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Book Reviews

Criticism Editors

Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction by Vincent B. Leitch, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). Pp. xiii + 290. $25.00, Cloth; $8.95 paper.

Deconstructive Criticism should prove a useful, if not indispensable, tool in helping to inform American students and many academics about post-structuralism, the latest phase of continental thought to influence literary studies here and abroad. Although it is regrettable that a provincialism in the English-speaking academy of criticism maintains defenses against alien styles of thinking and writing, Vincent Leitch commendably accommodates his audience by taking little for granted. Ultimately, any evaluation of the book's achievement does need to consider the question of the audience for whom this "advanced introduction" is intended, but for the moment I want to single out its merits purely as an account of what has come to be called deconstructionism. *Deconstructive Criticism* is a reliable guide to the major thinkers of a loosely federated project pieced together largely out of idiosyncratic texts by Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes. With American students and critics in mind, Leitch also chronicles the rival ways in which some prominent North American critics appropriate post-structuralist techniques: Hayden White, Paul de Man, the later J. Hillis Miller, Joseph Riddel, William Spanos, and Paul Bové. Leitch completes his account of this disestablishment of American formalism by showing how two members of the so-called Yale school, Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman, are indebted to deconstructive grounds for the independent positions they have taken beside them.

Leitch manages his expository tasks without extreme simplification or distortion, the major figures not only surviving summary but taking their places in a coherent historical account. Leitch shapes his history of deconstruction around the theme of sign-theory. In the *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure calls for a mode of cultural and discursive analysis based on his theory that language is not a storehouse of sounds produced by their anterior meanings but a system of articulated differences. The sign is constituted by an arbitrary bonding of signifier (the sound image) and the signified (the designated concept). The legacy of Saussure's new discipline, which he proposes to call "semiology," eventually issues in the revisionisms of Lacan in psychoanalysis, Lévi-Strauss in anthropology, and Barthes in literary analysis. In each case the differential nature of the sign figures to reformulate the methods of analysis: Lacan breaks a Saussurian path into Freud by grasping that the Unconscious is bound to conscious discourse through an arbitrary (not natural) link, a situation that voids the Unconscious as a repository of accessible truth. Instead, the analytic discourse must be taken as a floating signifier that can only refer to another system of difference; the Unconscious is already "the whole structure of language and its dreamwork follows the laws of the signifier" (p. 12). Likewise, Lévi-Strauss analyzes cultural practices structurally through elements whose significance inheres in symbolic oppositions. And Barthes, in his early writings, propounds a literary structur-

alism that concentrates upon the opposition of textual signs rather than upon the realistic or philosophical offices of literature. Leitch first demonstrates how structuralism realizes the Saussurian sign so that he can identify what the "post" marks in post-structuralism. For against Saussure's semiology Derrida calls for a grammatology, a science that appreciates the bar yoking signifier and signified more radically. Derridean deconstructionism challenges the place of structure, the signified, and presence in the structuralist enterprise by insisting that the differential nature of language (what Derrida calls the general structure of writing) already prevents the straight re-presentation of idea, structure, or personal presence in a text. The differential unity of signified and signifier means that concepts exist only as they are bound to their material images in a system of signs. My rehearsal of these commonplaces intends to illustrate how the unity of Leitch's introduction arises from its emphasis on a main question that a range of eccentric, difficult writers take up.

Throughout his explanations, Leitch maintains the "sympathetic stance toward deconstruction" identified in his preface (p. xii). He is neither a blind partisan, nor a messenger of alarm, nor a theorist crowding his own subject. As a result, Leitch avoids disappearing into transparent exposition at the same time he keeps clear of the kind of engagement that ruins some other accounts of recent theory: one thinks of Dennis Donoghue's hysteria, Robert Scholes's impassioned theologization, and even, to a lesser extent, Jonathan Culler's instant (however brilliant) judgment of the worth of new theories.

Deconstructive Criticism incurs a number of risks in undertaking to summarize the ideas of writers who deny a text's power to convey ideas, and to describe criticism inspired by writers who challenge the very possibility of criticism. Leitch understands these difficulties, but his book confronts them unevenly at best. One problem for a description of deconstructive theory has its ancestor in American formalism: paraphrase is still heresy. For Leitch, the difficulty might be illustrated in his treatment of Derrida. In order to explain the Derridean notion of *differance*, Leitch concentrates on the absolute difference between the acoustic image and its referent: we use the word for a thing because the thing is absent (in experience, as we speak; in the text, as we write). But this is scarcely the main thrust of Derrida's point (or even Saussure's), since difference, more profoundly, is the very structure of language and thought. Words mean because they differ arbitrarily from other words, not because they are tied to an object reflected in the word; likewise, difference permits the articulation of mental constructs and images, which signify because they are differentiated in a system. *Differance* suggests that the ideal concept is never 'there' except as bound to the graphic image. Moreover, the concept of deferment, which Derrida also intends by coining *differance*, does not suggest simply the perpetual postponement of some object itself in the text (as if we might look for literal limbs of a body to spill out of the pages of Pynchon's *V.*). *Differance* names the motions by which a text's nature as writing inescapably subverts the solidification of idea, insight, and even terminology. Derrida's analysis works most insistently within the tissues of the text, not, as Leitch may imply, between the text and the world of objects. Leitch undoubtedly knows all this very well, but the constraints of paraphrase sometimes force simplification.

Some readers will be put off by Leitch's efforts to preserve the flavors of

eccentric styles in his own prose: his occasional effusiveness and portentious-ness seem calculated to capture strains of the apocalyptic in Barthes, Derrida, Foucault; his punning to ape the tense compression of Derrida's playfulness or the seductive luxuriation of Barthes; his high toned aphorisms to echo the enigmatic proclamations of Lacan; his preference for a scientific, passive voice to approximate Foucault. I take Leitch's efforts here as one element in a strategy designed to overcome the intractabilities of texts that simply must be read in order to be possessed.

Beyond successive generations of advanced undergraduates or beginning graduate students, Leitch's audience is a problematic one, for one would not want companion books like this to be read in the place of the original works. Too many American critics have preferred to remain ignorant of the theoreti-cal tradition that culminates in post-structuralism—whether because of the sheer amount to be assimilated belatedly, or the rumored subversive implica-tions of the newer higher criticism, or some Oedipal deafness to the passions of the next generation. Whatever the reasons they go unread, the writers whom Leitch wants to "introduce" repay attention, and, of course, they are being read increasingly. The stature of figures like Lacan, Heidegger, and Lévi-Strauss in the course of twentieth century thought seems simply unquestionable. We have, purely as intellectuals, the obligation to acquaint ourselves with their work, whether we license their effect on criticism or not. We all read Freud or Marx even if we are strict formalists. Moreover, as the popular media's attention suggests (in images like that of the trenchcoated Monsieur Jacques Derrida peering out at the readership of *Newsweek*), the struggle between the new and newer criticism is a point of interest and in-quiry for a society that trivializes literature and literary study. We are a riven profession, and perhaps *Deconstructive Criticism* will do its part to promote conversation among ourselves and with the larger world. For the well in-formed, this book will seem decidedly belated, a presentation of methods al-ready being modified. For others more lately come, the book might still seem a little beside the point, since we are deluged with translations of most of these writers and with well edited and introduced anthologies in which even the faint of heart may take their deconstruction in shorter draughts. But for others who want a general map of the historical development of post-struc-turalism, and who want a chart for their reading of its authors, *Deconstructive Criticism* will be a welcome guide.

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The Poetics of Authority

I

"What conditions did Linnaeus (or Petty, or Arnauld) have to fulfill," Michel Foucault asked some time ago in *The Order of Things*, "not to make his discourse coherent and true in general but to give it, in the time it was written and accepted, value and practical application as scientific discourse . . . ?"[1] Although cast in terms of eighteenth-century natural philosophy, economics, and grammar, Foucault's question addresses the historical conditions of possibility for any given discourse; appropriately translated into the realm of literature, it is a question that should properly concern any literary history—at least, as Frank Lentricchia has recently argued, insofar as it endeavors to be genuinely historical:[2]

> What this means for the writing of literary history is that the historian will be loath to isolate giants like Milton for English poetry or Emerson for the American scene . . . . Milton or Emerson will be convenient names only for the focusing of convergences of force in which no authorial will (including those of Milton or Emerson) can control or even hope to be conscious of. Awareness of the numerous subindividual marks imprinted on authors by an impressive discursive formation (as well as by a subtle and potentially life-denying lineage) will encourage the historian to cease looking in the distant past for a single heavy-weight father-figure as the sole determinant of a given literary identity, will encourage him to start looking closer to home, at numerous forgotten contemporaries whose sense of the poetic may or may not correspond with that of the emerging identity in question . . . . The result of such a reorientation of historical method would be an emphasis on both lineage and differences and a perspective that the literary self as synthesis "is an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous types;" such a perspective would view the literary self as the product of the "hazardous play of dominations"—some of them not at all "literary."

Although literary history in its traditional guises has accomplished much, even at its most rigorous the consideration of an issue like poetic authority has been limited, insofar as the conditions of poetic discourse have been defined as strictly literary. The reorientation Lentricchia describes would result in the study of poetic authority as a more broadly determined cultural artifact —one produced not by the intersection of tradition and the individual talent, but by a complex negotiation between shifting fields of social and cultural forces.

It is poetic authority in the strictly literary sense of the phrase that John Guillory examines in his recent study of Spenser and Milton. Guillory's version of literary history—"poets talking and listening to one another" (68)— places his *Poetic Authority* well within the confines of traditional literary history; his emphasis on imagination as the ambivalent source of poetic power and autonomy further serves to identify the degree to which Romanticism, and critical theory developed from it, has determined his perspective on the Renaissance. A quite different view of the conditions and limits of poetic discourse in the period is offered in Richard Helgerson's *Self-Crowned Laureates*.

Although the question Helgerson asks of his authors is akin to Foucault's, it has also been fully translated into the historical context of early modern literature. The result is not a study of poetic authority *per se* but a broader cultural analysis that might be characterized as the poetics *of* authority: in this instance, a wide-ranging study of successive generations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English poets—Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and their respective contemporaries—and of the literary, social, and political pressures which, in combination, served both to authorize and to limit the roles available to ambitious poets of each generation. Thus while these two studies share authors and what appears to be a common theme, they in fact have little ground in common. Informed as they are by radically incompatible assumptions about history, literary and otherwise, they could be said to represent—matters of relative success and critical acumen aside—distinct and even opposed developments in current Renaissance studies.

<center>II</center>

John Guillory "describes an end and a beginning: the end of inspiration and the beginning of imagination" (ix) as the ground of poetic authority. Although Spenser and Milton occupy a period of hiatus "between the birth . . . of a putative 'secular' text, and the later triumph of the imagination," what is dying, what being born, and how, is difficult to say:

> This study describes an end and a beginning: the end of inspiration and the beginning of imagination. However, I do not identify this beginning with the origin of the secular text, or this end with the end of the sacred text. My hypothesis is that the authority of the imagination (which is almost never questioned by post-Renaissance critics) is completely implicated in the efflorescent death of inspiration; and this death, paradoxically, makes possible the survival of "scripture," always at the end of its era. The continuance of scripture is what we must now try to understand, as it is finally more important than the event announced in literary history as the internalization of the muse. (ix)

What "completely implicated" is meant to convey in the passage above is left to the reader's ingenuity, but certain aspects of Guillory's argument can nonetheless be summarized with relative clarity.

Guillory's interest in Spenser and Milton lies in their resistance to the increasing secularization of the text—a resistance to "writing that is not, in effect, *scriptural*"—and in the paradoxical effects of that resistance on the history of English literature. He is struck by the fact that "the post-Miltonic imagination no longer names an exclusively secular origin . . . but a further remystification of the same imagination" (ix) that Spenser and Milton polemicized against. Their polemics against it are "fundamentally a consequence of anxiety about *authority*" (177); their resistance to this authority of the imagination "as a mode of self-begetting," cast as it was in a "regressive" recourse to divine inspiration, served to produce that "'line' of poetry descending from Spenser and Milton" which, while grounded in the powers of the imagination, was also "aggressively scriptural" (viii). It is this "'line'" of poetry—primarily the Romantic tradition, especially Wordsworth, and always in quo-

tations—that *Poetic Authority* seeks to account for, and defines as a belated struggle "to produce a poetic text that is both original and sacred" (16).

After a brief survey of Renaissance concepts of imagination and inspiration, Guillory turns to Spenser and Milton's related (and equally belated) struggle against "the *secular itself*, or the established authority of Renaissance literature" (21). The passing recognition of some complexity in period attitudes toward imitation, imagination, and inspiration is quickly forgotten, since the "established" authority of Renaissance literature is hereafter treated as if it were grounded in claims for the imagination as an autonomous poetic power: a curious view of Renaissance literature, Spenser and Milton's perspective on it, and Guillory's own (more rigorous) sources.[3] Spenser and Milton conduct their struggle with this established authority by trying to displace certain of their precursor poets—Ovid and Shakespeare, respectively. Although Guillory has clearly modelled his "interior literary history . . . written tropologically" (131) on the revisionary poetics of Harold Bloom, he would claim the status of a revisionist himself. He has, he tells us, replaced the concept of literary influence with what he calls "the concept of acknowledgement." Furthermore, the figures displaced by Spenser and Milton are to be understood as allegorical figures of the imagination, rather than as poetic egos in Bloom's sense. Their presence can be identified whenever they are openly named, or alluded to, or echoed:

> I am interested in those maneuvers of invocation and recognition by which an author becomes an *auctor*. Poets certainly do confront each other as psyches in the course of literary history, as the notion of influence proposes, but these disembodied egos are also to be conceived as allegorically laden figures of *prosopopeia*. If the critical or climactic moments in the careers of my two poets are often those in which an *auctor* is acknowledged . . . these first-order phantasms conceal behind their empty sleeves other more spectral sources (Ovid for Spenser, Shakespeare for Milton) who in turn gesture toward the groundless origin, the imagination itself. By deferring, in particular, the question of Spenser's influence . . . I am led to consider the complicity of imagination in the construction of that fiction which is the "line" of Spenser and Milton. The adjacency of Shakespeare to this line has everything to do with the fortunes of fantasy, and by recognizing this fact, we should be able to recover a literary history less deformed by linear genealogy. (x)

The genealogy Guillory means to recover is less linear than Bloom's in the sense that it includes figures other than poets—figures who still function as personifications of ideas, but who are drawn from "history" as well as poetry. Thus the explicit recognition of Galileo in *Paradise Lost* not only represents Milton's "failure to keep history wholly purged from his redaction of the biblical story" (156)—failure implying the will to do so, of course, which may come as a surprise to a great many of Milton's readers—but also reveals to us the surprising historical dimensions of literary history. As Guillory puts it, Milton's acknowledgment of failure in the inclusion of Galileo reminds us "that the psychomachia of literary history constitutes not only the genealogy of poets, but also, and more truly, the contest of literature and history" (xi).

Galileo, however, is only a coda to Guillory's central concern, just as his brief chapters on Spenser are a prelude to it. The central body of his book is devoted to Milton and the spectral figure of imagination that most preoccupies him, namely Shakespeare. Milton, we are told, "displaced Shakespearean drama into dramatic narratives of Protestant eschatology (turning blank verse into sacred epic)" (21–22). He apparently did so by echoing a single passage in many of his works: Theseus' speech on imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is, for Guillory, the "most aggrandizing text on the imagination in the Renaissance." By "most aggrandizing" he means that it represents the idea of imagination most threatening to Milton, that of "a preliminary decreation as a constituent of the act of creation" (20). This rather overburdened reading of "airy nothing," however, is a slight problem compared to Guillory's notion that Theseus' speech represents "Shakespeare's 'poetic,' very mediated indeed in the mouth of the unimaginative Theseus" (18). Removed from the context which serves not to "mediate" his comments but to reveal their limits, Theseus thus becomes Shakespeare's mouthpiece.

Having ignored the fundamentals of dramatic context, Guillory then proceeds to ignore the fundamentals of dramatic form in his discussion of *Comus*, where "Shakespeare" of course reappears. In order to avoid "the possible trivialization of a generic reading" (74), he discards genre altogether. Milton's *Maske*, we learn, is "a drama in the ordinary sense" (68). What "drama in the ordinary sense" might mean becomes clear when Guillory tells us that "what Milton fears as perhaps too near him belongs to the great mimetic success of Renaissance literature, to its very illusionistic power, preeminently to the drama and the drama's greatest poet" (138–39). The masque was indeed the province of illusionistic power in the Renaissance; drama was not, as Stephen Orgel has frequently reminded us.[4] Guillory's blurring of distinctions, however, is not simply an effort to argue that *Comus* is, in a sense, dramatic;[5] we are meant to take any sense of a "dramatic" structure in Milton's works, thus loosely understood, as a sort of echo or allusion to Shakespeare. *Poetic Authority* is rich in examples of hyperbolic generalization and willful disregard of contexts, literary or historical, but the most impressive instance comes with Guillory's assertion that the final result of all this Miltonic wrestling with Shakespeare's ghost is to be found in *Paradise Lost*—which successfully killed off poetic drama in English literature:

> It is often said that Milton "killed" the epic in English literary history, but his greater victory was against the drama, the secular triumph of his native tradition. Great long poems continue to be written, but no great poet (with the exception of Milton himself in *Samson Agonistes*) would speak again in the form of the drama. In this overcoming Milton takes up both the blank verse medium, the Parian marble of Renaissance drama, and the allegorical play that was the seminal form of *Paradise Lost*. (139)

> This is not to say that no great poet will attempt a drama (Wordsworth's *The Borderers* is a fine exception), but rather that *poetic* drama is henceforth, *inevitably*, in the tradition of *Samson Agonistes* rather than Shakespeare. Poets tend to write closet drama while dramatists turn to prose. This seems to me much more astonishing than the supposed decline of epic. (189 n.40)

Oftentimes it is difficult to ascertain whether Guillory wants us to take his pronouncements at face value; the prose of *Poetic Authority* is at best difficult, managing to be at once excessively hyperbolic and oddly qualified in its assertions ("The authority of imagination . . . is almost never questioned by post-Renaissance critics"). This leads to a considerable blurring of necessary distinctions, and some doubts about what is being said. Thus, although Guillory recognizes in a footnote that chastity is not equivalent to celibacy, his discussion of *Comus* equates the two throughout. We encounter a problem of a different order in his declaration that "the masque is the very genre in which we would least expect the triumphs of chastity, and the later Miltonic exercise (the 'mask of chastity') chastens the genre itself" (70–71). As a genre the masque is rather fond of chastity and its triumphs, as one might expect, considering that it was the preferred form of entertainment at wedding celebrations. Elsewhere, claims to originality are founded on sheer misreadings of other critics. Attempting to rescue the "neglected historicity of *Paradise Lost*" (145) from previous criticism, he quotes Joseph Wittreich supposedly dehistoricizing the poem. Wittreich's "prophetic Milton also denies repetition in history: 'For Milton, it is not especially important that history repeats itself but that, as Mark Twain once wrote, it rhymes, and through its rhymes holds out the possibility of progress'" (161).

Poetic Authority is most successful, in contrast, when patient enough to give the work of others a serious and accurate reading. Thus the illuminating interpretation of Colin Clout on Mt. Acidale, stemming from Guillory's careful disagreement with Isabel MacCaffrey and Harry Berger; thus the use of Freud and Ricoeur to show, quite impressively, that "the pattern of Satanic behavior . . . follows the genesis of melancholia, as Satan begins to imitate God, to become what he has lost, to introject" (115) divine authority. Such consideration is infrequent, however, and the result is that *Poetic Authority* suffers from an extreme disregard for both literary and historical contexts.

III

Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System grows out of Richard Helgerson's earlier study of the cultural situation of Renaissance poetry, *The Elizabethan Prodigals*.[6] In that work he considered the surprising frequency with which poets dismissed their own enterprise as unworthy, often as a prelude to renouncing poetry altogether. Revealing a fine sense of the ways in which poetic formulae can be both conventional and profoundly significant, he showed that such expressions of poetic disdain, as in Sidney's renunciation of his corpus as "a trifle, and that triflingly handled," were not merely Elizabethan commonplaces, expressions of poetic *sprezzatura* cast in formulaic topoi of inconsequentiality. They were also a significant register of the cultural moment and its ambivalence toward the role of the poet. Helgerson reformulates that ambivalence and its consequences for the "literary system" of Elizabethan England in his introduction to the present work:

> In an earlier study of the writers who dominated English literature in the 1580's—the decade that first thrust England toward the mainstream of European Renaissance literature—I found the marks of an ex-

> traordinary and quite surprising uncertainty about the whole literary
> enterprise. These men had been taught by their fathers and schoolmas-
> ters that poetry was wasteful folly and that folly inevitably led to re-
> pentence. At first they rebelled against this iron law, but in the end
> they submitted and gave up writing, condemning all they had done as
> the outbreak of licentious youth. In doing so they were fitting their
> own literary activity to the commonplace definition of a poet as a
> young man culpably distracted from the real business of life. Obviously
> this self-image left no place for a fully developed poetic career. (17)

Poetry was a transitional pastime: something to leave behind, not to found a
career upon. Those who wrote professionally rather than as self-professed
amateurs or prodigals did so for the stage—and it was not until Jonson's ef-
forts to dignify "plays" with the name of "Works" that English drama began
to clear itself of the taint which, according to Sidney, caused "her mother
Poesy's honesty to be called in question" (150).

In *Self-Crowned Laureates*, "amateur" and "professional" comprise the first
in a series of binary terms which, taken together, serve to define the "system
of authorial roles" available to the Renaissance poet. Helgerson devotes
much of his introduction and opening chapter to a detailed portrait of "the
effect of this role definition on the shape of Elizabethan literature, on the
choice of subjects and their treatment, and on the configuration of the typical
literary career" (58–59). In turning his attention to Spenser, Jonson, and Mil-
ton, Helgerson is equally concerned with the formulae of literary self-pre-
sentation and their cultural determinants. Here, however, the fashioning and
presentation of an authorial self is viewed not merely as a reflection or prod-
uct of a broader cultural situation, but also as a more dynamic device, a po-
tential means of producing new paradigms of poetic authority. The shift to a
more dialectical model of cultural production is crucial, since Helgerson
wishes to explain how a new paradigm, "an essentially new configuration of
what Michel Foucault has called 'author-functions'" (3), came into existence
within a literary system which seemed to have no place for it. Given the con-
straints imposed upon the poetic enterprise by a moral and cultural imagina-
tion that precluded a major literary career, how was it possible for poets of
such "laureate" ambition, "who strove to achieve a major literary career and
who said so" (1), to achieve even relative success?

Helgerson's answer is an extended study of the dialectics of cultural
change. Avoiding the overly broad concepts of period or *episteme*, he ap-
proaches each poet in terms of his own generation, defining a generation as a
relatively synchronous cultural moment, "the temporal location in which a
certain language is spoken" (19). For Helgerson, that language is never a
merely poetic idiom, especially viewed from the perspective of laureate ambi-
tion. Since his self-crowned laureates (the fine irony of the title also reflects
the ultimate impossibility of the task) sought to translate many of the ideals
of civic Humanism into what was, by definition, a prodigal enterprise, their
efforts to redefine the limits of poetic authority necessarily intersected the
larger structures of authority; theirs was an effort to negotiate a new contract
for poetry that was at once a social, political, and literary contract. To do so,
each had to adopt the idiom of his time and adapt it to new purposes: each

had to be spoken through and thus be authorized by the collective cultural structure, and yet each had to speak in a way that made his words and works mean something new. It is in the examination of the individual careers that Helgerson's system of authorial roles receives its more detailed and precise exposition; the three chapters that form the heart of this book are not only studies of Spenser, Jonson, and Milton, but also comprehensive surveys of the limits and possibilities of meaning in the work of their contemporaries. And while this synchronic approach to the cultural idiom of each generation forms one axis of *Self-Crowned Laureates*, the effects of each generation on its successors forms the other, diachronic axis, producing what its author calls a "semiotic history," understood in the sense of Benveniste's "succession of synchronies."[7]

The chapter on Spenser shares with the others a focus on critical moments of transition in each career; these include not only those "liminal" works which announce the New Poet but also the proems and prefaces of major and late works. Such "crossings of the threshold," in which the author first appears before his audience or faces a new one, are the points at which the pressure to adopt a readily available authorial role is greatest, and with each new beginning comes "a renewal of self-presentational pressure" (13). In Spenser's efforts to combine the private inspiration of the love poet with virtuous civic action *through* poetry, that pressure is apparent even in the triumphant first installment of *The Faerie Queene,* whose dedicatory epistle to Lord Burghley, shaped by the unsympathetic but considerable power of its addressee, slips back into the recantatory posture of the prodigal poet to present "The labor of lost time, and wit unstayd" (66). Since it is with Spenser that Helgerson most directly adumbrates his earlier work on the Elizabethan amateur or prodigal, it should be said here that his readings of conventional expressions of poetic diffidence will strike many, albeit at different junctures, as being too literal-minded; the risk Helgerson runs with generations of critics weaned on Curtius is one he well recognizes, that of being thought a naive reader. However, his readings—especially, in this context, of *The Shepheardes Calender*—are finally convincing. Like E.K. (68), we seem to have been too quick to cite Virgilian and other models, too ready to slight, in our recognition of the oft-announced Elizabethan desire for a major poet, the ideological, political, and literary pressures such a poet had to resolve—a resolution which Spenser, of course, ultimately failed to achieve.

Spenser stands out from his contemporaries in two ways: first, in his public abandonment of all social identity except that conferred by his vocation (63), and second, in his efforts to achieve virtuous civic action through poetry. While he tries to make the second possible in *The Shepheardes Calender* by translating the conventional critique of the prodigal love-poet into a question of specifically *poetic* responsibilities neglected (71), the effort is troubled by "uncertainty about both the practical and moral implications of a poetic career" (72). The love poet and the vatic poet momentarily cohere in the first books of *The Faerie Queene,* but the later works of the 1590's have the "bifurcated look that we observe in the careers of his contemporaries" (88).[8] The shattering reappearance of the Blatant Beast and the return to a pastoral and personal self of *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* mark Spenser's retreat from a more public poetry, but even in retreat he stands out from his contemporaries

in his refusal to adopt the role of the prodigal. "Unlike the other poets of his generation, Spenser responds to such pressure not by renouncing, but rather by reaffirming, the value of poetry" (97).

Jonson began his only pastoral poem at the end of his career, and never finished it; his announced epic, the *Heroologia*, remained a title without a poem as far as we know. Helgerson explains Jonson's inclusion in this book by recognizing his unquestionable poetic ambition and by suggesting that many of his generic choices, although explicitly violating the Virgilian pattern of the "natural" laureate, were necessary for a generation of poets that included Spenser among its antecedents. Although the argument for a diastolic pattern of achievement in successive literary generations (123–24) remains overly general, Helgerson's readings of Daniel and Drayton, as examples of the perhaps inevitable "hardening of generic distinctions" (100) which marked the efforts of those who took Spenser as a model, are persuasive. Equally convincing is this reading of Jonson's career and its pressure toward self-presentation and definition by difference; while complementing current readings of Jonson, Helgerson provides a rich new context for them. For Jonson's generation, satire and the increasingly profitable stage were lures few writers resisted; Jonson's efforts to use both as unlikely forums for presenting his own laureate claims set him significantly apart from his contemporaries. In the profusion of authorial selves that characterizes *Every Man Out of His Humor*, Helgerson locates Jonson's efforts to adapt the role of the satirist to the ends of laureate self-presentation; his imitation of Spenser is strategic rather than generic, for both "adopt the fashionable mode of their time only to criticize and partially detach themselves from it" (139). A similar detachment is found in the anti-theatricalism that marks the middle plays from *Volpone* to *Bartholomew Fair*. In *Volpone*, Jonson "manages to have his plot without its having him," dissociating himself from it and making it "the responsibility of characters he can ultimately repudiate" (159).

The view of Jonson's career as a whole, including the epigrams and the masques, is of "an agon, an unresolved struggle for the self against the very conditions of its expression" (184). It must be said, however, that the effort to explain all of Jonson's antithetical career in terms of "the conflict between laureate self-fashioning and satiric excess" (144) necessarily ignores Jonson's collaborative work—also marked by considerable excess, especially in the first years of Jacobean rule. When Jonson was *not* presenting himself, his signature of "satiric excess" is still apparent and not easily explained by the pressures of laureate self-presentation.

It comes as a considerable surprise to be reminded, as we are at the opening of Helgerson's long essay on Milton, of the poets who were Milton's relative contemporaries—those born between 1600 and 1618. The list forms a fairly comprehensive roster of the poets who were for the most part "content to remain admiring Sons of Ben, dutiful pupils in the School of Donne" (187). Part of the surprise, of course, stems from the length of Milton's career: its early and repeated announcements of precocious ability ("like the middle class, Milton is always rising and never getting anywhere" [270] in the *Poems* of 1645); the long hiatus at its center, during which Milton shifted his laureate claims to the prose medium of the *Defense of the English People*; and the return to poetry under social, cultural, and political conditions which, as Hel-

gerson argues, made necessary as well as possible a "poem that would acknowledge no patron but God" (277). A part of that surprise, however, stems from Milton's eventual success in setting himself so fully apart from his contemporaries—a success which, as Helgerson brilliantly demonstrates, has given us the hindsight to misread the early work and overlook the degree to which it is "deeply engaged in the world of [Milton's] cavalier contemporaries" (257). Helgerson traces that engagement quite thoroughly, providing a detailed view of what Milton's early work shared with "Orpheus' sons," as Davenant characterized the cavalier poets. While *L'Allegro*, *I1 Penseroso*, and *Ad Patrem* are marked by a typical cavalier emphasis on stylistic virtuosity—Orpheus as a master of style and thereby an enforcer of civility—*Lycidas* acknowledges what the cavaliers rarely do, the tragic fate of Orpheus. The image of vulnerability and the questioning of the poetic enterprise it prompts are characteristic of Milton's efforts to speak "the literary language of his generation, but . . . with an accent that reveals his laureate ambition" (268) —characteristic both in the effort to displace that language, and in the sheer negativity of the gesture. "A series of emergences, Milton's volume is also a series of deferrals" (270).

The problem, Helgerson suggests, was not only the unsuitability of the Orphic idiom of the cavaliers or the presence of Charles on the throne. Both were of course obstacles to Milton's ambition, but both were also symptoms of a more fundamental contradiction:

> The very idea of a laureate poet harbored a contradiction that the passage of time made increasingly conspicuous. Yes, the laureate belonged by the monarch. But when placed there, he and his work seemed inevitably to decline toward mendacious flattery and triviality. Perhaps the true laureate could only be a poet of alienation and exile. (240)

> From the first Milton considered himself a divine poet, yet he saw no necessary opposition between God's ordinance and the order of the state. On the contrary, he, like Spenser and Jonson before him, saw the great poet as at once God's spokesman and the spokesman of national power. Nor did his increasing alienation from the established church and the royal government radically change that understanding. It simply meant that before he could assume his destined role there would have to be a new church and a new government. (242)

Both the long-planned but never initiated Arthurian epic and the energy devoted to tracts written in service of the Commonwealth testify to Milton's desire to see imagination and power, as Helgerson puts it, finally cohere. The central problem for the generation of Cowley, Davenant, and Milton, however, was "the problem of literary autonomy" (227); Cowley and Davenant freely gave it away, first to Charles I and later, during the Restoration, to the Royal Society in poems devoted to heroic scientific experiment—poems whose ultimate fate was to be collected in *The Stuffed Owl* (229). Only final and irremediable defeat, Helgerson argues, gave Milton the freedom to make "exile and alienation his subject and his stance," thereby resolving the inherent contradiction of his generation in a fashion that made him seem entirely unrelated to it. "But if *Paradise Lost* finally stands alone," as Helgerson suggests, "it stands alone as the unique solution to a shared problem" (251).

My summary can hardly do justice to the breadth of *Self-Crowned Laureates* or to the cogent and clear view of the Renaissance literary system that emerges as a result of that breadth. The transitional moments of each author's work are not merely considered as critical thresholds in the stages of a career. Rather, each liminal moment of transition serves Helgerson as a broader point of departure, an *Ansatzpunkt* (in Erich Auerbach's sense of the term)[9] which provides an expansive opening into the work of a wide range of contemporaries and thus serves to articulate the limits and possiblities of meaning for each generation. Helgerson's is an effort to write literary history from a native's point of view, as it were, while clarifying the structures of authority which conditioned the perspective and poetic practice of each successive generation. This bilinear charting of the Renaissance literary system ultimately serves as its author hoped it would: "to locate social and cultural constraints that do not appear on other maps and to discover significance in gestures that before seemed empty or odd" (15). As such, it is a significant contribution not only to literary studies but also to the larger "refiguration of social thought" taking place throughout the human sciences in recent years. Geertz's description of the increasingly interdisciplinary character of cultural interpretation in other fields could serve equally well to describe *Self-Crowned Laureates*:[10]

> It is a phenomenon general enough and distinctive enough to suggest that what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map—the moving of a few disputed borders, the marking of some more picturesque mountain lakes—but an alteration of the principles of mapping. Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think.

What Geertz takes to be a significant cultural shift in the social sciences has been evident in recent Renaissance studies as well, as the field has begun to incorporate methodological and theoretical perspectives from the other human sciences, and to regard literary interpretation as a vehicle rather than an end, a way of gaining entry to a broader cultural field. Such developments have been alternately described as "a return to historical criticism" or as a "new historicism."[11] However we characterize these endeavors, *Self-Crowned Laureates* contributes to them an illuminating and masterful study of the poetics of authority in Renaissance culture.

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Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. xiv.

2. Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 202–03.

3. See in particular the two works of Murray W. Bundy, "Invention and

Imagination in the Renaissance," *JEGP* 29 (1930), 535–45; and "The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Medieval Thought," *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature* 12 (1927), 1–289.

4. See Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Univ. of California Press, 1975).

5. For informed approaches to "dramatic" aspects of the masque, see C.L. Barber, "A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle: The Masque as a Masque," in *A Maske at Ludlow: Essays on Milton's "Comus"*, ed. John S. Diekhoff (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve Univ., 1968), pp. 188–206; Angus Fletcher, *The Transcendental Masque* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971); John G. Demaray, *Milton and the Masque Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968).

6. Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976).

7. Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, tr. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, Florida: Univ. of Miami Press, 1971), p. 5; cited by Helgerson, p. 18.

8. The account of the later work reveals some of the dangers of an overly synchronous definition of a "generation," although this is less of a problem in Helgerson's approach to Jonson and Milton; the chapter on Spenser was previously published in two separate essays, and may represent an early and less refined concept of a generation. For some of the self-presentational pressures particular to the 1590's, see Jonathan Goldberg, "The Poet's Authority: Spenser, Jonson, and James VI and I," *Genre* 15 (1982), 81–100.

9. Erich Auerbach, "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," tr. M. and E. Said, *Centennial Review* 13 (1969), 14.

10. Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *The American Scholar* 49 (1980), 167.

11. For the former, see Jonathan Goldberg, "The Politics of Renaissance Literature: A Review Essay," *ELH* 49 (1983), 514; for the latter, see Stephen Greenblatt's introduction to *Genre* 15 (1982), 5. Greenblatt's description of his own work as a "poetics of culture" may provide a better characterization of what he calls the new historicism. See Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 5.