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Book Review

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David Marno *Death Be Not Proud: The Art of Holy Attention*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Pp. xi + 315. £28.00/$40.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 0 226 41597 0.

David Marno's new book, *Death Be Not Proud: The Art of Holy Attention*, traces the role of attention in philosophy and prayer, exploring a tradition of striving for attentiveness devoid of distraction that spans from ascetic thinkers and Church Fathers to seventeenth-century devotional poetry. The book does what it says on the tin: despite the wide-ranging philosophical, theological, and literary ideas that Marno explores in his first monograph, his argument focuses on a single devotional lyric by John Donne – holy sonnet number 11, 'Death be not proud'. In concentrating on just one poem, effectively offering a book-long extended reading of this verse, Marno marries his argument and form, suggesting that 'the Christian ideals and practices of holy attention are a significant influence not only for early modern devotional poetry but for the modern protocol of close reading' (35). Like a preacher inviting his congregation to attend to the text of a sermon, exploring its constituent parts and various meanings, Marno takes 'Death be not proud' as his text, and invites the reader to attend to its devotional lessons.

Whilst *Death Be Not Proud* may have what seems a narrow literary focus, the book's scholarship and depth is extensive, combining an exceptional understanding of the philosophy of religion with a distinctively elegant and absorbing writing style. Marno addresses what might be meant by a 'devotional poem' and 'holy attention', what we understand by devotional 'proof' and 'thanksgiving', and how a poem might practise holy attention. His treatment of these materials is profound and engaging, moving smoothly between his sources – classical rhetoricians, Church Fathers, seventeenth-century poets and philosophers, nineteenth-century German parables – interspersed with judiciously chosen literary examples from a concentrated corpus of texts. These are primarily Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, but Marno also includes a discussion of *Hamlet*, as well as Sidneian and Petrarchan sonnets. Perhaps biased by my own background as a literary scholar, I found Marno's close analysis of these texts the most exciting parts of his work, offering wonderfully fresh and thought-provoking insights into canonical literary texts.

To focus so intently on a single poem for over 300 pages is an ambitious project, as is the task that Marno sets himself in the introduction: to make a case for the emerging poetics of attention in the seventeenth century. He begins his argument by exploring seventeenth-century philosopher Nicolas Malebranche's claim that prayer and the very act of thinking may be analogous, as in both an individual has limited agency, being simultaneously active and passive. Marno argues that thinking, and therefore philosophy, is like prayer, 'because truth is like God', and in each 'the outcome of the action is beyond our control' (1), i.e. I may be thinking actively, but when a thought occurs to me I am a passive witness to it. Following Malebranche, Marno suggests that the key to bridging the gap between the active and the passive, or to exploring the full extent of one's limited agency in thinking and praying, is the 'act of attention'. 'Attending', as Marno notes, has a dual meaning as both an active stretching or reaching towards something (from the Latin *attendere*), and a passive waiting (its archaic sense). Having suggested that 'attention is the hidden connection between religion and philosophy' (2), Marno boldly attempts to describe the essence of this connection, arguing that it is visible in poetry, as a 'middle realm' between philosophy and prayer. Exactly why or how poetry occupies this 'middle realm' could perhaps be explained more fully; Marno goes on to suggest that Donne's devotional poems function as poetic meditations in preparation for prayer, a sort of thinking about praying, but the initial leap from religion and philosophy to poetry seems a little sudden and would benefit from further elucidation. However, there can be no doubt about the advantages of using poetry to explore the role of attention in prayer, as Marno uncovers a rich seam of intellectual enquiry in his book.

The book's structure is teleological, guiding the reader in seven chapters through the poem 'Death be not proud' as prayer. From interrogating the poem's decisively assertive final line, through an exploration of the purpose of prayer and 'thanksgiving' in prayer, a discussion of why prayers fail, and how they can succeed, the book ends, almost paradoxically, by arguing that the poem successfully achieves a moment of 'holy attention' by attending fully to its own distractions. Marno distinguishes Donne from other seventeenth-century devotional poets; whereas poets like George Herbert write verse that allows a reader to 'feel' a religious thought, Marno argues that Donne prioritizes the 'cognitive aspects of affective devotion' (3): he writes verse to make a reader 'think' a religious thought, and thus closely *attend* to it.

The introduction critiques new historicist readings of Donne's devotional verse, and situates Marno's own readings as formal without being formalist. At times his argument does tend towards new formalism in its propensity to prioritize form over context, which occasionally minimizes the impact of his chosen examples. For example, he describes Claudius's prayer in Act 3, scene 3 of *Hamlet* as 'the most famous theatrical representation of prayer in the seventeenth century' (36) without making clear whether he is referring to its contemporary fame or modern fame, and indeed whether this matters. However, overall his methodology avoids a reactionary

response to historicism and offers a more genuinely philosophical approach to reading poetry; his method might best be described as phenomenological.

The first two chapters of the book are primarily concerned with exploring the personal experience of faith that Donne's poetry offers, through the ideas of proof and thanksgiving. Marno explores the tension between a classical, Aristotelian view of poetry as a domain of invention, and the Christian view of religion as a domain of the given, coalescing in the final line of 'Death be not proud', in which Donne asserts the doctrine of the resurrection. Marno surveys Aristotelian and Pauline ideas of proofs, and suggests that rhetoric may offer a way of combining the invented and the given, if invention might mean the 'discovery of already existing proofs' (48). Marno, with characteristic linguistic dexterity, encapsulates this by revealing how the poem (as in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians), transforms the given into a gift, moving from the general given doctrine to the personal, subjective gift and faith, which precipitates his discussion of personal thanksgiving.

In chapter 3 Marno asks why prayers may or may not be successful, and turns from Donne to Shakespeare, looking specifically at Claudius's prayer in Act 3, and asking why this might fail. This is a superbly written chapter, with some fascinating observations about the critical history of this scene, and how it might fruitfully be interpreted and performed. There are some excellent moments of close reading, some of which have unfortunately been consigned to footnotes (see, for example, 265 n. 43), but it is hard not to feel that the sudden switch from Donne to Shakespeare breaks the overall flow of the book somewhat. Although Marno offers reasons for this temporary departure from Donne, and returns to Donne's own work in the final part of the chapter, my complaint would be that the transition feels a little abrupt.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss attention's essential role in successful prayer, and how one might successfully prepare for prayer, exploring late antique, medieval, and early modern notions of attention in devotion. These chapters are principally concerned with the difference between vocal and mental prayer, and how each of these types of prayer might achieve a form of 'pure prayer', an ideal of attentiveness devoid of any distractions. Marno explores Augustine's works on attention's role in vocalized devotion, which emphasize that flesh is the stumbling block in the way of pure holy attention, symptomatic of humanity's fallen, distracted condition. Marno shows how the distracted self of Augustine's *Confessions* became central to poetry in the Petrarchan tradition, considering Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and Sidney's psalm translations, before returning to Donne to argue that he both integrates and separates himself from this tradition. Donne, Marno suggests, does not associate poetry with distraction, but makes 'distraction an integral part of the poems' striving to attentiveness' (152).

The book's final two chapters expound on this theme, using the rhetorical technique and early modern trope of *sarcasmos*, a mocking of the flesh, to suggest that Donne, in 'Death be not proud' and his *Holy Sonnets*, performs an *imitatio Christi*, as 'like God in the incarnation, they mock the human flesh not from without but from within' (198). The final chapter returns to the issue of proof, and addresses Donne's lifelong concern with the resurrection of the body. Marno, following

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, proposes that for Paul and Donne there is a 'spiritual body', which unlike the distracted body of the flesh, is capable of pure attention, and that Donne attempts to emulate the 'spiritual body' in 'Death be not proud'. Marno concludes that Donne does this by turning his attention to the body of flesh, which is 'simultaneously the site of mortality, of death, and of distraction' (215), and thus by directing attention at death itself and therefore distraction itself, he overcomes both death and distraction.

Throughout the book Marno's attention to detail and the thoroughness of his research is evident. His argument, though traversing complex theological and rhetorical issues, is at all times well elucidated, and his writing clear. Perhaps the book's greatest achievement, to my mind, is the delight of following the intricacies of Marno's thought process as he zooms in on tiny details, exploring the moments of tension and paradox in his subject material: distinguishing between thinking and a thought, the given and a gift, the paradox of attending to distraction, beginning with an ending. His graceful, often witty, observations about language and thought loop back on themselves, and the entire book, much like the poem that is its subject, has a circular, chiastic pattern: the introduction and the coda mirror one another in their discussion of Malebranche; the first and last chapters both deal with the closing lines of Donne's poem; analysis of Hamlet appears in the first and second halves of the book. Rather than feeling at all repetitive or limited, this approach ensures that the reader returns to each of these topics to see them afresh, and the book has a sense of symmetry and poise throughout. Like the tightly controlled form of Donne's 'Death be not proud' sonnet, with its chiastic apostrophe to Death, Marno's book is carefully structured and balance seems to be the defining quality of his writing; he balances complex devotional theory with insightful literary analysis, religion and philosophy, historicism and formalism. Without stumbling into one camp or another Marno successfully charts the varying schools of thought on Donne's verse, his Catholicism and Protestantism, his attention and distraction.

This is a book which would be of great interest to anyone working on devotional poetry or practice, or with an interest in the philosophy of religion or the application of rhetoric in verse. Although it is primarily a single author-focused (or even single poem-focused) work, the brief digressions from Donne's verse to look at other writers indicate how Marno's method and argument may be successfully applied to a range of other texts from the seventeenth century. Shakespeare, Petrarch, Sidney, Herbert, and even less canonical authors (such as Anne Lock) make fascinating cameos, and at times it feels as though there is much more to be said on these authors. Marno's wonderfully written book, however, provides an excellent framework for other scholars to test against writers and thinkers. It is a remarkable study – a major text for Donne studies, certainly – which skilfully conveys the benefits of closely attending to one's subject.

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