

Jonathan F.S. Post, ed. *Green Thoughts, Green Shades: Essays by Contemporary Poets on the Early Modern Lyric*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. xiv + 300 pp. \$18.95 paper. Review by SIDNEY GOTTLIEB, SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY.

The title of this volume—intended to show the value of a “direct encounter with verse” (4) and record the responses of a particularly talented group of poet-critics to late-sixteenth and seventeenth-century lyrics—is properly allusive and specific: the phrase “Green Thoughts, Green Shades” invites us to a rich meditative garden in which words, shapes, and minds interpenetrate and generate cascades of provocative meanings; and the subtitle identifies the guides and the basis of their authority. But judging by his introduction, Jonathan Post perhaps envisions this collection as in some ways more suitably titled *I’ll Take My Stand*, acknowledging that it is a manifesto as well as a series of meditations. “The time is right,” he says, “to offer readers of the early modern lyric an alternative to the dominant discourse of political criticism” (4). Not content simply to say that the focus throughout the book is on “the sense of exhilaration and joy (and power) enabled by the poetry itself” (14), he notes that these are qualities “so evidently missing in much criticism,” a claim that could be (and has been) with good reason levied against every age but is here directed specifically at contemporary new historicism and, perhaps to a lesser extent, postmodern criticism in general, implicitly identified as causes of the regrettable fact that “Matters of aesthetics have been largely abandoned in many academic quarters” (14).

Post’s strategy may be to a certain extent preemptive, defense masked as offense: whether or not he had introduced this polemical frame for the book, it would undoubtedly have been applied, by readers and certainly by reviewers. One can hardly speak of poetry or criticism these days without being or seeming proprietary, without positioning oneself or being positioned somewhere in the almost always heated debate about the function of poetry and the function of criticism at the present time, a debate typically figured as about power as much as methodology. But Post is by no means

an entirely reluctant or unwilling polemicist. He does not want to let the volume get distracted from its primary concern, demonstrating how certain kinds of “poetic” approaches to the early modern lyric yield valuable and much-needed results, so his comments on the critical controversies are brief and scattered, and the essays in the volume rarely address these matters directly. But even as he maintains the pull throughout the volume as centripetal, into the garden, Post does not want us to completely forget that it is an embattled garden, and that the intellectual and imaginative activities on display there are also, when necessary, weapons in the ongoing critical and cultural wars.

Where do the contributors to this volume stand and what kind of approach to the early modern lyric do they display and recommend? Their shared emphasis on a personal response to poetry adds a dispersive element to the centripetal pull mentioned above, and fills the volume with diversity and carefully cultivated individuality, even eccentricity, so much so that it is difficult to extract a series of principles that they all subscribe to. But there are some unifying and recurrent motifs that can be identified. They each, as Post notes, “stake a claim for reading *poetically*, in all that that tricky word implies” (5), and their focus is almost exclusively on canonical works and poets—although I should add that they carefully think through, revise, adjust, and expand as well as reaffirm and justify the canon. It would be a misleading overstatement to say that they live primarily in the word rather than in the world—the essays here are not by poetic recluses about other poetic recluses—but they focus relentlessly on dramas of as well as embedded in poetic diction and form, ever deepening nuances of meaning and effect, and self-referentiality. This last term is particularly important, and complicated: the essays here repeatedly highlight not only the way poems are about poetry and the art of making poetry but the way that poems are essentially about the construction of self—of consciousness, personality, style, emotion, and intelligence. Co-existent with the focus on self construction and expression is a recurrent consideration of poetic tradition and communication, that is, the way poems connect to poets and to other readers who may

not be practicing writers of poetry but are encouraged (and instructed how) to read responsively. (This would be a worthwhile but insular book if it were only about poets reading poetry; one of its subtle strengths is that it is about other kinds of reading as well.) And apart from overlapping critical methodology and subjects, the essays here are linked by their playfulness, intensity, allusiveness, and willful independence and idiosyncrasy.

Finally, lest the above list wrap up too neat a package, let me conclude with a suggestive and open-ended phrase from one of the contributors, Thom Gunn, that Post uses as a kind of credo for the volume: the business at hand is the pursuit of “the expression of energy and the exploration of complexity within that energy” (qtd. 14-15). As Gunn acknowledges, this way of praising literature and criticism may strike some as “old-fashioned,” but it is at the heart of each one of the essays herein. I find it particularly interesting that this key phrase is not altogether old-fashioned, and that it would not be out of place in, say, an essay by Stephen Greenblatt, who is similarly fascinated by complexity and the circulation of energy in texts. I’ll have more to say later about how throughout these essays gulfs ostensibly separating critical styles more than occasionally turn into bridges.

The main value of the book lies not so much in its underlying premises or refracted argument against other critical practices but in the details of the specific engagements as the contemporary poet-critics take on an intriguing variety of poetic forms, traditions, and predecessors. My brief comments on the individual essays cannot do full justice to but can at least sketch out their richness, and also occasionally call attention to some of their limitations and irritations.

The first three essays address forms and traditions rather than individual poets. Peter Sacks examines the sonnet, especially in the hands of Wyatt, as a genre that is essentially and intricately involved in issues of personal identity, visible not only in recurrent images of the human face but also in the way that prosody and syntax “stage” crises of the self. Sacks’s masterful technical analysis is supplemented by extensive biographical and contextual

knowledge, and the result is an exemplary marriage of formalism and historicism. Anthony Hecht gives more attention to form than facts in his essay, but as he focuses on structural and verbal play he acknowledges that “even fictive worlds are made to resemble the one we commonly think of as ‘real’” (56). He risks risibility by framing one of his key concerns as whether or not a poet can write a sestina that is not desolate or mournful—a concern not shared by many—but his analysis is more broadly on how important it is for us to know the rules of the game, so to speak, and the contours of a tradition before we can understand or appreciate the achievement of a poet, and by the end of the essay the drama of what Elizabeth Bishop and James Merrill do with the sestina is indeed captivating and momentous. Like Sacks and Hecht, Heather McHugh is enamored of metrical intricacy, poetic play, and the bravado of poets as they twist meaning and tease and challenge readers, and she illustrates all this by citing and free-associating on selected poems from Wyatt to Rochester. But what is most on display here is her own unfettered preciousness, and for me at least, her wonderfully energetic but infinitely repeated alliteration and echolalia, redoublings and conjunctions, and endless puns and paradoxes quickly become tiresome.

The remaining essays focus on individual poets, but rarely lose sight of the traditions they work in. Ben Jonson was famous for his quarrel with the “loathed stage,” but Linda Gregerson focuses on his quarrel with the “loathed word,” his deep-seated suspicion of the trustworthiness, integrity, and potential uses of poetic language. She recognizes the topicality of Jonson’s poems, but relies not on “philological and sociohistorical detail” (83) but strenuous formal analysis to “unlock” the lyrics, especially his often neglected devotional poems, and disclose their many tensions and recurrent strategies. Calvin Bedient puts Donne in the context of what used to be defined as the metaphysical poets’ tradition of “having things both ways” (109). He defines “sovereignty” in terms of playfulness and performance, not monolithic power, and suggests that Donne’s conception of love as “expansively metaphoric” (116) helps generate poetry that is boundlessly energetic, restless, imaginative,

self-delighting, and self-knowing. Bedient's analyses have all of Heather McHugh's enthusiasm but more ballast, and his essay rises to a stirring conclusion that discloses "What Donne exemplifies" and confirms why Donne matters.

Carl Phillips approaches Herbert as a poet of experience, particularly of affliction, that is registered as much in the form as in the details of his poems. The "irregular and unpredictable shifts of heart and mind that are what it is to be human" (137) give shape as well as substance to *The Temple* as a whole and the individual lyrics within. Phillips' own essay is similarly irregular and unpredictable, and like other contributors in this collection he downplays linear, systematic, demonstrative argument and writes in an allusive, suggestive, deeply personal and impressionistic manner, along the way embodying the "particular arrogance" (144) that he finds so valuable in Herbert and other great poets, a blend of confident assertion and earnest questioning. Even more than Phillips, William Logan suggests that form reveals mentality (in the broad sense, I might add: of a person and of an age). His test case is Milton's sonnets, and while there is initially something potentially ludicrous about using the term revolutionary to describe the use of a hyphen at the end of a line—"It promises that none of the proprieties is safe any longer" (169)—Logan's essay is a magnificent demonstration of how to read the large in the small. He is as persuasive as Christopher Hill or David Norbrook in arguing for a radical Milton, which he locates more in the "ripening of the vernacular" (170) in the sonnets than in the grand style of the epics.

Eavan Boland's essay on Anne Bradstreet is purposely decentered, and freely interweaves details about Bradstreet's life and her poems with meditations on "how poets of one time construct the poets of a previous one" (176). It is the least concretely analytical of the essays in the volume, but the most haunted and haunting, describing ever widening circles of Bradstreet's mysterious "construction" as a poet and ongoing reconstructions, hovering between success and failure, as John Berryman reads Bradstreet and writes his poems, and as Boland herself reads Berryman reading Bradstreet, and writes her poems. Alice Fulton takes on an even

more daunting subject, haunted not by Bradstreet but by Margaret Cavendish. Fulton's foundational claims are that Cavendish's poetry makes her cry (and she tells us several times that "I don't cry easily" [191]), that Cavendish's low reputation is based on "the laziness of hearsay and the wickedness of misogyny for 350 years" (192), and that her poems, when viewed sympathetically, are remarkable records of "unordinary passions," displaying a feminist sensibility and deep insight into the life of animals. Fulton's vigorous enthusiasm for Cavendish will undoubtedly attract more attention to her, but I suspect that many of these new readers will discover not only that she is a curiosity and somewhat more than a curiosity, but also that it is more than critical inattention and misogyny that keep her from deserving the reputation of a "great" poet, if that term is to retain any meaning at all.

In a collection of strong essays, Stephen Yenser's is one of the highlights. His hyper-refined sensibility almost gets him into trouble as it leads him into the realm of rarified commentary, a danger he is aware of from the very beginning but can't always avoid: observations like "the speaker's address to his love [in "The Gallery"] . . . at no point contains a hint of the atrabilious" (237) can only work against him in most readers' circles. But this same sensibility allows him to read Marvell's poems from the inside, and he shows uncanny insight into Marvell's creative volatility, "restless, virtually indefatigable" artistry (229), and the "structures within structures" that characterize his poems. Thom Gunn is, like Yenser, ingeniously attentive to form and voice, but his subject is far more resistant and controversial than Marvell. Rochester is an interesting crux, especially in a volume like this which applauds playfulness, wit, and idiosyncratic inventiveness but generally operates under an arch of high seriousness. Perhaps I betray my own prejudice when I say that I find Gunn's special pleading for Rochester more interesting than Fulton's for Cavendish, but it is special pleading nonetheless, and by no means entirely convincing. Gunn effectively rebuts the notion that Rochester's focus on sexuality in and of itself disqualifies him from consideration as a serious poet, and rightly documents how his poems are cynically observant, pro-

vocative, comical, and usefully subversive of the unexamined and often quite stupid and repressive niceties of conventional life. But while this is no mean achievement for a poet, Gunn's arguments and illustrations fall short of confirming that Rochester consistently escapes a foreshortened view and limited analysis and critique of human sexual behavior and desires, and that he is a "supremely talented stylist" (250).

Robert Hass's essay on Edward Taylor is placed last in the volume because the essays are arranged chronologically according to the time period of the poet discussed. But as Post notes in his introduction, this essay also "serves in many respects as a logical terminal point for this collection" (13), by emphasizing yet once more the overriding importance of approaching a poet through his or her poetic style, relationship to poetic forbears (and descendants), and struggle to find voice and form. All that is indeed foregrounded as Hass explores Taylor's poems as "full of verbal wonders" (263) but perhaps even more importantly as embodiments of "one of the main experiences that poetry has to offer: the intimate confrontation with another mind" (264). Even as Hass suggests that Taylor's primary experience was one of privacy, he traces a contrary impulse, motion, and achievement: to "only connect," if not by touch, then by text, to earlier generations of poets and later generations of readers.

But part of what makes Hass's essay a particularly valuable conclusion to this volume for me is that he seems to at least momentarily concede that his central points about Taylor's privacy and what he takes to be the conspicuous lack of social context in Taylor's poems are observations about sociology as well as psychology and aesthetics, areas of life that are densely and inextricably interrelated. Hass's subject, he implicitly admits, is not only the "issue of [Taylor's] style" (261), but also "New England culture" and "the solitariness, self-sufficiency, and peculiarity of the American imagination" (261). Exactly. And Stephen Greenblatt or Cary Nelson couldn't have said it better.

Post seems to suggest that this book rebuts the catch-phrase "always historicize" with a better one, "always poeticize," but I think

that the deeper wisdom demonstrated herein is that we can and should both historicize and poeticize. Many of the contributors to this volume do so, and their fascination for the concrete circumstances of consciousness and creativity, for the inevitably social context of poetry, for irrepressible *jouissance*, and for the tension between sometimes precise and other times uncontrollable signification mark key affinities even with the critics that they are supposed to be at war with. There are real differences in emphasis and approach between those who historicize and those who poeticize, but each approach can substantially enhance, enrich, correct, and perhaps complete the other. *Green Thoughts, Green Shades* activates thoughts about meditative gardens and annihilations, but also deeper Marvellian inflections about causes too good to go to war over and the prospect of world enough and time to forge a higher criticism that will satisfy poets and historicists, the outlines of which are sketched very impressively in this important volume.

Joseph Wittreich. *Shifting Contexts: Reinterpreting Samson Agonistes*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002. xxxii + 352 pp.+ 5 illus. \$60.00. Review by WILLIAM B. HUNTER, GREENSBORO, N.C.

The 1758 lines of *Samson Agonistes* may have elicited in the past few years more critical discussion than that occasioned by any other work of equivalent length. Besides numerous notes and articles there are three fulllength books by Harold Skulsky (1995), John Shawcross, and Derek Wood (both 2001), plus collections of essays edited by George Maclean (1995) and by Mark Kelley and Joseph Wittreich (2002). Earlier books on *Samson* by Mary Ann Radzinowicz (1978) and Wittreich (1986) won the Milton Society's