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Vincent Pecora, *Secularization Without End: Beckett, Mann, Coetzee*
Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015, 214 pp.

In *Secularization Without End*, Vincent Pecora applies to the novel the prescient framework he developed in *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, in which he argued that secularization is a process characteristic of modernity that creates the modern by extirpating the religious and anything else that is not secular or rational. In turn, the modern is far more entangled with the religious than its self-understanding permits it to recognize, not only because it sequesters itself to the spaces that remain uncontaminated by religion, but also because it arises from the very past from which it works to make a break. In *Secularization Without End*, Pecora recovers the religiosity that persists in the novel despite its ostensible status as the secular modern genre *par excellence*.

Focusing on the Calvinism that pervades the work of Samuel Beckett and J.M. Coetzee and the influence of Augustine on Thomas Mann, Pecora demonstrates convincingly that a secular critical perspective will always fail to understand these authors' novels because it must blind itself to the presence of theology and because these authors write self-consciously from within a tradition that modernity, in its hamstrung binary, can only recognize as theological. Working beyond this binary at the same time that he derides its myopia, Pecora argues for a critical approach that is neither secular nor religious, that draws its explanatory power from both streams at the expense of neither, and that finds in the combination of temporal and sacred narratives a rich description of the human condition that would otherwise remain illegible. At times challenging because it unsettles the perspective from which it attempts to see, *Secularization Without End* nonetheless offers its reader a sure guiding hand (as well as many precise and sonorous turns of phrase). It is unlikely to convince the committed secularist to let down his guard against the religious, though it provides a valuable contribution to those who find the persistence of religion a worthy modern mystery or who have seen and felt, if only obliquely, the peculiar contradictions of the secular novel.

In the book's first chapter, Pecora manifests in Beckett's writing "a distorting transformation of a Calvinist, puritan religious tradition" (26). With the term distortion, Pecora refers to Heidegger's *Verwindung*, which he sometimes translates in Lucretian vocabulary as the "swerve" to describe the non-teleological movement of history, "a peripeteia—a wandering, errant process that often folds back on itself, producing not only the return in distorted form of something perhaps hastily repressed... but also a host of unintended consequences... that we have only begun to understand" (22). The swerve of history is the distortion of the past through the constraints of the present—an inheritance neither faithfully received nor forsaken. Beckett acknowledged his debt to the Calvinist philosopher Arnold Geulincx, who described himself as a spectator in a machine-like world in which he is unable to make any difference because he and the world are creations of a God who is infinitely distant but totally in control. Beckett's absent God does not make room for human agency. The individual's authorial "I" is always also authored, "since he is never anything other than the personae that come to life through him, unbidden... and yet inescapable" (54). In Beckett's mechanical world, like the predetermined one of Calvin, we are observers who have become aware midstream of a process we did not set in motion and cannot complete.

In the second chapter, Pecora reads in Mann's *Doktor Faustus* the "distorted echoes" (58) of Augustine and in its protagonist an uncertain hope that the truth can set him free of the need for divine grace. Leverkühn turns away from God in a pact with the devil that guarantees his musical virtuosity, and in the process, he descends into a moral corruption like that of Hitler's Germany, which made "genocide itself seem to the perpetrators a heroic task" (71). The novel's narrator, Zeitblom, asks without answer whether there can be "hope beyond hopelessness, the transcendence of despair—not its betrayal, but the miracle that goes beyond faith" (71). In a reading that rejects allegorical simplicity, Pecora's Mann invokes Augustine's own questioning of whether the Elect are guaranteed salvation and the damned were always damned in order to tell Leverkühn's story and that of Germany, but also to reflect on the deeper, persistent dilemma of living with one's own depravity and anxiously awaiting a cleansing miracle that might not come, though if it does, it is certainly arbitrary and unearned.

Chapter three takes on a similar theme of hoped-for grace in the work of J.M. Coetzee. In the book's longest chapter, Pecora argues that Coetzee's search for redemption from the stain of South African apartheid is not altogether secular and finds in his writing an ambivalence toward the Dutch Reformed Calvinism in which Coetzee was raised. His work swerves like the secular modern in his attempt to break away from theology and his reoccupation of now-vacant, once-Christian answer positions (to borrow the language that Hans Blumenberg uses to describe the burden of the modern age). To ask a secular theological question, do the novels that an author writes against the sins of his nation absolve him of his guilt, or are his confessions "fatally compromised by the worm of self-interest" (93) on account of the fame and fortune they bring him? Faith and grace, however distorted, remain the only sources of hope given "the psychological implausibility of the good, absolutely sincere, and complete confession" (93). In this light, Coetzee's oeuvre is a confession without terminus, and thus with "no real possibility of full atonement or redemption" (105). The chapter then returns to Beckett's concern for the author who is also authored, and fittingly, to the *Quixote* at the origin of the novel, before concluding with a lengthy meditation on all language as representation of reality and thus, in a sense, all narrative as allegory—a symbolic *this* standing in for an actual *that*. Or in another framework that Pecora draws from Origen, reality persists as it swerves through inherited tradition, the particularity of the individual human reincarnated again and again as humanity.

In his conclusion, Pecora takes his arguments as far as they seem able to go, boldly speaking of the novel as a genre "suspended between two aesthetically problematic poles of discourse," i.e., reportage and allegory. At stake in this distinction is, on the one hand, a mode of telling that remains real in its fidelity to the facts and the agency it attributes to its characters, and on the other a mode of "totalized meaningfulness" in which the author predestines the fates of the story's ideal forms. In brief, Pecora suggests that a good novel depends on a balance of these poles and thus a balance between the non-narrative messiness of secular reality and the satisfying completeness of a divine, preordained order. In turn, the novel must always negotiate these tensions between the author and her characters and the act of authoring and the world it achieves. I worry somewhat that Pecora's claims regarding the novel reflect his narrow focus on Calvinism, as evidenced by a strange contrast in which individual agency is secular (156) and the absence of autonomy is theological. (One wonders what Arminian echoes a critic might find in ostensibly secular

works.) All the same, Pecora is wholly convincing in his demonstration that the novel's impetus toward secularity makes it fallow ground for theology in a swerving secularization without end.

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