

BOOK REVIEW

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Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry by Richard Strier. University of Chicago Press, 1983. 277 pages.

JUST AS HERBERT scholars have accustomed themselves to the arcane comments of his most recent post-structuralist critics, Richard Strier produces a new study which has the consistently annoying habit of making perfectly good sense. His impressive book is written with a clarity and precision which are delightful to read; his interpretations of Herbert's English poems go beyond showing "that they have certain shapes or emphases" (p. xi) to attempt to show "why" they are so. The "why" behind the poems, in Strier's opinion, is best explained by placing Herbert in context as a practicing Christian, an ordained priest, and, most important of all, as a knowledgeable and progressive Reformation theologian. This position is rather refreshing as it is contrary to the general view of Herbert as a poet, who created literary artifacts which could be read and understood on a purely aesthetic level. In this scheme only occasionally does he glance at the theological issues of his day. Strier gives us a systematic application of the theological frame of mind to the Herbert canon, and it is for this reason that this book offers some wonderful insights into the very situations and operations of Herbert's work.

Strier's book is not without faults, however. Whereas the pervasive influence of Calvin's thought on the Renaissance mind seems indubitable, it is less easy to accept the claim made by Strier that Luther's theological positions are pertinent to Herbert. He almost acknowledges as much when he tells us that "Herbert could easily have read Luther in Latin—but direct influence cannot be documented. Indirect influence, however, was almost inevitable" (p. xiii). Inevitable, yes; but to what degree? Simply because Herbert's sentiments bear some resemblance to Luther's thought does not mean that he shares Luther's theology. It is rather disconcerting, then, when Strier claims that Herbert's expression of his distrust of human reason is less "hyperbolic [than] Luther's, but his theology is the same" (p. 31) and also, in reference to the misguided intention of *imitatio Christi*, that Herbert "does not have Luther's rancor, but he does have his theology" (p. 50). Commendable as his

intentions may be, the urgency with which Strier makes Herbert conform to Lutheran doctrine is perhaps the only *major* flaw in the book. To claim Herbert for one specific camp, as Tuve and Martz did for the Anglo-Catholics represented by Laud, is particularly unfair. Herbert, as any poet worth his salt, was sensitive to many of the issues at the fore of intellectual debate; it was inevitable that he might address these issues, but it was not inevitable that he would champion any of them.

Strier can thus state that Herbert is “not an Arminian, that is, in the *theological* sense as opposed to the general political sense in which the term is sometimes used” (p. 84). The point is that Herbert is a closet Reformer, seeming to be an orthodox supporter of the Church of England, but disagreeing with its theology. It is a shame that Strier does not offer a full reading of Herbert’s “The Church Militant” at a point like this; he pauses merely to tell us that Herbert recognizes the great impulse to take “true” and “pure” religion to America, away from the ravages of doctrinal and sectarian strife in Europe. But Strier fails to notice that Herbert offered this observation as a last resort; he wishes to keep his Church, the Anglican Church, pure in his own land, neither “polluted” by Catholicism nor undercut by radical puritanism. Furthermore, Strier offers no comment whatsoever on Herbert’s first major excursus, the Latin poem *Musae Responsoriae*. In fact, he offers precious little on any Herbert work outside of *The Temple*. Herbert’s poem was written in reply to Andrew Melville’s rabidly anti-episcopal diatribe, the spectacularly named *Anti-Tami-Cami-Categoria* in which he ranted with the self-assurance which is the gift of Calvin. Quite simply, Herbert defends the faith here. Perhaps there is an explanation for this omission. The Latin poems were *public* pieces, far from the “private ejaculations” of the English lyrics of *The Temple*, and were designed for an audience which might have been less than enthusiastic about Calvinist and Lutheran doctrine. Still hoping perhaps for political advancement at court, Herbert may well have been keeping his nose politically clean. These are my speculations, however, and I do not want to second-guess Strier. But there is no doubt that his avoidance of the issue is rather disturbing.

In trying to bend Herbert’s poetry to Luther’s will, Strier has to deal with some troubling paradoxes. There are chapters in which he sets up a kind of straw man argument, which he delights in constructing only so that he may have greater pleasure in knocking it down. The fourth chapter, “*Vindiciae Gratiae: The Rejection of Bargaining*,” is a case in point. Strier tells us that “The Pearl” is designed to illustrate the “speaker’s conception of the covenant” between God and man, yet later in the same chapter, Strier shows convincingly, as he quotes from Thomas Blake’s *Vindiciae Foederis* (1653), that Herbert is really concerned with proving that there is no real covenant between God and man, because God acts without compunction.

In specific matters of doctrine, Strier offers some illuminating comments. He deals astutely with the idea of *agape* (unmotivated and undeserved divine

concern for the wretchedness of the human condition), especially in one of Herbert's most famous sonnets, "Redemption." The unexpected and direct articulation of Christ's speech at the end of the poem makes no sense to the poem's speaker, because, like *agape*, it is delivered for no other reason than Christ wishes to pronounce it. Viewed in this light, the poem becomes not just a piece speaking of *agape*, but a demonstration of it in action. Furthermore, Strier uses *agape* to explain away the notion of covenant theology by showing that Christ's sacrifice was ordained and necessary; God chooses to bind himself to man and requires little in return.

Strier's fascination with theology leads him into some fascinating speculations about Herbert's motives, even to the point of almost becoming a little absurd every now and then. For example, Strier proposes that Herbert's preference for emotion over intellect makes him wary of ingenuity. As it is the product of reason, Strier especially deems technical ingenuity a kind of mortal sin. Reason is a form of pride because through it man "wants the responsibility for his salvation to lie with him" (p. 30). But this approach seems rather strange for a man who like Herbert excelled academically, and whose prominent position at Cambridge gave him ample opportunity to exercise his rhetorical ingenuity. Herbert would probably agree with Strier's evaluation of emotion and the denial of wit. But the fact remains that Herbert can never actually reject ingenuity without becoming a dull poet. Strier suggests that "A Wreath" and "Sinnes Round," two poems which are thoroughly and elaborately contrived, are deliberately ingenious because they deal with the concept of sin directly. This surely is the logical point to make; yet, if we accept it at face value, then Herbert would actually commit a sin in producing an ingenious poem. And, by extension, Strier himself, in the ingenuity of his argument and anyone who replies to it, would be a sinner, too. *Mea culpa*.

Strier furthers this end by suggesting that Herbert's anti-intellectual Christian sentiment is part of a general internalization of religion, of moving inwards to what the heart has for us to feel, rather than listening to what the brain has to say. Internalization of belief produces a concomitant sense of the individual nature of Herbert's struggle with his own idea of his worth and his understanding of his relationship with God. This approach makes Herbert's poetry seem all the more vital and immediate; gone are the assumptions made blithely by many critics that when Herbert speaks in *The Temple*, he is speaking for any number of like-thinking Christians who are traveling the same spiritual road. Strier emphasizes the *emotional*, not the intellectual side of faith: the urgency of Herbert's speakers to force their attention on God shows a desperate desire to repent. The simple rudeness of this action, Strier terms wonderfully "privileged indecorousness."

In the same way, Strier makes this emotional strain in Herbert's work conform to basic Lutheran principles. Luther called for a fundamental realignment in Christian belief when he advocated a "theology of the cross," with

its emphasis on the Word made flesh, suffering for man, as opposed to a "theology of glory" with its intellectual disquisitions on the nature of a Majestic God. The latter represents the Christianity of theologians and philosophers, whereas the "theology of the cross" is sought after by believers who *feel* their relationships to God in poignant moments when the "sincerity of [their] groans makes them music in God's ears" (p. 182). Luther is so against the intellectualizing of human experience that he rejected most philosophical pursuits, especially platonism, and denied their importance to the Gospel of John. In the same way, Herbert is characterized as opposing the pantheism which platonism promoted, despite the fact that on occasions he seems deliberately pantheistic; consider, for example, the opening of "The Elixir," with its first lines reading "Teach me my God and King,/In all things thee to see."

I have been showing my disagreement with a few of the arguments of a book which I said made good sense. I admire the style and the scope of the work, and am impressed by its author's reasoning. But I disagree with the substance and the results of Strier's inquiries. He seems to place Herbert in the same league as today's fervent Falwellian fundamentalists who have placed blind faith above far-sighted and rigorous inquiry. The skill and originality with which Strier approaches his topic make his work constantly engaging, not to say intriguing. There is no doubt that Strier's book will be much discussed and cited in the future; it will be considered a major contribution to the canon of Herbert criticism because Strier provokes his readers to examine their own critical appraisals of Herbert, even if they choose finally to disagree with him.