



Open Library of Humanities

Review of Patrick J. McGrath, *Early Modern Asceticism: Literature, Religion and Austerity in the English Renaissance*

Daniel Juan Gil, Texas Christian University, United States, d.gil@tcu.edu

Keywords: asceticism, dualism, body, soul, sexuality, “Upon Appleton House”



Patrick J. McGrath, *Early Modern Asceticism: Literature, Religion, and Austerity in the English Renaissance*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. Pp. 248; Hardback \$52.50.

Patrick McGrath's *Early Modern Asceticism* recovers deep currents of corporeal asceticism within seventeenth-century writing, including by Puritans who nominally reject it as a feature of a superseded Catholic past. His book is powered by wide-ranging engagement with many contemporary scholars and with a wide range of fascinating, often obscure early modern texts on spirituality and religious life. McGrath's framework generates rich analytical readings of several canonical texts including verse and sermons by Donne, Milton's *A Mask* and *Lycidas*, Andrew Marvell's "Upon Appleton House," and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

In his rich introduction, McGrath sketches two fundamental arguments that will run through the book. The first argument has to do with what McGrath sees as a paradox at the heart of asceticism, in which seeking to overcome the body by means of bodily self-discipline only reaffirms the presence of the body. He writes,

this paradox derives from a seemingly straightforward dichotomy. Asceticism is one attitude towards the relationship between the body and the soul. It conceives of that relationship in hostile, dichotomous terms: the body versus the soul. The soul needs to overcome the body. [...] Whatever form it takes the same problem arises: embodiment. Prayers against lust are prayed in the vessel of it; the body is both agent and object of mortification. Since the soul resides within the body it must—paradoxically—overcome the body *through* the body; this can perpetuate, rather than escape, the problem. (7)

The second argument in the book has to do with McGrath's resistance to one version of a sociological argument about modernity, in which bodily asceticism is gradually secularized and turned inward to create the modern, inward individual. This argument is obviously associated with Max Weber, but also with a number of contemporary scholars including Charles Taylor. McGrath resists this argument, at least when retroactively extended to encompass the seventeenth century, by arguing that traditional asceticism aimed toward disciplining or repressing the body is in fact a pervasive feature of seventeenth-century culture and not simply a rapidly disappearing hold-over from an earlier age. He writes that, "there are simply no clean breaks with an ascetic past in this book, and the transposition of asceticism into something more rational, secular, and manageable does not take place" (20). In order to make this second argument apply to seventeenth-century England, in which traditional practices of physical asceticism

are often maligned as a vestigial Catholicism, McGrath introduces a distinction between “spiritual and physical” asceticism. He cites many Protestant writers who illustrate “how spiritual asceticism redirected austerity inwards and intensified the attention that Roman Catholics and some English Protestants wasted on the body” (20). Thus McGrath argues that even if seventeenth-century England did turn against monasticism, virginity, celibacy, flagellation, fasting, and other traditional ascetic practices, the ascetic spirit persisted through intensive efforts to master and manage the inner life, including in its relations with bodily desires. He tracks the way this new “spiritual asceticism” interacts with debates about the depravity of the will between Calvinists, Arminians, and Laudians. At the same time, one of his broader premises is “to demonstrate that this dichotomy—of ascetic types and confessional allegiances—can be porous and the neat opposition unstable” (14). This latter argument leads to one of the most interesting aspects of McGrath’s book, his persistent ability to uncover unexpected connections between nominally Puritan writers and the Laudian Anglicanism that they would seem to oppose.

In an initial chapter on Donne, McGrath argues that, Donne’s reputation as a poet of sexual libertinage notwithstanding, “asceticism constitutes a coherent and under-acknowledged component of his work” (27). McGrath argues that Donne’s commitment to corporeal asceticism is especially evident in his views on marriage, articulated in his verse, his decision not to remarry after the death of Anne Donne, and in his sermons preached on the occasions of marriages. In a close reading of Donne’s sonnet on the death of Anne Donne, McGrath argues that Donne there articulates a belief that marriage impedes devotion, quite in contrast to the views of many Protestants, William Perkins perhaps most notably. McGrath tracks Donne’s affirmation of the connection between corporeal asceticism and the priestly calling, both in Donne’s own life and in the poem addressed “To Mr. Tillman after he had taken orders.” McGrath uncovers a dimension of Donne’s thinking that sees ordination as a kind of consecration of the self to religious service and which McGrath connects to the fundamental impulses of asceticism. While McGrath is convincing in his recovery of an abiding ascetic impulse in Donne’s thought, he is perhaps too quick to posit a simple opposition between all forms of sexuality and ascetic practices, for some of Donne’s erotic verse seems to posit forms of desire that are built upon and even animated by asceticism, including in the religious eroticism of the Holy Sonnets.

The next two chapters turn to Milton, where attention to Milton’s persistent ascetic impulses leads McGrath to make a provocative argument about the convergence between

Milton's thinking, especially on marriage, and the neo-platonic Caroline culture that he appears to revile. Thus, in discussing *A Mask*, McGrath attempts to dismantle the opposition between Caroline court culture as the scene of licentiousness and Milton as advocating a kind of inner restraint that nevertheless values marriage and intimacy. In place of that opposition, McGrath argues for a surprising convergence between Milton and neo-platonic Caroline culture: both are driven by a corporeal asceticism that contrasts with emerging Puritan ideals, which advocate inner restraint while celebrating physical intimacy in the context of marriage. In his discussion of *Lycidas*, McGrath posits a coincidence between Milton's interest in sealing and sacralizing the borders of the body and an interest in sealing and sacralizing the physical borders of a parish through the traditional practice of rogation. McGrath offers an interesting account of the status of the historical background of rogation, in which priests would lead their congregations around the borders of their parish in order to ritually bless the land and ward off dangers to humans, animals, and plants alike. McGrath argues that while seventeenth-century Puritans were attempting to eliminate rogation altogether or to recast it in a completely secularized form as a way of reaffirming the secular boundaries of the parish, Laudians were attempting to return to something closer to the traditional Catholic ritual practice. Surprisingly, McGrath argues that *Lycidas* contains strong and positive echoes of this ritual practice. McGrath offers a fascinating account of the pagan origins and Christian appropriation of Bacchic festivals that lie at the root of rogation, but his efforts to uncover a Milton who actively embraces rogation as the backdrop for his elegy are sometimes strained. Nonetheless, McGrath's basic argument, that we should understand Milton to have a deep-seated and thoroughgoing ascetic strain, is certainly convincing.

McGrath's chapter on Marvell is likely to be of particular interest to readers of this journal. It is in rich dialogue with many major Marvell scholars and makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of Marvell's thinking about asceticism. McGrath argues that Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" lays bare the central paradox of asceticism as he sees it, namely that it insistently foregrounds the body in an ultimately futile effort to transcend it. Starting with a review of the criticism that has noted Marvell's almost complete refusal to envision conventional forms of sexuality, McGrath notes that this nevertheless does not lead to an unconditional embrace of bodily asceticism. Rather, he argues that "Upon Appleton House" drives toward the recognition that an effort to discipline the body completely can only work if the body is utterly destroyed, and McGrath identifies the poem's culminating image of the world "vitrified" as an emblem of asceticism's failure.

Much of this chapter is devoted to a very close reading of “Upon Appleton House,” with particular attention to its critique of the building projects and liturgical reforms of Laudianism. McGrath concludes that

the brilliance of the poem’s devastating critique also lies in its willingness to expose the dialectic that drives asceticism: namely, the antagonistic reciprocity between body and soul. The elevation of the soul comes through the deprivation of the body. But since the soul resides within the body, it must overcome the body *through* the body; this means of overcoming can perpetuate, rather than escape, the problem. An attempt to assert the independence of the soul results in recalling its dependency on the body. Asceticism ends up where it began. It seeks to escape the body, and the sexual urges burning within it, but only ends up affirming the soul’s circumscription by the body. (120)

While this conclusion is certainly enriched by the close reading of the poem McGrath performs in the earlier parts of the chapter, it is not derived from the close reading so much as it is the enabling premise of that close reading. As McGrath himself notes, “Asceticism ends up where it began” and one reason for that circularity is because McGrath himself insists upon an *a priori* understanding of asceticism as fundamentally driven by an opposition between soul and body. This Cartesian dualism is clearly in the background of some of the ascetic discourse that McGrath quotes, but at times his own commitment to a hermeneutics of body/soul dualism limits access to dimensions of Marvell’s poems in which the paradoxes of body and soul are pushed beyond any stable dualism whatever.

The final chapter of the book takes on Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and returns to the argument about modernity as a kind of secularization of the ascetic impulse. Here McGrath argues that “rather than deposing corporal austerity, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* reveals how self-denial and humiliation—primarily spiritual forms of asceticism—both retain and reinvent monasticism” (123). McGrath argues that Bunyan’s affirmation of the ideal of worldly humiliation represents something close to a literal return of the monastic ideal, and McGrath is particularly struck by the radical renunciation of family and family ties that begins *Pilgrim’s Progress* and which is endorsed by its value system.

One of the strengths of this chapter—and indeed of the entire book—is the way the readings of the central literary text are situated within a dense textual web of citations from early modern religious devotional texts, pamphlets, theological treatises, and sermons, illustrating the ways the literary texts McGrath discusses draw

on and crystallize a cultural context marked by pervasive asceticism. Many of the small quotations that McGrath weaves throughout his book, often drawn from obscure writers, are very provocative. To cite just two examples of these pithy, engaging quotations that appear in the chapter on Bunyan, McGrath quotes Edward Polhill celebrating the impulse “to un-self, and as it were un-man us, that God may be all in all” (136) and John Howe celebrating the power of ascetic experience to allow practitioners to “live at the rate of a God; a God-like life. A living upon immense fulnes, as he lives” (137). These quotations remind us of the power of early modern religious discourse, including on asceticism, when it is at its most distant and alien from some of the key assumptions of modernity.

McGrath’s book is valuable for repositioning asceticism at the very heart of seventeenth-century English culture. The archival depth and richness that he brings to bear on his close readings of canonical texts serve to remind scholars of the importance of entering fully into the historical eccentricity of the seventeenth century in order to appreciate the intellectual and aesthetic power of the highly canonized texts that are with us still.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

