

**(Book review). Robert N. Watson, *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance***

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**Article:**

Robert N. Watson, *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994. xiv + 416 pp. \$52.

Bacon wrote that "some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." I would add to his menu another kind that is worth consuming, but best taken with a grain of salt. Such a book is Robert N. Watson's study of Kyd, Shakespeare, Donne, and Herbert, *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance*. On the one hand, it is loaded with fresh and sometimes startling insights, and it is bracingly skeptical of reigning New Historicist certainties about the hegemonic Christianity of the English Renaissance, asserting rather that "[d]espite its ferocious displays of Christian conviction, Jacobean culture struggled with the suspicion that death was a complete and permanent annihilation of the self, not merely some latency of the body awaiting the Last Judgment" (p. 3). Thus Watson takes prolonged issue with "the first precept of New Historicist criticism-Jonathan Dollimore's claim that political virtue can arise only from the belief 'that there is no shared human essence ... no traits not the product of social forces at a particular historical juncture'" (p. 20). In Watson's initially Freudian, "neo-essentialist" rebuttal, the generations are united across the historical abyss by a common fear of the deepest abyss: the fear, to paraphrase Hamlet, that in that sleep of death *no* dreams may come.

Yet, on the other hand, the book is troublingly at odds with its subjects and with itself in ways that seem strangely personal and even self-indulgent. First, Watson is prone to overstatement. For instance, as a self-described atheist (the son, he informs us, of a "lapsed-preacher father" turned "psychologist and literary critic" [pp. 99, 54]), Watson decries "the peculiar exemption" from serious critique that, in his view, Christianity enjoys in the modern secular academy. This exemption produces "a double standard whereby audible assertions of atheism strike most observers as a tasteless and even malicious affront to Christian believers, whereas ordinary assertions of Christian belief are considered nothing other than the practice of spiritual freedom" (pp. 48, 49). This double standard probably does obtain in many walks of middle American life; but the contemporary academy, especially in its humanities departments, seems conversely inclined to celebrate the skeptical, the heterodox, and even the overtly blasphemous. Imagine the response were one to open a typical college class or an MLA session with the Lord's Prayer.

Second, Watson's tendency to overstatement can rebound as retraction. For example, Watson has intentionally taken his book's annihilationist title from a play whose protagonist is famously obsessed, not with annihilation, but with the inevitability of an afterlife; Prince Hamlet is stymied at every turn by his belief in eternal consciousness, whether beatific or horrific. So, Watson provocatively claims, our seeing how Hamlet's idea of the Divinity shapes his dead end "may liberate us to obey neither God the Father nor the fathers' ghosts when they tell us to kill each other for the sake of our immortality" (p. 99). In other words, *Hamlet* might well be subtitled "The Theist's Tragedy." Yet Watson quickly reverses field, conceding these earlier assertions to be mere "preacherly (if atheistical) speculations" (p. 100). He then ends his discussion of the play by counter-

claiming that "dying for tribal honor, as Hamlet does, is arguably a sounder answer to mortality than blindly replicating those ancestors for tribal survival" (p. 102).

Such instances of assertion and reversal might be valued as balancing judiciousness did they not belong to a larger pattern of conscious self-contradiction; for, to return to my opening phrase, this book finally does ask to be taken with a grain of salt. I say "*conscious* self-contradiction" because Watson chooses to end with a puckishly agnostic "Retraction" admitting that perhaps he has overstated his case for the previous 321 pages: "while my doubts about the afterlife remain, my argument has evolved away from theology and towards psychology ... in the process, it has become more sympathetic toward the mythmaking impulse ... Without some story of afterlife, a completely unorganized self travels into an eternal structureless future" (p. 323). That is, when all's said--all seven chapters and an epilogue--let's believe what we must, but not believe it too much. This reviewer genuinely respects an open mind, but would have appreciated more consistency, foolish or otherwise.

Nevertheless, despite these serious rhetorical problems--which better editing might have solved--this book offers important interpretive rewards if we will, like Watson, give atheism a chance. In his first chapter, "Religio Vindicis: Substitution and Immortality in *The Spanish Tragedy*," Watson takes revenge tragedy as his starting-point. As the Elizabethan archetype of this sub-genre, Kyd's play offers the "reassuring implication that death ... can be cured by destroying its immediate agent.... The villain of revenge tragedy ... provides a satisfyingly localized and assailable scapegoat for our inward mortal frailties" (p. 44). Yet, says Watson, the play complicates these "metonymic consolations" by inviting its Elizabethan audience to imagine Hieronimo's concluding carnage not only as an attack on a villainous earthly monarch, but also by metaphoric extension on the heavenly author of death, by means of "killing his only begotten son in compensation" (p. 73). Watson sees vicarious regicide verging over into vicarious decide.

Turning to Shakespeare, Watson begins his second chapter, "Giving Up the Ghost: *Hamlet*, Revenge, and Denial," with the oxymoronically "polemical suggestion" that "we ought to give up the ghost in a more literal sense, and that *Hamlet* deeply condemns the illusions of afterlife that it superficially encourages" (p. 74). I have already noted Watson's penultimate claim (immediately revised) that the play incites the audience to disobedience towards God and our ghostly fathers if they stir us to rash and bloody deeds. Significantly, he explains Shakespeare's possible dalliance with the School of Night in terms of Freudian psychobiography: "Hamlet's guilt-ridden compulsion to help his tormented father may draw on Shakespeare's own guilt toward his recently deceased and reputedly Catholic father"--the Reformation having deprived son Shakespeare of the ancient means for resting the ancestor's perturbed spirit. Only after the playwright made this and other indirect theatrical assaults on the conscience of the killing divine King, says Watson, could he begin to pray again (p. 75).

In his best Shakespearean chapter, "Comic Means, Tragic Ends: False Immortality in *Measure for Measure*," Watson pursues Shakespeare's plausibly atheistic foray onto the famously troubled ground of "problem comedy." Here he proposes "one more imperfect but evocative allegory lurking in a play that has perhaps already been allegorized too often and too ingeniously: the Duke, not simply as *imitatio dei*, but as *imitatio dei absconditi*, Angelo as the Angel of Death, Claudio as Everyman, and Isabella as Faith." In Watson's view, the Duke's notoriously unsatisfactory and arbitrary final judgment, in which virtually everything is forgiven and everyone married, but no one is plausibly happy, carries added thematic punch as a devastating satire of the ancient tribal hope in immortality through reproduction. Lucio, who in Watson's allegory embodies Doubt, becomes the sardonic hero of the piece, "mocking Isabella's pious virginity, the Duke's reputation, and the entire reproductive process" (p. 132).

In the breezily titled "Another Day, 'Another Golgotha': *Macbeth* and the Tyranny of Nature," Watson concedes that the play presents itself as "a story of positive moral order with strong Christian markings" (p. 134). Nevertheless, he argues, this tragedy nurtures what Sir Thomas Browne called "secondary Atheisme" by insinuating that God, though he exists, has left sublunary affairs to the Donnean rogue's gallery of "fate, destiny, fortune, chance, and necessity" (p. 133). Thus the play's portrayals of abominable human violence and violation

"serve as the disguises, and the scapegoats, for the depredations of natural mortality over time" (p. 139). The opening battlefield scenes render Macbeth's victorious carnage as "another Golgotha," but each new day, creeping in this petty pace, brings yet another, and another, and another, until everywhere is Golgotha, and Golgotha is everywhere.

In his ambitious fifth chapter, "Duelling Death in the Lyrics of Love: John Donne's Poetics of Immortality," Watson moves from dramatic to lyric poetry, and hence to a genre more obviously congenial to his claims about the conflict between the "narcissistic self" and mortality. Indeed, there is no Jacobean voice more exuberantly narcissistic than Donne's, and Watson ingeniously finds new means to the old ends of showing that "Donne's erotic *Songs and Sonets* deeply anticipate the immortal longings of his pious maturity" (p. 156). Because, Watson argues, the young Jack Donne feared annihilation, his craving for romantic love

can be read as an effort to invent, confer, sustain, some metaphor of immortality within the span of human life. In seduction, he seeks not only physical pleasure, but also an object he can desire as limitlessly as he wishes to be desired, a consciousness that he can deem perfect so that its perception of his perfection can be trusted. When familiarity breeds contempt for a lover, when sexual boredom exposes the limits of the physical connection, Donne has little choice but to seek a new object, even though the change itself seems to invalidate his claim against mutability. (p. 250)

In contrast, Watson suggests, the lyrics addressed to identifiable "extraordinary women" with whom Donne was probably not sexually active "are spared the manic-depressive swings between bravado and embitterment that mark the other love poems." The two women whom Watson discusses in this regard are Lucy Harrington, Countess of Bedford, and (with important consequences for Watson's last chapter), Magdalen Herbert--most importantly in "The Relique," "To Mrs. M. H.," and "The Autumnal."

Watson strikingly claims that Donne's oft-noted attachment to Magdalen Herbert combined the maternal and the erotic in ways made doubly significant by her suggestive (in both senses) saint's name. "Mary Magdelene was the only female saint to survive the first Anglican purge of Catholic idolatry, probably because her transition from loving Christ in the flesh to loving him in the Word" supported a Protestant allegory of the shift from popish carnality to Reformed scripturalism (p. 246). In a similar way, Donne's adoption of the latter-day Magdalen as surrogate mother authorized "his otherwise guilt-ridden shift from Catholicism to Protestantism." Like the painting of Mary Magdelene which Donne apparently hung in his room in later life, Magdalen Newport Herbert Danvers served Donne as "a sort of maternal bridge between two incarnations, one as the bodily child of the Catholic Elizabeth Donne, the other as the piously born-again progeny of a Reformed Magdelene." That her maternal image bore a decided sexual charge made it all the more precious: "Having left his own sins of the flesh behind, he could nonetheless continue loving the sight of this beautiful woman, if only as an image of the sublimation he had achieved ... unlike the women who had betrayed him in the past, her gaze offered a divine constancy" (p. 245).

Magdalen Herbert serves as a bridge in another way, to the book's final chapter, "Word Without End: The Comforts of George Herbert's *Temple*." Watson concludes his discussion of Donne with perhaps his most audacious claim, promising to argue in the next chapter that Magdalen was "both mother and God" to her son George. What this turns out to mean is that "the patriarchal heroics and erotics described in *Hamlet* and *Songs and Sonets* give way, in Herbert, to what might be called a matriarchal alternative of nurturance," for as an infant, Herbert had the good fortune of two abundantly available maternal nipples to suck (pp. 248, 251). According to Watson, this early experience of "the caretaker who comes in the night to clean, feed, and comfort" disposed Herbert favorably to a "gynocentric model" of God, "replacing the [phallogocentric] desire for a single decisive ending with the satisfactions of an ongoing surrender to benevolence" (pp. 258, 256). Thus, where the agoraphobic terrors of emerging Stuart annihilationism produce in Donne a confrontationally "fierce morbidity" (p. 262), they stir in Herbert a "gynocentric eroticism" which longs to embrace the warm bosom of the heavenly Mother.

But this chapter turns out to be about more than Mrs. Herbert's breasts. Indeed, it is more generally about how "Herbert works ingeniously and relentlessly to dispel the anxieties attaching to closure," anxieties which, Watson assumes, must have been "an epidemic threat among Herbert's Christian audience" (p. 254). Here Watson illumines a remarkable fact too little noted about *The Temple*: its mentions of Hell are so few as to be negligible, while it is frequently fortifies the reader against fears that death is a terrible anticlimactic silence. As he says to the skull in "Death," "thy mouth was open, but thou couldst not sing" (l. 4). To remedy this epidemic of fear,

Herbert offers a sort of Paracelsian cure: the reader absorbs poems that yield to, and then overcome, their own mortality. The terminal silence that becomes an occasion for heightened anxiety about annihilation in most Jacobean authors becomes in Herbert an occasion to celebrate, even demonstrate, the promise of Christian salvation.... In the ending is the beginning, because the last human words [of the poems]--as if they were a human soul--are savingly assumed into the Word of God. (p. 254)

Elucidating this "anti-closural poetic" then becomes the burden of Watson's argument.

He does few extended readings of full lyrics, but rather touches briefly on excerpts of thematically-grouped poems: those, like "The Tempter" (I), "Paradise," and "Our life is hid with Christ in God," which show "a fear of unlimited space and [love] the shelter of an enclosure" (pp. 264-68); those, like "The Method," "The Forerunners," "The Quip," and "Home," which substitute a pre-emptive divine voice for the human speaker's (pp. 268-77); those, like "Sunday," "Affliction" (II), "Mortification," and "Time," which deliberately disorder linear chronology "to glorify the time-transcending power of God" (pp. 278-82); those, like "A Dialogue-Anthem," "Praise" (III), "Even-song," "Sighs and Groans," "Redemption," and "Vanie" (I), whose last words punningly overthrow the power of death ("mort") by substituting words of continuation ("more") (pp. 282-89); those, like "Longing," "The Thanksgiving," "Grief," "Sinnes round," "Employment" (II), and "The Pilgrimage," which end in apparently isolated despair only to be redeemed by their inclusion in the hopeful fellowship of "The Church" (pp. 289-97); and those poems of the Four Last Things, from "Death" to "Love" (III), a sequence which resists closure by telling yet again the story of everlasting salvation (pp. 297-303).

Watson's careful attention to the cultural nightmare of ultimate nothingness pays substantial interpretive dividends throughout the chapter, for Herbert's lyrics take on a fresh urgency when seen as prodigiously clever responses to a pastoral problem that was more widespread in his time than we in ours have imagined. And Watson's own writing partakes, often stunningly, of his subject's lyrical wit. Of Herbert's trust in a maternal deity: "The Fall of Man can be rendered as harmless as the stumble of a loved child" (p. 262); of "Faith": "God is a faith-healer, and he works on poetic feet as well as human ones" (p. 274); of the long-winded persona in "Time": "Is the speaker ... covertly seeking more time on earth through pious expostulations? Is this a prayer, or a filibuster?" (p. 281); of the last stanza in "The Flower": "accepted endings are the only acceptable means to endlessness" (p. 284); of "Death": "Herbert does not empower the macabre here (his decay is dry where Donne's is soggy)" (p. 298); and my favorite: "'Employment' (II) is arguably the blackest hole in the starry night of *The Temple*" (p. 292).

However, there is paste strewn among these gems. Watson apparently attributes to Herbert a belief in transubstantiation which he never held (p. 260); he claims that as a poet, Herbert could boldly confront issues like death and atheism which "he evades in his clerical office" of pastor (p. 263; Watson misses Herbert's formula for such confrontation in "The Parson's Application of Remedies" in *The Country Parson*); he seems unusually credulous throughout of Izaak Walton's famously unreliable *Lives*; he cites Herbert's possible impotence (Jane Danvers Herbert had children only with her later husband) as support for Herbert's almost complete Oedipal attachment to his mother (p. 259), overlooking the fact that Herbert was during his brief marriage dying of tuberculosis.

More seriously, Watson wants to suggest that *The Temple's* entire repetitive consolatory strategy is itself a symptom of the kinds of deep doubts that the sequence is ostensibly designed to eradicate (p. 282), making it

eventually a disingenuous mask, a work of "elaborate psychological denial ... supremely consoling, but only until we ask what it is consoling us about" (p. 304). It is of course possible to protest too much; but why not be this radically skeptical about any concerted and persistent effort to reaffirm any set of threatened certainties? Are Stephen Jay Gould's many books evidence of his doubts about Darwinism? Is Milton Friedman a socialist at heart? Mario Cuomo a closet Republican? Rather, can't *The Temple's* cyclical, reiterative structure be better explained, as it has been explained by Stanley Fish (at his best) and by Camille Wells Slight, as a catechistical and casuistical device?

Most seriously, Watson's thesis--that Herbert's comforting, irresistibly gracious Deity was a maternal projection--requires an historical corrective. No doubt Herbert's "Deare Mother" shaped him in profound and lasting ways; but if Herbert derived his sense of God primarily from Magdalen, where did Reformation stalwarts like Luther, Calvin, and Cranmer derive theirs, with its similar confidence in the "unspeakable comfort" of "irresistible grace"? Must we trace them, too, back to their mothers' bosoms?

Fortunately Robert Watson is too close a reader and too good a writer to be bound for long by such an *idée fixe*. His frequently careful attention to the glittering particulars of these plays and poems tends to subvert his neo-Freudian generalizations and undercut his overstated, though illuminating, annihilationist claims. Perhaps that is why he felt compelled to conclude with an (admittedly disconcerting) retraction: in the end, these well-wrought works resist reduction to our terms, and insist on their own.