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Article:

Michael C. Schoenfeldt's *Prayer and Power* is proving to be the decade's most influential study of George Herbert. It is also one of the best pieces of sustained new historicist criticism in print, which is a compliment less extravagant than it may sound. Schoenfeldt's historicism is tempered by a methodological pluralism which makes his book less tendentious and reductionist than most cultural materialist productions (though he, too, sometimes succumbs). To his great credit, he has listened carefully to all the critics (he is in extensive and fruitful dialogue with the interpretive heritage); he has pored through the archives (his application of contextual materials both obscure and famous is often astonishingly fresh); but, most importantly, he has dwelt with Herbert's poetry, got it into his bones, and frequently achieved what should be the critic's first and final goal: the opening, or reopening, of the text on something like its own terms. This book does not so much translate Herbert into our language as translate us into Herbert's mind—or, more correctly, into one neglected stream of his consciousness.

That consciousness, it is Schoenfeldt's central thesis, was profoundly *courteous*—*permeated*, indeed saturated with the attitudes, fears, aspirations, and especially the rhetorical strategies of the Tudor-Stuart court. Schoenfeldt builds on Joseph H. Summers' recognition that " [elven religious language remains ... an 'incorrigibly social medium'" (p. 22) , and on the fact of Herbert's own failed courtly career; Schoenfeldt insists on close attention to "the neglected social component" in *The Temple* (p. 12), to the ways that these poems "reveal the glimmers of aggression and manipulation couched in the most apparently humble and benign social maneuvers" (p. 4). In this view, Herbert's work is ironically shot through with the myriad persuasive tactics of a courtier Seeking employment, yet in the court of the heavenly king.

Schoenfeldt develops this social, courtly thesis in three sections of two chapters each. Part One, "The Distance of the Meek," considers how Herbert both engages and criticizes the court. His first chapter, "'Subject to Ev'ry Mounters Bended Knee': Herbert and Authority," argues persuasively that Herbert's experience praising and supplicating King and Prince as University Orator at Cambridge profoundly informs similar utterances in his divine lyrics; his second chapter, "'My God, My King': Socializing God," concludes convincingly that Herbert's potentially insurgent critique of courtly speech and values—particularly in "Jordan (I)," "Affliction (I)," "Redemption," and "The Collar"—is indeed real, though finally not radical.

Part Two, "I Live to Shew His Power," examines the political meanings of affliction and petition in Renaissance England as contexts for spiritual affliction and petition in *The Temple*. The third chapter, "'Storms are the Triumph of His Art': The Politics of Affliction," analyzes the frequent and chilling image of God as torturer, arguing for "the inextricable linkage between affliction and affection, between intense suffering and Christian salvation" (p. 153). I found this the most harrowingly effective section of the book; Schoenfeldt's enumeration of torture's implements brings to vivid and disconcerting life the pictures of enforced agony that Herbert could

take for granted in the imaginations of his first readers, thus deepening our appreciation for what Schoenfeldt calls "Herbert's valiant refusal to conceal the divine source of his suffering" (p. 152). Yet the fourth chapter, "Engine against th'Almighty: The Poetics of Prayer," provides an immediate counterpoint to divine violence by focusing on prayer as corollary violence directed at a God whose love lays him open to every kind of human demand and assault.

Part Three, "Love Bade Me Welcome," turns up the magnification to an extraordinary, perhaps excessive, degree, devoting most of 172 pages to contextualizing "Love (III)" in terms of early modern table manners and sexual conduct. The fifth chapter, "Standing on Ceremony: The Comedy of Manners in 'Love (III),'" demonstrates how this final lyric serves as Herbert's ultimate self-critique, revealing how this dinner guest's courtly habits of self-deprecation and subordination are at last "impertinent and inadequate accounts of the human relationship to God" (p. 217). The last chapter, "'That Ancient Heat': Sexuality and Spirituality in *The Temple*," argues somewhat overheatedly and overingeniously but still valuably—that "erotic longing affords Herbert a resonant vocabulary for expressing religious passion" (p. 16). Given Herbert's reputation for asexuality (in this regard he truly has served as the "Un-Donne"), this final material provides a necessary corrective, and has proved Schoenfeldt's most controversial; indeed, he seems least at ease here, feeling after all compelled to deny that the beloved "Love (III)" concludes *The Church* with an act of spiritualized fellatio (p. 260)—a denial with which I concur.

Still, despite his best efforts at modulating his claims, Schoenfeldt does at times lapse into new historicist excesses: in terms of his title, too often he seems to treat prayer as *merely* a tactical approach to power, as canny supplication rather than heartfelt, disinterested gratitude. He sometimes speaks as if Herbert really believed that God could be flattered and manipulated (pp. 183-84)—which is quite a different thing from his fascinating explorations of how certain voices in *The Temple* seem temporarily to believe this (p. 190). Also, Schoenfeldt's precommitment to textual instability makes him downplay these poems' professedly pastoral purpose, so that he seems prejudiced against textual—let alone spiritual—resolution (pp. 11, 171, 209, and 213).

This privileging of indeterminacy seems related to his slighting of theology in reaction to Richard Strier's *Love Known* (by far the most frequently and oppositionally cited secondary source in the book); for example, amidst all his intricate contextualization of "Love (III)," Schoenfeldt seems at times to forget that Herbert must have intended the Bible and religious teaching as the poem's master discourse (p. 213). The poem is not *about* food or sex; food and sex, like the poem, are about love. As to Herbert's mature politics, they were probably not as simply royalist as his boyhood Latin poetry and Cambridge Latin orations might suggest, and as Schoenfeldt seems to assume; he might have examined more carefully Herbert's relation to protestant theologies of resistance against kings who set themselves in the throne of God. Overall, as rich and rewarding as is Schoenfeldt's project of "aligning the Secular and the sacred" (p. 14), I wish that he had attended more closely to Herbert's own project, as announced in *The Country Parson*, of sanctifying the secular, of building the nation by the spiritual means of the church—not by "socializing God," but by theologizing society.

Nevertheless, at its frequent best, *Prayer and Power* does as much to open up Herbert as any book on the subject. One of Schoenfeldt's many apt phrases captures the essence not only of the poet's but of his own achievement: "Herbert percolates a strenuous spirituality through the terrestrial politics of Renaissance hierarchical relationships" (p. 199). This strenuous study distils more robust and earthy savor from these heavenly poems than anyone, perhaps even the poet, had ever expected.