Light and Death: Figuration in Spenser, Kepler, Donne, Milton / Judith H. Anderson

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Reviewed by TIMOTHY DUFFY

This new book from Judith Anderson explores death, light, and figuration. Figuration, for Anderson, is not an act, it is an “issue” in early modern writing and there is a fluidity to the sourcing and inspiration of Anderson’s work that makes this a compelling, if at times difficult to follow, text. Though death and life would seem the natural oppositions to explore, Anderson points her reader toward Light as the force more directly involved with figuration. Anderson's introduction is full of valuable and suggestive insights, though, like much of the book, fascinating observations are very much prioritized over clarity or unity. This is not so much a critique of Anderson’s impressive work here, but a warning that the reader will not follow Anderson’s revelations easily. Even at the sentence level, there are obfuscating statements. Sentences like “So understood, poetry bridges the cultures” (5) and “This process of reading includes what I'll simply call textual respect, at once encompassing verbal and rhetorical, intellectual and affective, historical and cultural dimensions” (7) are a bit too vague at times to place the reader on solid ground. We are invited to follow Anderson's interests, and given the author’s vast erudition and insight, this is still a quite worthwhile invitation however much this reader wishes a more detailed and specific continuous thread were drawn through these various projects.

But what projects they are. The book’s main focus is on analogical figuration as an ongoing issue, perhaps most fully expressed in the conclusion of the first chapter: “Metaphors and analogies are the means by which we make sense of life and death” (31). This first chapter on Donne, Spenser, and Milton argues for a lingering Pauline body of death. That the Pauline body of death, especially Christ’s death, is also the body of the resurrection gets less than expected attention. The chapter’s illustration of how sin, death, and the body are necessarily linked in these works haunted by Paul’s text is convincing and a major contribution to the understanding of Renaissance figuration of sin and death.

The book’s second chapter takes on Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, specifically the Mutabilitie Cantos. Anderson’s treatment of Mutability is enlightening and alone worth the read, but the best and most provocative polemic, if one wanted to call it that, to emerge from this chapter is an insistence on focusing on the process of poetic creation against the ideological or theological backgrounds of the text. As Anderson writes, “Spenser’s poetry, indeed his allegory, engages the complexities and perplexities of lived experience” (40). This is what poetry, analogy, and figuration do in Anderson’s readings: they approach the complexities of life over doctrinaire theological debates.

The third chapter on “Satanic Ethics in Paradise Lost” offers a fascinating two-part study of the origin of evil and the parameters of God’s figured exaltation.
One of the most compelling arguments to emerge from this chapter is Anderson’s assertion that ethos determines ontology in *Paradise Lost*. “In Milton’s epic, ethos determines what a thing properly is; it is as fully real as the very substance that it informs and renders singular, individual, numerically one. Evil is therefore really, not just metaphorically, a necrotic disease, and here it *transfigures* Satan’s whole being” (75). Like so much of this text, this chapter convinces the reader that figuration is at the heart of what poetry does.

Chapter four offers a lengthy tour of theories of analogy and analogical thinking from Aristotle to the present day. The payoff of this Herculean, and quite useful for scholars interested in the subject, chapter is to allow Anderson to “reaffirm that Aristotle’s view of analogy as a distinguishable kind of relational metaphor was operative from his own time through the early modern period and that in modernity it continues to be so productively” (112). The author’s erudition and span of sources in this chapter is admirable and effective.

The fifth chapter on Kepler is among the very best in the book. Arguing for a Keplerian science of analogy, the chapter’s detailed exegesis of Kepler’s thought is readable, illuminating, and impressive. Analogy emerges as the central energy of so much of mathematical inquiry. “Geometry now serves analogy,” Anderson writes,” rather than the reverse, and analogy knows the created secrets of nature, the principles at its core. Geometrical terms, which exist to enable quantitative accuracy are the servants of something greater than they, but used with some insight and imaginative freedom, they still facilitate the beauty of mathematical simplicity” (146). Though Anderson’s pathways are usually quite technical, the central theme of her text could be summed up as a defense of the power of imaginative freedom to define or cultivate other forms of inquiry. The sixth chapter, on Donne’s *Anniversaries*, is meant to build on Kepler to argue for a Keplerian sense of proportion in Donne’s work. In the full-scale, detailed treatment of the *Anniversaries* that follows, I do not know that the Keplerian influence sticks as much as one would like, but Anderson’s reading of the poems is revealing and necessary just the same.

A concluding chapter on “Milton’s Twilight zone” brings so many of the major threads of the study together in what is a culminating and convincing chapter. Though this book has so many moments of signposting in which the relationship between one chapter and another are spelled out, this reader could have used much more signposting within the chapters themselves. In this text, we are so often in the middle of one fascinating passage or other that the specific thrust of the argument in the moment can become muddled or uncertain. The scope of this ambitious text may be behind this issue. The concluding sentence: “Essentially creative, imaginative, fictive, hypothetical, and metaphorical, analogy remains a fundamental resource for poetic brooding across cultures—historical, geographical, and intellectual” (226) reveals just how sprawling the book’s goal has been. Though Jim Nohrmenberg is not among the book’s sources, his focus on analogy and the scope of his critical stakes seem not unrelated to what Anderson achieved here. This book is not an easy read, but it is a necessary read, a beautiful, complex tour of the ways in which analogy and figuration are issues which entangled Renaissance writers and entangle us still.
Timothy Duffy is a scholar of Renaissance poetry and spatial philosophy. An edited collection, *Space, Place, and Genre in the European Renaissance: Epic Geographies*, will appear soon from Palgrave, and he is at work on a study of Renaissance poetry entitled *Anti-Worldly Geographies: Lyric Technologies of Place in the European Renaissance*. 