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Article:

What a wonderful idea for a book! As the subtitle announces, Jonathan Post has brought together some of our finest contemporary poets and set them to interpreting and appreciating many important lyricists from Tudor-Stuart England and early colonial America. If the subtitle says much, the contents page says more: Peter Sacks on Wyatt, the late Anthony Hecht on Sidney, Linda Gregerson on Jonson, Calvin Bedient on Donne, Carl Phillips on Herbert, William Logan on Milton, Eavan Boland on Bradstreet, Alice Fulton on Cavendish, Stephen Yenser on Marvell, both Heather McHugh and Thom Gunn on Rochester, Robert Hass on Taylor, and no one—or rather practically everyone—on Shakespeare.

Post's main title says, perhaps, the most: he invokes Marvell's wondrous garden fantasy of respite from the urgencies of social and societal life, "Annihilating all that's made / To a green thought in a green shade"; so this collection, Post explains in his lively introduction, is about a return to "poetical reading" as distinct from, though not necessarily in opposition to, political and historicist reading. Post claims that to read "*poetically* ... is to prize (and to 'prise') the curious, explore the unusual, hunker down with the unordinary — sometimes with the OED in hand" (p. 5). In other words, "poetic" reading is close and intimate, word-obsessed and aesthetically-centered.

Post cautions that this " 'retreat' to the muses' garden is not the same thing as an escape from the world" (pp. 4-5) — in particular the world of postmodern critical theory. Still, most of the contributors display a measure of protective solidarity with their fellow past poets (this side idolatry, of course). I am reminded of what Richard Strier has to say in *Resistant Structures* about the resilient "resistance" mounted by literary forms; I'm also reminded of novelist Alison Lurie's trenchant comment on Derrida: "If someone says he is coming to deconstruct my house, I call the police." In this collection the police — or at least a friendly detachment of the local constabulary—have arrived.

Thanks no doubt to the poetic pride of the contributors, this collection exhibits a heartening humility about the critical enterprise: that is, as auxiliary to the creation, understanding, and experience of poetry itself. "Authorship remains, and sometimes reigns," Post notes about many of the essays, "in the figure of Donne's 'sovereignty' (Bedient), Cavendish's 'unordinary passions' (Fulton), Milton's 'modernity' (Logan), Rochester's rakishness (McHugh, Gunn), Jonson's 'loathed word' (Gregerson)" (p. 5). These poet-critics are suspicious of procrustean ideology and unsuspecting of pleasure, and they revive the immediate and personal response of the New Critics without Eliot-like puritanism or a universalizing fixation on "wit"; yet each critic remains thoroughly aware that "reading poetically can only mean something different for each author" (p. 6).

Indeed, one of the chief pleasures of this collection is in the rich variety of voices and idioms on display. Seldom is criticism so well- composed, at once so astute and so arresting in style. Peter Sacks leads off with "The Face of the Sonnet: Wyatt and Some Early Features of the Tradition," and his ear for connotation is practically ultrasonic. I've taught Wyatt's "Long Love" dozens of times, but Sacks made this sonnet new for me. He winkles out the marvelous implications of Wyatt's prosody (he notes "the stress-losing rhythm of the final line") and of his diction

(he hears the "hardiness" of line eight as a sexually "vascular" hardness, and the edenic resonance of words like "good" and "shame"). Sacks also excels by situating the poem more precisely in Wyatt's perilous life at court and in his honor-bound family heritage. Above all, Sacks hears almost infinite reverberations of the "face" and "features" in his title: he locates this particular poem near the beginning of a tradition "that seeks to save face via a detour behind and beneath the face — usually toward the heart" (p. 28). Sacks also helped me to see Wyatt as much more than just a source of "gorgeous raw materials" (p. 31), in John Ashbery's phrase, but as an accomplished artist with rough magic of his own.

Sacks's mention of Ashbery highlights another of this collection's many pleasurable virtues: since most of the contributors are not dogged Early Modern specialists, they feel free to range in the zodiac of their own poetic associations, which are often Modern or Contemporary. This range is particularly evident in Anthony Hecht's "Sidney and the Sestina." The sestina is a transhistorical form, so Hecht doesn't feel bound by chronological lines, and in an essay devoted mainly to Sidney he references not only Virgil, Sannazaro, Puttenham, and Spenser, but also Pound, Eliot, Ashbery, Merrill, and Bishop. Hecht notes that Sidney creates the first English sestinas in *The Arcadia*, and there, in "Yee Goteheard Gods," sets himself the double challenge of the double sestina. According to Hecht, Sidney deliberately capitalizes on the form's built-in repetitions to evoke the obsessions of love-longing, and exploits the emotionally equivocal meanings of the sestina's terminal words. If Hecht doesn't quite refute William Empson's claims about the poem's "wailing and immovable monotony" (p. 47), Hecht certainly does demonstrate how Bishop and Merrill overcome the form's monotony and stasis with mystery and "heartrending drama" (p. 55).

Linda Gregerson is both an Early Modern critical specialist and a contemporary poet — as well as a self-confessed "daughter of Ben." In "Ben Jonson and the Loathed Word," she renders well Jonson's quest for the univocal, for the last word, indeed the *only* word, a quest which runs him up against the divine Word, which he both admires and resents. Gregerson is especially penetrating on the "absence of process" that has made Jonson's epigrammatic lyrics so off-putting to many modern readers, in contrast to the winning interior drama and psychological discovery of Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, and Marvell. On the contrary, says Gregerson, Jonson usually begins with his conclusions, proclaiming and then elaborating them. This insight leads Gregerson to the view that Jonson "is not a Renaissance poet at all," but rather "a neoclassical poet avant la lettre" (p. 102) — a claim which sounds extravagant but really isn't. Yet Gregerson recognizes and appreciates "another Jonson" — the Jonson of the songs, evoked by Pound's Pisan Cantos, a poet of pure aesthetic contact, of remembered but lost perfection. She also notes the Jonson of *The Underwood* and *The Forrest*, who breaks down the dominance of the epigrammatic couplet to intimate a more personal reference, and even to incorporate witty female voices. Still, Gregerson's Jonson is a poet finally concerned with control, hostile to interpretation and therefore suspicious of publication (while famously seeking it). And as to his quest for the last word, though I'm not sure that I hear the blasphemy that Gregerson does in the conclusion of "On My First Sonne," it's not entirely implausible that Jonson could have envied God the Father for producing, in His Son, a *better* "piece of poetry."

I've noted above that by and large these essays — as one might expect from poets — are exceptionally well-composed. Indeed, in some cases the essays' form and language reveals the direct influence of the poets discussed, in a seeming extension of the poet-critics' "negative capability" into the cooler element of prose. This kind of mimetic tribute is especially evident in "Donne's Sovereignty" by Calvin Bedient. His style is episodic, elliptical, cheerfully solipsistic, bracingly colloquial, and often brilliantly illuminating. Thus he writes with a good deal of the sovereign "virile and playful assurance" (p. 113) and outright "hotdogery" (p. 110) that he celebrates in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*. Obviously Bedient writes too well to be a full-scale Lacanian, but he has taken up Lacan's theme of *jouissance* and filed it to a sharpness for defending Donne from the doctrinaire seriousness of Tuve and, especially, Eliot. Bedient makes joyful sense of *Songs and Sonnets* as play, as a negotiating dance between soul and body, phallic and feminine, metaphor and metaphysical, sexuality and spirituality, pagan and Christian. Playing off of Eliot's schoolmarmish disapproval of "The Exstasie," Bedient captures Donne's tone of deliberate anti-Platonic complaint even amid the Platonic didacticism of the poem's opening. And Bedient's re-explication of Donne's compass in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" renders that image's effects with marvelous freshness. The standard geometric tool is "antisentimental and antisublime" (p. 123) as "it rebels against

its utilitarian role" and "goes whee in a circle" (p. 124). Nevertheless "the sublime enters in, sideways, as astonishment" as "it justifies itself instantly, with emblematic aplomb" (pp. 123, 124). Yet this instance of playful sublimity illustrates my main reservation about Bedient's almost exclusive emphasis on play. For while Donne is not creating or even preaching any one serious doctrine in *Songs and Sonnets*, he is dramatizing the sometimes serious effects of a doctrine — the pull of "dangerous constancy" towards the moment when, in Dickinson's words, "the play prove[s] piercing earnest."

Carl Phillips, too, seems to have imbibed much of his subject's style, and indeed expresses a strong sense of personal identification with his chosen poet — as if, in some sense, chosen by him. In "Anomaly, Conundrum, *Thy-Will-Be-Done*: On the Poetry of George Herbert," Phillips admits with disarming candor that his way of writing poetry is to regard his own work as "advance bulletins from the interior" (p. 157), and that this disposition must influence his decision to render *The Temple* as "a private record" in a kind of confessional mode (p. 137). In fact, Phillips wants so much to privatize Herbert's poetry that he chooses simply to ignore "The Church-porch" and "The Church Militant" as, in Louis Martz's words, "rather imposed than organically related to the whole" (p. 138). (Martz is the only Herbert critic whom Phillips cites.) Having dismissed these more public-minded bookends as anomalies, Phillips proceeds to focus — without conscious irony — on the many interior "anomalies" and "conundrums" found in the lyrics of "The Church." That Phillips writes as if he were almost entirely innocent of academic criticism of Herbert actually turns out pretty well. Even more than Calvin Bedient, he combines the poetic master and critical layman to fresh and engaging effect, imitating the strophic structure of "The Church" in his own episodic approach, admitting to a love of the Herbert who complicates dogma, who refuses closure, who ends not in pat answers but in richly ambiguous silence.

So, naturally, Phillips openly dislikes the lyrics that don't fit this seeker paradigm, those which "sermonize," which "take as subjects sins to guard against, or holy days, or religious duty" (p. 150). Like James Boyd White in *"This Booke of Starres": Learning to Read George Herbert*, Phillips values the indeterminacy and impurity that he discovers in this reputedly purest of poets. In fact, Phillips goes so far as to say that, whether Herbert would like it or not, sin is both "inevitable" and "necessary" for spiritual advancement as actually portrayed in "The Church" (pp. 140, 141). That Herbert would disagree with the antinomianism (if not the anti-authorialism) of this statement doesn't bother Phillips, who rather endearingly admits that his own poems often turn out to mean more, and differently, than he had intended. Still, Phillips concedes that Herbert has an instructional, and thus a public, purpose to his "private" lyric confessions: that is, to bring his flaws and his struggles forward as lessons for others, though most of all for himself (p. 158).

One could wish that Phillips had consulted Barbara Lewalski on Herbert's distinctly Protestant forms of confessionalism, and Ilona Bell about the implied refutation of *imitatio Christi* in the opening sequence of "The Church," and my own and others' work on how "The Church-porch" and "The Church Militant" are integral to *The Temple*; and Herbert might well quote back to Phillips all of the Pauline warnings about sinning that grace may abound. Nevertheless, I enjoyed Phillips's frank, heartfelt, and modest response to Herbert's hard-won and uncommon grace.

It's on a modest note, also, that William Logan ends his elegant, perspicacious, and provoking essay "Milton in the Modern: The Invention of Personality." Logan admits to a touch of anxiety: "perhaps I have gone too far," he worries, in suggesting that Milton's sonnets essentially invent modern poetic personality (p. 173). If Logan has overstated a bit — and perhaps he has — it is a fruitful hyperbole not alas usually allowed to us mere scholars. Logan surveys Milton's long but episodic career as a sonneteer, relying frankly on the chronology of W.R. Parker, and discovers essentially three movements within it, roughly in keeping with the divisions of the career as a whole: the apprenticeship, the years of public prose, and the grand poetic climax. The early Cambridge sonnets Logan mostly dismisses as rule-bound and derivative, including the famous "How soon hath time," which he finds a mere "empty vessel" (p. 164). Turning to the war and interregnum years, Logan makes excellent and even amusing sense of "three violent sonnets" mocking the detractors of Milton's divorce tracts and attacking "The New Forcers of Conscience." These poems, says Logan, are written so idiomatically and punctuated so disruptively that "they must have been shocking," drawing comparisons with Robert Lowell's highly enjambed

"public poems" (p. 169). Logan also notes, with real penetration, that Milton's overt turn to the vernacular comes just before his invention of his trademark "grand style" in *Paradise Lost*. Then, with the loss of his sight, come Milton's "three great sonnets" — on the Waldensian massacre, on his blindness, and on his "late espoused saint" — the first, says Logan, as immediate as a newspaper headline, the latter two heartbreakingly immediate and particular. It is this particularity, says Logan, this attraction "to real events, to momentary changes in a disrupted life" (p. 173), that anticipates the modern poet's fascination with specificity, even to the point of solecism, and that makes Milton the inventor, or at least the pre-inventor, of the modern lyric.

Perhaps the signature fascination of modern and postmodern poetry is sex, graphically anticipated, rendered, and recalled. Still, I've never been able to see the appeal of the Earl of Rochester's verse, beyond sophomoric prurience, nor do the essays here by Heather McHugh ("Naked Numbers") or even Thom Gunn ("Saint John the Rake") help me much. Yes, John Wilmot's prosody was smooth, and no, I've got nothing in principle against Saxon monosyllables in all of their quadriliteral glory, and yes, *humanus sum* and all things interest me—but what really bothers me with Rochester is the rank *inhumanity* distilled here, like the essence of a tart's handkerchief. Hang me up for a puritan, but these poems' moral blindness would be more tolerable were there more real *eros* or sensuality involved, for which rather spasmodic repetitions of "fuck," "cunt," and "shit" are a poor substitute. Indeed McHugh gives away the game by invoking the period's truly great erotic poets like Donne, Herrick, and Marvell, less than intentionally reminding us that subtlety, metaphor, and nuance are essential to "sweet reluctant amorous delay" — and dare I add Carew, Lovelace, and even Suckling as superior to Rochester's beastly urbanity.

A more fruitful pairing of articles is Eavan Boland's "Finding Anne Bradstreet" and Alice Fulton's "Unordinary Passions: Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle." Theirs make for an intriguing contrast: the native Dubliner Boland stresses the importance of historical distance and difference when observing such a strange rare bird as the early New England Calvinist Bradstreet, and Boland provides a healthy antidote to contemporary tendencies to assimilate Bradstreet smoothly into the master narrative of patriarchal oppression, locating her instead in the traditions of her own time. On the other hand, Fulton confesses to a touchingly personal and anachronistic emotional reaction — amounting to a "crush" — in reading Cavendish, best known for her overbearing, idiosyncratic, and nearly hermetic visions. Virginia Woolf wanted to like Cavendish, but ended comparing her mind to "some giant cucumber . . . [running] over all the roses and carnations in the garden" (p. 204); Fulton, on the other hand, expected to be repelled and found herself deeply moved. Perhaps the time has come for a fuller reconsideration, and a full scholarly edition.

Last I come to a different sort of contrast: between the subjects of Stephen Yenser's "'How Coy a Figure': Marvelry," and Robert Hass's "Edward Taylor: What Was He Up To?" Between Marvell and Taylor, it would seem, a great gulf has been fixed, wider than the Atlantic that divided their lives and work: Marvell the chameleon-like public man with a private lyric passion, whom Yenser (like Joseph Summers before him) finds marvelous for his many-voiced skill at impersonation; and the univocally upright colonial Taylor, vanishingly isolated from the centers of culture and power, whom Hass sees writing for a coterie composed mainly of the Holy Trinity, crafting nearly baroque Eucharistic offerings out of simple words. Yet there are intersections and resemblances too: the works for which they are known now were virtually unknown in their lifetimes; both had puritan roots and intricate devotional imaginations; and both tested the outer limits of their chosen forms—in Marvell's case the forms being not only the devotional but also the erotic and the political.

So, to return to Post's introduction, "Taylor serves . . . as a logical terminal point for this collection" because in Taylor the Tudor-Stuart lyric sensibility is coming to an end. Over the water, "American poetry has already begun," as Hass observes, "in th[e] strange absence of a social context for [Taylor's] work. He seems—as Anne Bradstreet does in her private and unpublished poems—an early instance of the solitariness, self-sufficiency, and peculiarity of the American imagination" (pp. 13, 261, 286). Post denies that this collection belongs to any such "American" program "of aesthetic retrenchment," of a return to the merely private vision and to personal emotion, to the exclusion of public resonance (p. 14). What this fine book does accomplish, instead, is to remind freshly of richly important kinds of inwardness, of quiet private places to restore the self and the soul, before we return to the world from the garden—as return we must.