***"This Book of Starres": Learning to Read George Herbert*. By James Boyd White. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. ISBN 0-472-08337-6. Pp. xxiv + 292. $39.50 (cloth), $18.95 (paper)**

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Article:

"CURB YOUR DOGMA!" read the homosexual activist's protest sign a few year back during a papal visit to San Francisco. And one need not be a militant to share in our era's chafing at authoritative religious teaching; many within the churches are profoundly uncomfortable with categorical "doctrine." Indeed, one seldom hears even Catholic priests or evangelical pastors preface a homily or sermon with a promise to "preach dogmatically"; congregations are more likely to hear "sharing from God's heart."

What, then, is the modern reader, especially the unchurched, to do with preacher-poet George Herbert? No important English writer is more fully informed by and about dogmatic theology; yet none is more linguistically canny, many- voiced, or dramatically complex—in short, none is less the stereotypical monomaniac. As James Boyd White asks early in "*This Book of Starres": Learning to Read George Herbert*, "How for is it possible to read Herbert's poetry, cast as it is in religious language, and with a theologically defined audience, without ourselves in some sense sharing the beliefs that that language expresses?" (43). This is the perennial question in reading Herbert, and responses vary widely.

White's answer in this spritely, pedagogically stimulating, but seriously misleading book is twofold: on the one hand, he walks the uninitiated reader carefully and companionably through the intricately spiraling interior journey of *The Temple*; on the other hand, he concludes, despite Herbert's declared intentions, that the journey has no final destination beyond itself, that the wandering is all. In other words, White's ultimate answer to the problem of shared beliefs is, ironically, to assimilate Herbert to White's own creed of charming, soft-spoken anticreedalism.

To its credit, this book has much of value to teach its intended audience—nonspecialists reading Herbert, and perhaps serious poetry, for the first time. White, Professor of Law, English, and Classics at the University of Michigan (and a self- identified Episcopalian-cum-Quaker), writes in the plain style, avoiding critical jargon except when clearly defining it, flavoring his low-key commentary with winning personal reflections and anecdotes about his own years of discovering and rediscovering Herbert's *The Temple*.

He is a refreshingly sincere spokesman for what used to be called "New Criticism" and what he calls "slow reading" —the meticulous effort at putting aside systematic preconceptions and focusing "on the tensionsor contrasts that give life to a text, on its movements and transformations, its restorations and irresolutions," and "especially on voice" (20). His six chapters—"Slow Reading," "Beginnings," "Sequences," "Developments," "Imagined Identities and Relations," and "Reading George Herbert"—move inductively from local to global; that is, they move from very minute analysis, through groupings of poems, to important Herbertian themes, to overall generalizations about the reading experience.

Such slow reading with an emphasis on voice is an especiallyrichand rewarding approach to Heifoert, whose work, in White's words, is a poetry "not of statement alone, but of statement and response" (5). Though little of what White says will be news to Herbert specialists (with whom he is, nevertheless, fairly familiar), he models a kind of total-immersion, process pedagogy. He keeps the reader's eye on interior drama; he demonstrates how within well known poems like "Vertue," "The Collar," "Affliction (I)," and "Jordan (II)" Herbert starts with one mood, direction, or voice and abruptly turns to transform or undercut that start by changing the tone, the argument, or even the speaker himself—often repeatedly in one lyric.

For example, he interrogates "Vertue" early in the book (3-10), starting as a (Groton) schoolboy encountering a sentimental Anglophile snippet of the poem; then he rereads it years later to discover that the poem's serene Nature-as-God's-Garden opening lines are immediately blasted by those that follow, and that the poem is really a debate; then he discusses how emotionally troubling is its apocalyptic conclusion. Such changes and exchanges of voice extend beyond single poems to *The Temple's* many related sequences, as poetic speakers arrive at seeming illuminations and resolutions, only to have their stability undermined as the sequence continues.

Herbert's purpose in all this vision and revision, says White, is the "stripping [of] the self to the core" (21), "a poetically induced brokenness…enacted in the story and in the form, a kind of disintegration out of which can come, almost like a croak, a simple gesture of need" (30). It is this rejection of sentimentality and false consolations, this kicking of the props out from under the edifice of hollow piety, that Herbert is about. All of this has been said about Herbert before, but seldom has it been said so well, and so accessibly for the neophyte.

The book's serious problems do not result, then, from its recognition that Herbert's purpose is to dismantle easy spiritual certainties. Rather, they result from White's failure—indeed his near-refusal—to recognize Herbert's even larger purpose of leading the reader on a pilgrimage beyond these ruins to solid comfort and hard-won assurance. For a critic so sensitive to nuance and connotation, and so diligent to cut through cant, White is surprisingly ham-fisted when handling the loaded terms "doctrine" and "authority."

These *bêtes noirs* appear early in the book and bedevil his argument throughout. When addressing the relationship between preaching and poetry, he asserts their incompatibility in strikingly prescriptive, indeed categorical terms. All theological language, he writes,

> *should* be open and polyphonic,…here least of all *should* it be reduced to dogma, doctrine, or flat assertion. Indeed…we *should* expect religious people to be exemplary as pluralists… On such assumptions as these *there could be no place* for an authoritarian language of dogma and doctrine… To attempt to praise [God] is to claim to know what is worthy of praise in Him, and this we *cannot* know.… There is *no* point of view available to us from which truth, including the experience of others, can be observed and comprehended. Herbert *knows* all this…and his verse is consequently less a series of prayers than a series of poems exploring and enacting the *impossibility* of prayer. (33-34,35; my emphasis)

White here declares with absolute certainty that uncertainty is absolute, preaches dogmatically against dogmatism, lays down doctrine against the doctrinaire, and so on. The fact that White voices his deep convictions so categorically is simply a consequence of his being human, with humanity's deep-seated need for a creed. But White's claim is only partly true and so, given his totalizing language, untrue: no doubt Herbert "knows" his own finitude—it is inscribed in every line—but he does not "know" that none can know, and neither does White or anyone. After all there may be a God, and God may know, and He may be able to communicate to us quite clearly, and perhaps He has.

What this digression into epistemology has to do with Herbert's poetry is everything. White sees a fundamental cleavage running throughout *The Temple* dividing the preacherly, "overcommitted," "didactic, conclusory, authoritarian" "sermon voice" (91, 73) from the contingent, existentially chastened, inquiring, experiential

voices, full of poetic life. Yet Herbert, while acknowledging the inevitable tensions between the sermonic and the experiential, sees no such radical split but rather the opposite. In "The Windows," a poem about how God uses flawed "man" to preach his "eternal word," the speaker concludes:

Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one
When they combine and mingle, bring
A strong regard and awe: but speech alone
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,
And in the ear, not conscience ring. (11-15)

As in a beautifully annealed stained-glass window, "doctrine and life"—the pastor's preaching and practice—are mutually necessary and complementary. Neither theology nor experience is adequate alone. Faith without works is dead, but works without faith is dead as well. Significantly, White admires these lines, but only because he finds them—despite their preacherly tenor—"not didactic and expository, but imagistic, transformative, and poetic" (42).

Though White briefly concedes that there may be such a thing as positive doctrine and that "doctrine and life require each other" (147), what he means here by "doctrine" is "not dogma or cliché, but... a transforming story" (97). Precept and "flat assertion" are inimical to poetry, and whenever Herbert turns preceptive—as in "The Church-porch," in certain lyrics of "The Church," or in his pastoral manu *The Country Parson*—White finds him "hard to like" (71n3).

Ironically, one of White's finest metaphors for entering deeply into the experience of poetry is that of travel to a far country, where one must learn a new language and risk immersion in a new culture, undergoing, by slow change, "a transformation of the self" (xvi). Yet such transforming travel requires some guide, some direction—at least a map. In journeying through Herbert's poetry—and toward the spiritual experience to which it points—dogma is like that map: assertive, clearly delineated, drastically simplified, and flat Some maps are better than others; a bad map maybe worse than none; and our travels won't amount to muc if we prefer our map, even a good one, to the road itself, or to our destination. In White's view *The Temple is* carefully crafted to break down false assurances about destinations, to "throw everything in doubt" (62), to transform us into lovers of the road—lifelong spiritual vagabonds.

But for Herbert journey becomes pilgrimage, taking meaning from its destination, and even the most painful transformations have a goal. After experiencing the "many deaths" described in "The Flower," the speaker joyfully embraces God's undercutting, redirecting purposes:

These are thy wonders, Lord of love, To make us see we are but flowers that glide:
Which when we once can find and prove, Thou hast a garden for us, where to bide. (43-46)

By exploring the myriad turnings, wrong turnings, and returnings of the pilgrim, the manyways of getting lostand found, the preacher Herbert's *The Temple* is no exactly preaching. But it is doing, in the more intensely dramatic, particular, and metaphorical mode of poetry, what good preaching does in its plain and summary way: Herbert is showing the heart the way home.