

GARY KUCHAR. *George Herbert and the Mystery of the Word: Poetry and Scripture in Seventeenth-Century England*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. 288. \$119.99 (cloth). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.133

This is a book rife with gems of conceptual, interpretive, and historical insight. Gary Kuchar's overarching thesis is that George Herbert's verse reacts against an increasingly dogmatic third wave of the English Reformation, advocating for devotees a cagier, humbler mystery, in opposition to the overconfident doctrinal assurance required by figures like William Perkins. That thesis leads down several compelling paths, the most interesting of which is Kuchar's account of prayer as an unconscious projection into the future. Other scholars (Elizabeth Clarke and Sophie Read, for example) have described Herbert's verse as answering its own prayers, but the insistence here on prayer's fundamentally speculative character seems extremely fruitful and novel: "Prayer, in order to be prayer, must remain open to the possibility that what one truly prayed for comes back from the future in the form of God's response to his own intention" (107). That conceptual insight, I think, is especially helpful for reading "The Altar" and "Gratefulness" (1633), those poems that imagine an automatic pulse of praise as the aim of devotion. Just as compelling is Kuchar's contention that Herbert consistently presents speakers who do not know how to worship, but who nonetheless feel their way forward in a way that encourages readerly participation (107, 213).

The book's larger claims ultimately issue in novel readings of individual poems. For example, "Love-Joy" (1633) appears not as a cutesy permutation of anagrams or acrostics, but as a more serious invitation to the participatory reading of scripture. In other words, "J" and "C" inscribed on grapes points not toward a glib conceit, but to the fuller presence of Christ beneath or behind the poem. As the poem develops, so, too, do the mere letters flesh themselves out: from "J" and "C," to "Joy and Charitie," to "JESUS CHRIST" (148). In other words, even the typography connotes this growing presence of Christ. Kuchar also offers a compelling reading of "H. Scriptures (1)" and "H. Scriptures (2)," maintaining that the first poem presents a literalist exchange, then supplanted by its more spiritual companion poem (134). As a result, he reads this moment in *The Temple* as an inter-poem drama of supersessionism, from law to gospel.

Some of Kuchar's briefer readings of individual poems could do with more extensive elaboration. As a result, they are not always as convincing as the more sustained discussions. For example, he maintains that the ending of "Love (III)" (1633) is an example of a poem that ends by "reopening the scriptural or sacramental mystery rather than by concluding in a fully close-ended way" (51). It is not quite clear how that is so given that the poem terminates with the speaker's final, deliberate response to Love, "So I did sit and eat." Another example: how does a very this-worldly thing like rhyme in "Denial" (1633) suggest God's mysterious intervention (67)? Perhaps it is unjust to demand a more expansive account of these passing comments on individual poems, but I think that there are some missed opportunities in these moments.

Kuchar also nicely situates Herbert within the intellectual culture of the seventeenth century, making a convincing case for his reaction against rational religion and his older brother Edward's own influential treatise on this subject, *De Veritate* (27). Herbert also appears presciently modern in Kuchar's reading: namely, he uses religious lyric as a means of resisting or scuttling the turn to epistemology in seventeenth-century intellectual culture (229). Finally, Kuchar makes the provocative claim that "The Bunch of Grapes" (1633) shows how "the desire for gospel without the law is an inadvertent form of legalism" (138). Such an assertion would certainly fit Herbert squarely within our own political dynamics, concerned as we are with various extremisms. The developmental link between antinomianism and legalism needs further development, though (138–39). It is not clear how it follows from Kuchar's reading of Lancelot Andrewes' sermons or the depiction of an "unrealistic and immature" joy

in “A Bunch of Grapes” (147). As is, this latter normative characterization does too much of the work of the argument: antinomianism and legalism are both “immature,” the implication being that they both must be rejected by a “mature” poetry.

If there is a weakness in this book, it is moments like these, where normative notions appear without adequate explication. “Mature” poetry is one (147). Naïveté is another (142). Perhaps the most frequent is “open-ended” (16). In this last instance, I think that the absence of a more extensive conceptual explanation of open-endedness sometimes makes the argument sound like an anachronistic characterization, as if Herbert’s verse mirrors our presuppositions about desirable literary criticism. Perhaps that is true, but I think the book requires a more sustained discussion of this issue. Kuchar’s account of mystery and *mysterion*, the pivotal concept for the argument, is extremely thorough, sophisticated, and interesting (34). However, these often-tacit links between early modern concepts and modern ones, especially modern ones with pedagogical or political resonance, have the occasional effect of turning “mystery” into too capacious a concept.

All of that said, there are compelling and interesting moments throughout this book, from its broader conceptual account of the various stages of Reformation soteriology and Herbert’s reaction thereto, to the argument for an unconscious prayer and faith, to the concluding discussion of phenomenology, hearkening, and the Protestant privileging of aurality. As such, it is a valuable rethinking of the complexity of the English Reformation, as well as a welcome broadening of our understanding of what literary responses to doctrinal matters can entail.

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SVEN MEEDER. *The Irish Scholarly Presence at St. Gall: Networks of Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages*. Studies in Early Medieval History. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 2018. Pp. 187. \$114 (cloth).
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The influence of the Irish in the Swiss monastery of St. Gall has long generated scholarly controversy. In 1956, a former abbey librarian, Johannes Duft, published a famous article entitled “Iromanie und Irophobie” that described the course of the controversy up to that date, with the pendulum swinging now in favor of the Irish, now against. Most modern scholars have managed to find a middle ground in the debate, and the 2018 exhibition in the abbey library, with its accompanying, richly illustrated catalogue edited by Cornel Dora and Franziska Schnoor (*An der Wiege Europas. Irische Buchkultur des Frühmittelalters* or the English-language version, *The Cradle of European Culture: Early Medieval Irish Book Art*) has provided another opportunity to present all the evidence and reexamine all the facts about St. Gall himself and his foundation.

Sven Meeder sets out to minimize the Irish influence at St. Gall by questioning the significance of all the surviving Irish material in the abbey library and by turning on their heads all the well-known references by continental writers to the Irish and their influence, and rather than seeing them (as previous scholars had unanimously done) as complimentary and admiring of Irish scholarship, viewing them instead as manifestations of anti-Irish animosity. In doing so, he occasionally misreads the early evidence—as, for example, when he argues that “the surviving sections [of the *Vita vetustissima*, the oldest known Life of Gallus] make no reference to Ireland or to Irishmen” (19).