

Garrett A. Sullivan. *Sleep, Romance and Human Embodiment: Vitality from Spenser to Milton*.

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In modern times the question of the meaning of life is inevitably a personal one: what is the meaning of my life, what renders it distinctive and significant? In *Sleep, Romance and Human Embodiment: Vitality from Spenser to Milton*, the question takes on a very different inflection. For Garrett Sullivan, life means above all “vitality”: the sum total of organic processes sustaining human beings in a biological, rather than existential, sense. Yet even as it addresses itself to these processes, *Sleep, Romance and Human Embodiment* makes an implicit case for the idea that the meaning of life in its loftiest sense might be inseparable from life in the biological one, from the vitality that, for the Renaissance mind, was as much vegetal and animal as it was human.

At the heart of the work is the insight that the tripartite soul, with its three souls at once continuous and discrete, is deeply analogous with the generic distinction between epic and romance. The node that joins these two classificatory systems, both Aristotelian in origin, is sleep. Just as sleep exposes an animal or plant to vitality subtending reason, so the romance episode, in which the hero sleeps, marks “a play of sameness and difference” (9) between epic, with its emphasis on action and completion, and the passivity and delay of romance. Sleep, as it emerges in this book, is both a last flourish of Aristotelianism and a first tremor of Cartesianism, which for Sullivan means primarily not the rise of the cogito but rather the “banishing” of “the vegetable and sensitive souls” (23) that had to precede it.

The work is divided into three sections. The first (“Aristotelian Vitality Ascendant”) covers the “pre-Cartesians”: Spenser, Sidney, and Shakespeare. Chapter 1, on Spenser’s Bower of Bliss in book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*, is in many ways Sullivan’s paradigm case, in which Guyon emerges as the human, Verdant as the vegetal, and Grill as the animal soul in Aristotle’s schema. But unlike many readers of this scene, Sullivan is under no illusions about Spenser’s moralism,

even as he remains deeply sensitive to his characteristic ambiguity: where “letting Grill be Grill” draws a clear line between human and animal, Verdant’s naming — and the swoon that renders Guyon similar to Verdant — “underlines that continuity of forms of life that so troubles conceptions of the human” (42). Chapter 2, on Sidney’s *Old Arcadia*, considers the relationship, seemingly counterintuitive, between sleep and the passions, and also incorporates a fascinating analysis of their porous interaction with places and environments. Chapter 3 takes us on a detour into Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*, ingeniously finding in Falstaff a dramatic embodiment of the “romance episode” and the vital inducements of sleep over against “the fantasy of monarchical hypervigilance” (96) seen in *Henry IV* and *V*.

Chapter 4, which occupies its own section (“Aristotelian Vitality Embattled”), turns to Milton and his much-discussed monism, which Sullivan interprets as a rearguard defense of the “Aristotelian assumption of the foundational primacy of vegetative life” (102). Here Sullivan’s choice of Aristotle (associated by the seventeenth century with Italy, Spain, and the Counter-Reformation), instead of, say, Hobbes or Spinoza, warrants more initial discussion. However, its aptness is borne out in a series of deft readings, in particular that of Adam’s and Eve’s creation: “as Adam and Eve recount their origins, sleep and the vegetative are yoked with coming into being and consciousness” (112). But perhaps Sullivan’s most innovative claim in this chapter is his suggestion that, after the fall, “Christ supplants Aristotle’s vegetative soul as the principle of postmortem vitality” (122). The final, brief section (“Aristotelian Vitality Undead”) also consists of one chapter, on *All for Love*, Dryden’s rewriting of *Antony and Cleopatra*. The romance episode persists, but now the hero’s “construal of himself in terms of animal and plant life is little more than a metaphor”; unlike his predecessors he is not “functionally identical to or partly comprised of such life” (136).

To a growing body of work on pre-Cartesian embodiment, *Sleep, Romance and Human Embodiment* brings an enlarged sense of the philosophical background as well as an unusual literary sensibility, showing how changing theories of the human have consequences on both generic and figural levels, and revealing just how complex and far-ranging the consequences of a single idea, such as the tripartite soul, can be for both poetry and criticism.

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