

Gary Kuchar. *George Herbert and the Mystery of the Word: Poetry and Scripture in Seventeenth-Century England*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. \$109.00. xvi + 288 pp. Review by JONATHAN NAUMAN, VAUGHAN ASSOCIATION.

Literary studies produced during the past few decades often proceed under the assumption that texts and their historical backgrounds are best appreciated through a process of demystification, in which transcendent or supernatural motives are minimized in favor of postulating psychological and socioeconomic drivers for aesthetic activity. Gary Kuchar's book on George Herbert's poetic response to *sacramentum* and *mysterion*, though enabled by and largely an instance of the present fashion for cultural studies, manages to open a somewhat different angle, bringing the concept of mystery itself sympathetically and historically to the fore. Kuchar examines developing trends in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Anglican Bible-reading and maintains that early seventeenth-century readers tended to balance impulses toward interpretive certainty, inherited from the early Reformers and reinforced by incipient Baconian rationalism, with impulses toward a more participatory and mystery-oriented exegesis that hearkened back to Augustine. Kuchar in turn holds that the experiential and dialogical ethos of seventeenth-century Anglican devotional verse, and of George Herbert's *The Temple* in particular, manifests a movement of retreat by Herbert's contemporary leading Anglican divines from "the exaggerated certainties that had developed within Protestantism over the previous century" (11). The thesis thus seeks to modify an emphasis on "sixteenth-century contexts most often adduced by recent critics" (11).

Kuchar's initial chapter on "Herbert's Neatness" spells out his basic contention that George Herbert's poetry should be read in terms of a preference for "interpretive wonder and spiritual participation" over "exegetical control or purely objective meaning" (10), a position Kuchar correlates with moderate Puritan divines such as John Preston and Richard Sibbes as well as with Herbert's friend and sponsor Lancelot Andrewes. Chapter Two clarifies Kuchar's take on the term "mystery," noting Augustine's inclination to use the Latin words "sacramentum" and "mysterium" interchangeably, a conflation that

“helped convey the paradox that Biblical mysteries remain obscure or hidden even in the very process of being revealed” (35). Kuchar’s readings from Herbert’s poetry throughout the book generally track failures and successes of Herbert’s lyrical personae to achieve the “dialectical and immanentist view of revelation” (35–36) needed in order to approach such mysteries, and they portray Herbert’s speakers as undergoing initiations into an “experience of divine love” that must begin “with an avowal of non-understanding” (50).

In his third and fourth chapters, Kuchar surveys the development of Protestant opinions regarding personal assurance of eternal salvation, mentioning an interesting controversy over the fate of Italian Protestant Francis Spiera, who fell into despair “after renouncing a number of his Protestant beliefs before the Inquisition” (85). Kuchar again considers Andrewes and Sibbes to have approached such questions as Herbert would, Andrewes modifying “Calvin’s highly focused emphasis on Paul’s assurance through faith with the Johannine emphasis on assurance through love” (80) and Sibbes emphasizing as redemptive the fact that “human beings want to be holy in the first place” (96). Kuchar then reads Herbert’s Williams Manuscript lyric “Perseverance” and Herbert’s lyric “Assurance” from *The Temple* as revealing how “Herbert deftly balances the desire for spiritual confidence with the realities of doubt” (101), finding “Assurance” to be “less flamboyantly dramatic” but “more doctrinally wary” than “Perseverance” (103).

In his fifth and sixth chapters, Kuchar contrasts the dialogical and immanentist views of Scripture-reading that he ascribes to George Herbert with the utilitarian and rationalist sidelinings of the Bible practiced by John Valdeso and by George Herbert’s brother Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury. Valdeso’s lack of interest in continued experience of the Scripture, his opinion that it acted as an elementary lesson that could be dispensed with once learned, Kuchar pairs with Cherbury’s inclinations to cast the Scriptures as the highest manifestation of universal Common Notions, effectively reversing Augustine and giving reason priority over faith.

Kuchar’s seventh and eighth chapters, which I found the most rewarding in his volume, address further implications of the Augustinian approaches to Scripture-reading attributed to Herbert in this study. In

“Truth and Method: Error and Discovery in *The Temple*,” Augustine’s willingness to countenance “a failing that is laudable or desirable” (205)—i.e., a straining toward comprehension of God without actual success—is contrasted with Bacon’s directive to harness error as one aspect of process control. In such poems as “The Thanksgiving,” “Jordan [II],” and “Easter,” a corrected error looks forward, not to a future of methodical process improvement, but to a strengthened and open-ended relationship with God. In “The Mystery of Harkening: Listening for *The Odour*,” issues of oral versus visual culture are intriguingly fielded and also successfully linked with the “dialectical and immanentist” Augustinian reading advocated earlier. “Sound and scent,” Kuchar notes, “offer modes of discovery that enhance the participation of knower with known” (238); Donne’s differentiation between *hearing* and *hearkening* is cited: listening “becomes hearkening when sound is translated into action, when what is heard actually transforms one’s relation to the world, one’s mode of attunement” (245). Relations between touch, taste, scent, and sound, rendered in seventeenth-century context, considerably enhance Kuchar’s reading of Herbert’s “The Odour.”

The book ends with a conclusion reiterating and enlarging on the author’s placing of Herbert’s poems in the context of Augustinian reading, in a “space between understanding and ignorance, precognition and knowledge” (262). Kuchar adds a final gesture toward Herbert’s disciple Henry Vaughan, whose emulation of Paulinus of Nola probably contributed to the Augustinian strategies Kuchar notes in Vaughan’s “H. Scriptures.”

George Herbert and the Mystery of the Word makes a welcome turn in cultural studies, successfully reinstating a category and a mode of reading that has tended to drop out of sight in contemporary criticism. As is often the case in such restorations, I found the thesis more convincing in its affirmations than in some of its expressed negations; I rather doubt that George Herbert saw quite so deep a divide as this study occasionally does between Scripture as a “site of ongoing, prayerful meditation” and a document providing “information-transfer” (132). There are readings with which I argued—the interpretation on page 133 of Herbert’s metaphorical presentation of his heart as a bee and the letters of Scripture as flowers in “The H. Scriptures [I],”

for instance, and the reading of line 27 in “The Bunch of Grapes” (145). But the theological and phenomenological peripheries offered will make this text valuable to read for all who study Herbert’s poetry.

Joseph William Sterrett, ed. *Prayer and Performance in Early Modern English Literature: Gesture, Word and Devotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xii + 275 pp. \$85.00. Review by P.G. STANWOOD, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA.

This exceptionally thoughtful and well-focused volume addresses a universal theme in thirteen discrete essays, each one supporting the other and altogether forming a coherent whole—a rare quality in edited collections. “What kind of an act is a prayer?” asks Brian Cummings in the first essay of the book, “Prayer, Bodily Ritual and Performative Utterance,” which effectively anticipates and embraces the issues of the essays that follow (19). He leads us succinctly from J.L. Austin to J.R. Searle. What gives an act its meaning? From the theory of speech acts, Cummings leads his discussion into “the nerve ends of the Reformation” (21), and to Martin Bucer’s reflections on performance and prayer, action and word, and his interventions with Cranmer and the *Book of Common Prayer*. Calvin would subsequently extend these concerns by urging the necessity of interior feelings, which must corroborate external action and utterance. At issue here is the Protestant realignment of prayer in public worship with “an ardour of thought” and intentionality.

These fundamental issues that Cummings so cogently defines form the principal and overarching theme of the book against which the dozen essays that follow provide special and applied insight. Graham Parry is first of the essayists to open and study this theme of private and public prayer in his well-argued “Tradition of High Church Prayer in the Seventeenth Century.” He places Lancelot Andrewes and John Cosin next to each other—the one notable for his *Preces Privatae* (as *Institutiones piae* 1630, *Private Devotions* 1648), the other for his *A Collection of Private Devotions* (1627). The comparison of the two describes not a difference in ecclesiology or religious orientation but rather a private, interior mode of prayer against a public formulation of