Herbert poetry, like prayer, was "a Eucharistic experience" (p. 20), a manifestation of union and love. After establishing the legitimacy of poetry as a kind of prayer in his first chapter, he turns to an extensive analysis of Herbert's understanding and representations of man's love of God, a topic often "crowded out" (p. 36) of modern "Protestant" interpretations of Herbert by a one-sided emphasis on faith and God's love of man. Sherwood associates Herbert with his Cambridge contemporaries John Preston and Richard Sibbes to argue that even certain strains of seventeenth-century Calvinism fully appreciated the mutual love of man and God.

The most interesting parts of the book revolve around Sherwood's demonstration of the distinctive ways in which Herbert's experience of love is embedded in the texture, imagery, and structure of the poems. It is a troubling fact that there are few references to physical union or embracing in *The Temple*, but Sherwood

shows at length how Herbert conveys a remarkably full range of spiritual joy in terms of “the taste, smell, and sound of sweetness” (p. 59). Throughout the poems, God is a sensuously felt presence, not an abstraction or a disembodied voice, and as Sherwood catalogues example after example of the sweetness of conforming to Christ, the pleasures of framing poems that are meant as offerings to God and edifying artifacts for human readers, and the quickening of one’s spirits that may follow even the darkest afflictions, he substantiates his claim that Herbert is “a poet of delight” (p. 100).

This is a remarkably cheery version of Herbert. Much to his credit, Sherwood does not sidestep the many disturbing aspects of *The Temple*: Herbert’s deep experience of recurring physical and spiritual pain, his difficulties in fashioning a devotional poetics worthy of or acceptable to God, his awareness that conformity to Christ’s exemplary sacrifice is both simple and strenuous, and so on. But for Sherwood these problems are rendered inconsequential by faith and love. And he makes some rather bold assumptions, not only about Herbert’s faith, which he writes about very familiarly, but about the beliefs of Herbert’s ideal readers. For Sherwood, “secular critics” have readily apparent “limitations” and “blindness” that “Christian readers” presumably do not, and therefore are or should be “uneasy” when it comes to “interpret[ing] the spiritual experience expressed by Herbert’s art” (p. 3). Secular critics, he says, “wish to avoid rushing in where perhaps only the Christian should tread” (p. 3). This comes close to reviving Coleridge’s claim that in order to appreciate Herbert fully one must be “a zealous and an orthodox . . . a devout and a devotional Christian . . . [and] an affectionate and dutiful child of the Church.”

Sherwood is more cautious than Coleridge, but still runs the risk of oversimplifying the experiences described by Herbert and restricting the “fit audience” of *The Temple*. His approach recalls an early Bergman film, *The Prison*, where one of the characters says, in a moment of arresting honesty and simplicity, that “if one can believe in God, there is no problem; if one cannot, there is no solution.” I resist defining the devotional philosophy of *The Temple* in that way, and thus have some reservations about *Herbert’s Prayerful Art*, which ultimately relies on faithful testimony as much as on critical argumentation.

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