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In Memoriam: Coburn Freer (November 5, 1939–February 26, 2019)

Sean H. McDowell

They are all gone into the world of light!
And I alone sit lingring here;
Their very memory is fair and bright,
And my sad thoughts doth clear.[1]
—Henry Vaughan

My thanks to Meagan Freer for the photo of her father along with some details about his life.

[1]"They are all gone into the world of light," *The Works of Henry Vaughan*, vol. 2, ed. Donald R. Dickson, Alan Rudrum, and Robert Wilcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 567.

As attested in the previous pages of this volume, academic year 2018/2019 saw the passing of several notable scholars of 16th- and 17th-century English literature. Coburn Freer is another of that generation of scholars born in the 1930s who have "gone into the world of light" this year. Freer was known more as a scholar of Herbert and of early modern drama than as a Donne scholar. Nevertheless, his 1996 essay "John Donne and Elizabethan Economic Theory" made a notable contribution to our understanding of Donne's usage of coinage and other economic metaphors in his verse. He will be missed by several generations of former students and colleagues who admired his wit, hospitality, and knack for making the poems and plays of the past come alive in the present.

Born in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Freer grew up in the Pacific Northwest, where he received bachelor's degrees in both mathematics and English literature from Lewis and Clark College and his Ph.D. in English from the University of Washington. Over the course of his forty-year career, he received National Endowment of the Arts and Fulbright grants and taught English and creative writing at several universities in the United States and Europe, including the University of Arizona, the University of Montana, the University of Oulu (Finland), the University of London, and the University of Georgia, where he served as Department Head from 1980–1992.

By multiple reports Freer was one of those Department Heads whose tenure lingers long afterwards in the memories of his colleagues. During his twelve years in this role, the number of tenure-track women and persons of color among the faculty greatly increased, along with department offerings in "women's studies, ethnic studies, English language study, creative writing, folklore, and rhetoric."[2] Freer invested considerable time in reading and responding to all the work written by his colleagues to better support them and advocate for the needs of the department as a whole. He retired from the University of Georgia as Professor Emeritus in 2011.

Freer's scholarship often explores issues of style and versification in the work of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century writers. The trajectory of this interest began in his earliest work on the poetic style

[2]"In Memoriam: Coburn Freer," https://www.english.uga.edu/memoriam-coburn-freer.

of Philip and Mary Sidney in their psalm translations and in particular, the elegance of these translations in contrast to the more monotonous metrical psalm translations of Sternhold and Hopkins.[3] Building on this early work, Freer's first book, *Music for a King: George Herbert's Style and the Metrical Psalms* (1972),[4] contends that Herbert's poems combine the eloquence of the Sidneys with the strategic use of some of the stylistic infelicities of the Elizabethan psalm translators to convey the poetic speaker's sense of spiritual inadequacy. Freer observes that "there is sometimes a discrepancy between the way a Herbert poem behaves and the way it says it behaves," as when, for example, the literal sense of a poem "may be assertive while the form is hesitant; or the sense may be uncertain and the form suggests an answer."[5] The conscious adoption of some of the psalm translation qualities Donne complains about in *Sidney* allows Herbert a way to stress his own humility through style. As an argument, this one proved somewhat controversial in reviews of this book.

Freer's own literary style tends to be lively and clear, eschewing and sometimes openly critical of literary jargon in favor of a prose that is just plain enjoyable to read. He writes of Donne, Herbert, and others as one alive to human foibles and dedicated to the obligation to tell things as they are, or at least as how he sees them. For example, in the "Epilogue" of *Music for a King*, he describes the psalm style as "not an ornamental trim with Herbert, much less a glue or adhesive; it is part of his character, his 'real' character and his poetic character."[6] When contrasting prior references to usury with Donne's economic interests in a broader sense, he says

> Donne's writing shows how a late Renaissance poet, certainly no financial wizard himself, was able to use ideas from economics with considerable sophistication. Donne is one of the first English poets to sense the vast economic changes coming over Europe in general and England in

[3]See "The Style of Sidney's Psalms," *Language and Style 2* (1969): 63–78, and "The Countess of Pembroke in a World of Words," *Style* (1971): 37–56.

[4]Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972.

[5]*Music for a King*, p. 194.

[6]Ibid., p. 243.

> particular, and the first to work them into the understanding of intellectual experience.[7]

He finds fault with those academics and academic presses who ignore the poetry as poetry of early modern drama with a similar liveliness. Some presses and journals, he notes,

> quote the poetry as if it were prose, running on the lines one after another without even slashes to indicate line breaks, and with only a vestigial capital letter now and then to mark the start of a poetic line. Certainly this practice saves paper and typesetting costs, and certainly it focuses our attention more on the "content" of the poetry, which is supposed to be what the author was interested in anyway.[8]

As these examples suggest, Freer was always aware of the reader in his writing and of his obligation to engage their attention with the same dedication as the writers he studied and taught. Often his passion for his usual subject, the importance of reading poetry as poetry wherever it appears, is palpable, as when he implicitly chastises those who would avoid attending to the poetry of poetic lines because doing so is too labor intensive:

> How can poetry assume the center of an extended argument? Can every line of a play be analyzed and coordinated with every other line, as if the whole were a mammoth lyric, some sort of poetic dinosaur? How can even the most tireless reader respond to every line in a play? The challenge seems impossible, but Paul Alpers has assured us that each of the 4,000 stanzas of *The Faerie Queene* is addressed directly to us as readers; if we can rise to that occasion, then we ought to be able to stand up and walk through plays like a man.[9]

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[7]"John Donne and Elizabethan Economic Theory," *Criticism* 38.4 (Fall 1996): 497.

[8]*The Poetics of Jacobean Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 3.

[9]Ibid., p. 11.

Such a passage suggests why many of Freer's former students found his courses on Milton and seventeenth-century poetry lively and memorable.

The last two quotations come from Freer's second book, *The Poetics of Jacobean Drama* (1982), which, like the first, concentrates on what it means to attend to the sound of writers' voices as assiduously as we would ferret out the meanings of their texts. This time, Freer's attention centers on what poetic lines reveal about characterization in five Jacobean plays: Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Ford's *The Broken Heart*. His central contention is that the verse of these plays, and by extension Jacobean drama generally, essentially fuels the action within them, often on a very intimate level. As he explains in his second chapter, "Contexts of Blank Verse Drama,"

> The paradox of performance as literature is inherent in all those metaphors used to describe the actor's basic job of work. Meters or "numbers" in the poetic text become a kind of music in the delivery of the actor, or in the mind of the reader. The process of mediation begins in the poet's mind, and ends in speech that occurs on stage or in the mind of the reader; the second is a sensible apprehension as well as the first, because the residual core of poetry in poetic drama allows the reader himself to re-create the play.[10]

Characters unfold for audiences and readers moment by moment in how they speak. This point of view, which is consonant with how the Royal Shakespeare Company tends to treat Shakespeare's blank verse as a primary source for performance cues, treats Jacobean dramatists as poets telling stories, not as storytellers using verse merely to satisfy literary convention.

Reviews of this book at times took issue with Freer's characterizations of particular sound effects in particular passages. How one hears the meter of a passage can vary from person to person. Nonetheless, the book succeeds in showing the degree to which insights in individual characters emerge in how they speak as much as in what they say. The book thereby succeeds in demonstrating a key

[10]Ibid., p. 48.

difference between early modern and modern sensitivities regarding style. In stressing the close relationships between individual speech patterns and personalities, Freer reiterated the centrality of what former Royal Shakespeare Company director John Barton called the "verbal relish" of early modern drama. He also recovers a sense of how early modern auditors and readers likely perceived the characters through the verse they spoke.

Freer is survived by Ramona, his beloved wife of fifty years, two daughters, five grandchildren, two nieces, and several generations of former colleagues and students whose lives were touched by his advice, his humor, and his presence in numerous ways.

Seattle University