



Evaluation
of
Doctor of Sciences (Litt. D.)
Stasis and Ecstasy:
Archaeologies of the Early Modern Self

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Stasis and Ecstasy: Archaeologies of the Early Modern Self is an eloquent and erudite piece of work by a distinguished scholar in the field of early modern literature. The study explores through a series of representative Elizabethan texts – Spenser’s epic *The Faerie Queene*, Marlowe’s tragedies *Tamburlaine the Great (Part I and II)* and Shakespeare’s sonnets – the construction of the self in early modern culture. More specifically, it analyses the dialectical tension of the early modern self caught between the desire for ec-static transportation out of one’s own body, of self-transcendence, and the normative pull of the static self-present, self-possessed and self-contained self. The thesis explores the possibility of “subtler states of transcendence beyond this binarity, towards *le tiers inclus* of a static ecstasy or an ecstatic stasis” (p. 7). Paradoxically such an ec-static state produces the situation whereby the self, in its acts of intentional self-transcendence yields stasis, the ec-stasy of a self absorbed completely within itself. The study traces this intricate play of ecstasy and stasis through a rich and detailed discussion of ancient Greek philosophy, medieval theology, early modern literature and contemporary cultural theory.

The thesis itself is divided into four parts: A methodological Prologue succinctly and lucidly sets out the procedures and terms. The core of the thesis - sections Two and Three - provide a genealogy of the self from Pythagoras to Pomponazzi and a close reading of literary renditions of the self in Spenser, Marlowe and Shakespeare. The Epilogue, part Four, summarizes the



main arguments and briefly analyses a series of “meta-” or “para-texts” of the Elizabethan poetic tradition and European philosophies of the self: Shakespeare’s *The Phoenix and the Turtle* (1601), John Donne’s *The Ecstasie* (1633) and Andrew Marvell’s *The Garden* (1681). This final section also includes an appendix on problems of identity and the self in Shakespeare’s comedy.

Methodologically, the study presents a Foucauldian genealogy of the early modern self, that is to say, the self constructed through discourse. The selection of texts – epic, drama and lyric – is significant, as each genre has its own specific formal history or genealogy, which combines, often in contradictory ways, to constitute the broader episteme of early modernity. Thus, Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* is read in the light of an allegorical tradition running from *Le Roman de la Rose* through Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. Marlowe’s tragedies are read against a background of the self constructed through the English morality play, while Shakespeare is read in the context of the specific “space” of the sonnet sequence that facilitated the lyrical exploration of the self as relationally defined. In the manner of Stephen Greenblatt’s seminal *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) the study brackets the notion of an essential self and explores the fascinating twists and turns of the spiritualized and embodied self from antiquity to the end of the sixteenth century. This is more than a simple genealogy, though, as Professor Pancheva practices a form of “bricolage,” in the Derridean sense of borrowing concepts from an already existing archive and refashioning those concepts to address the issue of the ec-static self. For example, the thesis subjects the Bakhtinian distinction between the classical (closed) and grotesque (open) body to revision, revealing the classical body to be rather more porous than Bakhtin himself allowed for. Similarly, the close reading of the Elizabethan sonnet sequence questions the Lacanian formulation of the feminine, a formulation that Lacan arrived at through his own reading of Courtly Love poetry. The two key theorists that inform this study, alongside Foucault, are Derrida and Deleuze. Derridean and Deleuzean concepts are deployed in a subtle and unobtrusive manner that belies the theoretical work they are undertaking.

The thesis’ object of study, the “self” as opposed to the “subject,” the “ego” or the “I”, raises a number of conceptual issues that are not shied away from in the text. The thesis amply demonstrates an awareness and understanding of the critique of the humanist subject with an impressive survey of post-Cartesian discussions of the self within Phenomenology,



Psychoanalysis and postmodernism. The selection of the self, therefore, is a political choice and the central theoretical resource is Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989). A neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist, Taylor has long been one of the most persuasive critics of the post-structuralist subject, as he "situates the self *in a moral space*" (p. 11, emphasis in the original). Taylor sees the self as relational, one is only a self in relation to other selves. At the same time individual identity is a position, it is a stance that one adopts and it therefore entails a moral dimension. Identity is essentially defined by the commitments and identifications one makes, it is an ethical choice. Thus, the study draws upon the Phenomenological archive – Husserl and Heidegger through to Levinas – that prioritizes phenomenological description of the self in relation to the "other" and the "world" as opposed to theoretical conceptualization. In short, the thesis presents an extended analysis of literary renditions of the phenomenological stasis of the self, alongside an acute sense of how the text deconstructs this sense of self through ec-static moments of self-transcendence.

The genealogy of the self presented in section Two follows the peregrinations of the soul and body from Pythagoras to Plotinus, as notions of the self are inextricably linked to the way in which the soul is related to the body. The Pythagorean and Platonic self advocated an ec-static sense of selfhood through the transcendence of a trans-corporeal soul, a nomadic soul in the Deleuzean sense. Aristotle rejected notions of Platonic ecstasy in favour of a more embodied notion of the self, proposing the soul as the body's form. This sense of embodiment was taken even further in Epicurus, who asserted the corporality of the soul, that is to say, the soul as essentially atoms. Epicurus' embodied self precludes any possibility of ec-static transcendence and facilitated the Stoical "inward" turn, restricting notions of the self to an individual existence and positing an essentially stable or static self. It was left to Plotinus to restore a notion of Platonic ecstasy through the separation of soul and body and the assertion of the non-corporeal soul's transcendence as the core of selfhood. The medieval church would recast these debates in its own Christocentric view of the self, bracketing Stoical notions of the body and mortality and reasserting the immortality of the soul, the difference being, of course, that the soul is the gift of God and this places God at the very centre of human identity and selfhood. This analysis of the early Christian self and in particular the discussion of different forms of the body (the physical body and the spiritual body, the mortal body and the resurrected body etc.) and different states of the soul (embodied, universal, intellectualive) was fascinating. Professor Pancheva's ease with the texts from the Pauline tradition, St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the English mystics,



Protestant reformers, the Cabala, the Neo-Aristotelians through to the occult practices of John Dee is impressive, to say the least. These medieval and early modern discourses of the self highlighted not only the autonomy and non-corporality of the soul but also its unequivocal identification with the essence of the self. In this respect, rapturous or ec-static states were viewed as not only possible but as desirable modes of achieving full selfhood. This in turn required a complete rethinking of the notion of the body and its plasticity, as the body could be changed, mortified, reformed etc.

These early modern debates over the relationship between the soul and the body are rendered in Elizabethan literary production as so many struggles to fashion the self. Thus, Books I to III of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* are read as an allegory of the inner space of the self and as an anatomy of the spiritualized body. The dynamic combative world of Spenser's epic provides the textual space for his ec-static selves to gradually move towards stasis that is itself a form of self-transcendence. Contrary to the static self constructed by the medieval Morality tradition, Marlowe's tragedies explore the ec-static self, as it seeks to leave its imprint upon the world. In this reading Part I of *Tamburlaine the Great* depicts Tamburlaine's self-transcendence through the conquering of geographical space and the ultimate absorption of the *Umwelt* into the self. Part II, on the other hand, presents the collapse of the self through Tamburlaine's failure to conquer territory. If *Tamburlaine* renders self-identity in essentially spatial terms, *Doctor Faustus* construes the self in terms of time and the self's mastery over time. *Faustus'* concluding monologue once again dramatizes the failure of the self to conquer time. Marlowe's tragedies, therefore, dramatize two complementary modes of the self that both ultimately fail in the desire for self-transcendence. Finally, in a reading that fluently slides from an analysis of Elizabethan Sonnets to deconstruction, renaissance art and architecture to number theory we can see how Shakespeare subverts the static notions of the self-sufficient, monadic self by locating the core of the self, the spirit in the other. The Shakespearean notion of the self is distilled in the idea of the "friend" (other) and achieves self-transcendence through poetry itself. In this reading, the third term that breaks the initial dyad is identified with the feminine and a "oneness" of self and other is achieved at the price of a divided self. This is, as Professor Pancheva well knows and makes clear in the thesis, contrary to the Lacanian theory of sexuation as well as Lacan's reading of Courtly Love poetry and begs for an analysis in terms of the *objet petit a*. This is, perhaps, an intimation of the next project.



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In conclusion, I would like to endorse the conferring of the degree of Litt. D. (Doctor of Sciences) to Evgenia Pancheva, full professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at the Department of English and American Studies of Sofia University.

Yours Sincerely,

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