

my conclusions. Surely, I told myself, Blythe could not be unaware that even in 1830 (let alone in more recent times), “Indian summer” was widely used in a broad sense that has nothing to do with specific American climatological conditions (point 1). (The passage in my article referred to time, not climate.) Surely Blythe knows what the “implement laid by” is actually used for (point 2). Surely he must recognize the warlike implications of agriculture. Function, not shape, was the point of my article. Surely a knowledgeable zoologist like Blythe realizes that midges *are* insects (point 3). Surely he cannot mean what he *seems* to mean when he suggests that Keats’s “To Autumn” takes place in the spring or summer (point 4). And surely he does not want to persuade his readers that there is a contradiction between evening and autumn. And surely, surely, somebody who tries to censor an “insensate theoretical mind” (point 6) cannot seriously do so by supplying examples of excessive critical imagination (point 5). Blythe’s parlance itself can only be a friendly though bumbling parody of the terminological preferences he pretends to attack. It cannot be mere accident that not a single point raised is relevant to the main argument in the article. So it *must* all be a kind of parlor game (of the type: “Who is Turner?” “The painter of hooks and harvests?”).

Unfortunately, one serious (though only implicit) judgment in the letter (point 5) made me change my mind. Blythe rejects the use of visualization as an explanatory strategy and even denies the objective reality of connotation at the level of the larger poetic image: stanza 1, we are told, has no lush grass, no buzzing insects, and no hedge (the hazels presumably float in thin air). The critic’s reading must be modest reproduction, never an unfolding of meaning. In fact, even connotation at the level of smaller semantic units is suspect: not “grapes,” just “fruit,” etc. The suggestion that there is imagistic coherence in the first stanza is particularly annoying: let us just read it as a warehouse catalog; we shall thus be closer to a “higher natural truth.” The poetic dimension of a text, we are in effect admonished, is none of the critic’s business.

Such stark literalism mixes only too well with the gray parochial intolerance of the letter reread. It is not too surprising that Blythe should find so offensive an essay that endeavored to provide a broad dialectical framework for a variety of critical readings.

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Herbert’s “The Collar”

To the Editor:

In teaching George Herbert’s “The Collar,” I was always curious about how students dealt with the discrepancy between the highly elaborate “interior story” of rebellion and the “frame story” of submission. Barbara Leah Harman’s recent attempt to rationalize the tension between these two stories (“The Fiction of Coherence: George Herbert’s ‘The Collar,’” *PMLA*, 93 [1978], 865–77) left me both amazed and exasperated. I was amazed at the incredible amount of phenomenological and structuralist superstructure she was able to put up around such a simple poem (much of which superstructure was enlightening) but exasperated that she failed to take into account the most obvious “frame narrative” of all—the Bible.

The three texts that I find shed light on the poem are Matthew xi.29–30 (“My yoke is easy, and my burden is light”); Luke xv.13–21 (“And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living . . .”); and John xx.16 (“Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master”). Herbert’s title itself gives us a context with which to begin our interpretation, for it suggests that the poem will deal with the paradox of yokes and burdens in a person’s life. For me the first lines—instead of referring “to an experience for which we have no context,” as Harman asserts (p. 868)—subtly refer to the Prodigal Son demanding release from his father; they thus not only provide a traditional context for the beginning but also suggest a hopeful ending to the interior story. Harman’s elaborate reflections on beginnings, ending, closure, and the like, however illuminating for narrative theory, do not apply as simply or as completely as she would suggest. In fact, the enclosure of the interior story and the final narrative frame within the larger context of the scriptural narratives of the Prodigal Son, the Resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene, and Jesus’ words on yokes and burdens indicates at once both a more complex narrative device and a need for a more elaborate theological mode of interpreting.

Thus, instead of being “rather inclined to forget” that the “interior story” is not a present-tense account, the scripturally conscious reader cannot forget that the poem deals with *several* temporal levels—the present tense of the speaker, his past experience of rebellion, the biblical time of Jesus (and the fictional timelessness of his parable of the Prodigal

Son), and the future time of reunion, foreshadowed by the return of the Prodigal Son to his father. The reader who is aware of the biblical allusions would be unlikely to think that the interior story's speaker could ever "engage in a productive future" or find his "creative alternative" (Harman, p. 872). The beginning is always seen as a "false start," not merely retrospectively, as Harman contends (p. 873).

What my students and I have always had difficulty doing for Herbert's "The Collar" is finding what Harmon calls an adequate "manifestation" or "representation" for the action of the frame-story conclusion. It always seems too easy for the speaker to be won over by a simple call of "Child" after spending thirty-two lines *dramatizing* his motives for rebellion and self-assertion. Harman says that Herbert destructs all fictions in arriving at this conclusion and remains "in a vulnerable present where images cannot be secured" (p. 877). This Fishean mode of interpretation relies on a method of using Scripture as a substitute for poetry rather than as an analogical enhancement ("Thy Word is All" becomes all-destructive). Granted that the speaker gives the reader only a very brief "manifestation" or "representation" of his conversion, his replying "Lord" to the one calling of "Child." But if the scriptural narrative frames are acknowledged, then this use of two words calls up numerous images into the "vulnerable present." The response of Mary Magdalene to Jesus in John xx.16 is merely the last of numerous replies to the call of the Lord throughout the Bible. As a reply during the post-Resurrection time, it looks forward to the replies of saints throughout the Christian tradition, from Augustine onward. When the speaker inserts himself into his personal re-creation of the biblical scene (as was expected in the meditative tradition of the seventeenth century), he is performing both a complex imaginative exercise and a religious one. The vulnerability on the religious level of faith is not to be denied, as Harman would agree. But the imaginative vulnerability is nowhere near so drastic or self-destructive as she suggests. In fact, the poem has a variety of further theological implications on the imaginative level that I have not yet mentioned (some of them already available in the Jeffrey Hart article that Harman cites). For instance, the final frame story of father-child is a familiar Christian model that Paul uses to contrast with the older Law-burdened model of Judaism, the latter alluded to by Herbert in the title of his poem and explicitly mentioned in lines 21–25 ("be thy law"). Further, one could cite the complex play on the theology of "word" suggested by the speaker recalling himself

growing "more fierce and wild / At every *word*" (my *italic*) only to be calmed by the single *word* "Child," to which he replies the proper *words*, "My Lord" (addressed to the Word made flesh, who had become known to the speaker through the scriptural word of God). Once again, I find that too many of Harman's ingenious readings of the conclusion to "The Collar" follow from her too-ready acceptance of Stanley Fish's misinterpretation of "Thy Word is all" as a rejection of the analogical imagination. I would suggest that Harman's attempt to "preserve the dialectic between the impulse toward self-representation and the eroding influence of the poem's conclusion" (p. 877, n. 22) fails because she has not placed the two narratives of the poem within the larger narrative frames provided by the biblical allusions.

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Ms. Harman replies:

I welcome David Leigh's contribution to my knowledge of Herbert's sources. The biblical narratives he cites certainly illuminate "The Collar"—but I do not think they alter, fundamentally, my reading of the poem. I claim in my essay that sacramental meanings, though they are not available to the rebellious man whose speech is conserved in the poem's interior story, are available to the retrospective narrator. If Leigh's point is that biblical references and biblical meanings are also available, I agree without hesitation. My reading certainly does not want to exclude those meanings—it only wants to bring them in at a later stage.

But it is on this last point that Leigh and I part company. We do not part because one of us would place the poem in its scriptural context and the other would not; we part because we would do the placing differently. My reading separates the interior story from its sacramental (let us also say biblical) frame because it wants to describe what Herbert called "spirituall conflict"—a conflict between the person who sets out in search of an independent life and the person who acknowledges that to set out in such a way is to abandon meaning, not to come into possession of it. When Leigh says that "the scriptural narratives of the Prodigal Son, the Resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene, and Jesus' words on yokes and burdens" are present throughout the poem, he ignores the experience of the interior story's speaker—to whom these narratives were certainly not available. And when he claims that, for "any scripturally conscious reader,"