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Review of Timothy Walsh, *The Dark Matter of Words: Absence, Unknowing, and Emptiness in Literature.*

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Timothy Walsh, *The Dark Matter of Words: Absence, Unknowing, and Emptiness in Literature*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998. 206 pp. ISBN 0809321726.

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As I read through Timothy Walsh's *The Dark Matter of Words*, a piece of doggerel from Mother Goose Rhymes kept running through my mind:

As I was walking down the stair,
I met a man who wasn't there.
He wasn't there again today,
I wish, I wish he'd go away!

The unrelenting presence of that which isn't there is the main topic of Walsh's argument, and, to his credit, Walsh manages to examine the indescribable and the ineffable as they appear in literature without collapsing too frequently into a necessary sort of incoherence. Like "the man who wasn't there" in the rhyme, Walsh argues that great literature constantly and consciously seeks ways to convey a sense of the inexpressible through systems of perceived absences and fertile silences. Often, according to Walsh, these structured (and therefore purposeful) absences point to knowledge and experience that are beyond language yet are still potent and real, even though they verge on the mystical and the transcendental. Furthermore, Walsh attempts to pinpoint an aesthetic of absence which, he argues, runs contrary to the mainstream of contemporary literary criticism and its tendency to simultaneously emphasize language as the only way we know the world and to critique language's inability to offer stable meaning of any sort. Instead, Walsh wants to reassert the centrality of language to signify human experience, including experiences beyond the pale of words. To do this, Walsh wants to return to a critical method that helps readers understand the text rather than deconstructing it in such a way that neither text nor reader really matters anymore.

Applaudable as this approach is, Walsh's book is at times full of sound and fury at contemporary literary criticism, which, however, really means deconstruction and its heirs, despite the fact that deconstruction (as even he notes) no longer rules the critical roost in the academy. What's worrisome is Walsh's insistence on attacking a critical theory that is not quite the threat he perceives it to be, thus setting up something of a straw man argument that detracts from the rest of his discussion. That being said, however, Walsh is poignant about the recent tendency of critics in the academy to emphasize criticism over the works they are critiquing, moving from elucidation of the text to self-aggrandizement. This critical tendency, according to Walsh, "too often fails to engage with literary art as art" (10) and instead reduces literature to a manifestation of this or that ideology, or a convenient field of action to demonstrate the workings of our latest psycho-social obsessions: "We have seemingly forgotten that art has its own concerns and its own significance, its own power—that art partakes more of magic than the museum, more of spiritual alchemy than the archeological dig" (10).

With that last phrase, Walsh reveals his true agenda: to return to an aesthetic of reading that celebrates the mystical act of creation and a transcendental entry into the realm of spirit. He argues movingly for a critical method that is less dissecting and more appreciative. By focusing

on the silences and gaps within a text, he insists that these are not necessarily unconscious ruptures in meaning, as deconstruction argues, but conscious and necessary intrusions of experience beyond words—whether we call it the transcendental, the sublime, or even God.

Indeed, Walsh is at his strongest when he exhorts the reader to be sensitive to the mystical force of such experiences; we are defined as much by that which "isn't there" in the physical sense as we are by that which is. Walsh's discussion of the Venus de Milo and her missing arms is particularly provocative, as Walsh identifies the missing appendages as the source of the statue's "mysterious suggestiveness" based on the "element of uncertainty" regarding how the arms might have been posed:

Even if we try to reconstruct the statue imaginatively as we view it, we do so without confidence and are constantly thrown back on the actual emptiness residing where the arms once were. Yet it is this very emptiness, this purely negative element, that seems to enhance our perception of the figure's beauty. (15)

In addition, similar and intended absences in more recent works of art serve as a mechanism by which the viewer engages with "what is not there" and hence "we are seemingly brought within the aesthetic construct itself as a participant" (22). Likewise, Walsh explores and dissects both the use of the word "something" in literature and the aesthetic process of riddles in the same enlightening manner. The greatest works of literature, according to Walsh, have a built-in sense of mystery—of something that is beyond language which is yet language's duty to point toward if not articulate.

I would agree that these "structured absences" are much more conscious and deliberate on the part of the writer than recent critical theory allows. In addition, the very fact that the text so often calls attention to these absences, as in Walsh's examples of Robert Frost's poems "Mending Wall" and "For Once, Then, Something," means the reader is deliberately drawn into the work as a co-participant, even creator of meaning. Throughout his text, and to his credit, Walsh brings a poetic sensibility to his theory of reading which gives his attacks on literary critics even greater credence (no surprise, perhaps, then to learn that most of Walsh's publications have been poems and short stories). In many ways, Walsh seems to be "feeling" his response to the works mentioned rather than relying on critical hoops to jump through, and this method is most successful when he addresses works like *The Cloud of Unknowing* and other texts which bespeak mystical experience. But his method falters in the rather strained readings of some of the other works.

For example, Walsh's discussion of Samuel Beckett—as seen primarily through the eyes of Harold Bloom—is problematic on several levels. First Walsh relies only on a short quote from Bloom on Beckett regarding the "beyond" in Beckett's later works: "The silence, or the abyss, or the reality beyond the pleasure principle. . . . [the death drive that] Beckett can not and will not name" (Bloom qtd. in Walsh, 76-77). But Walsh fundamentally misreads Bloom in assuming that this "silence" not only "points toward a 'beyond'" but also that "Beckett succeeds, largely by indirection, in representing this 'beyond'" (77). "Beyond" as abyss or void is substantially different from the positive and creative "beyond" that Walsh convincingly looks for elsewhere in art and literature. In addition, Walsh, using Bloom as his starting point, states that Beckett is not

trying to "subvert all meaning" (as the deconstructionists claim) but Beckett instead offers a "quite specific and calculated experience of unresolved uncertainty" (77). What is troubling here is not only that Walsh neglects to quote Beckett to demonstrate these points, but that a careful reading of Beckett cannot help but reveal the substantial difference between absence/silence as transcendence and the grotesquely funny yet horrifying silences and voids that haunt Beckett's works. The "beyond" in *Endgame*, for example, is a landscape marked literally by nothing, or "no thing." "'No more nature?'" asks Hamm desperately. "'Not in the vicinity'" answers Clov. To call this simply "unresolved uncertainty," thus putting it on the same transcendental and even hopeful level as something like *The Cloud of Unknowing*, is at best a naive and at worst a superficial understanding of Beckett. Beckett's frequent depictions of humans forced to confront the nothingness of the abyss and their pathetically funny attempts to resist or embrace it, make Walsh's assertion of "unresolved uncertainty" inadequate and even misleading regarding both Beckett and Bloom's reading of Beckett.

But the major drawback to Walsh's method is the tendency to reject all recent critical theory on the grounds that it is not appreciative enough of the mystical within literature. I was struck by the complete absence of any of the work feminist critics have done on gaps and silences as found in women's writing and writing about women. Walsh dismisses all such critical theory as too ideological and therefore unconcerned about art, but feminist theory could have deepened his arguments, especially in his discussion of Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes. Walsh's resistance to literary theory that is overtly "linear and linguistic" runs parallel to some of the seminal texts of feminist theory, including such groundbreaking writers of the nineteen-eighties as Hélène Cixous, Elaine Showalter, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (notably in their influential work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*)—none whom are mentioned.

What is further puzzling is the discussion of such thinkers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Carlyle, and Henri Bergson, all of whom Walsh mentions but fails to address in useful depth. To speak of the transcendental and not to make better use of Emerson, for example, means a lost opportunity to place Walsh's argument into a historical perspective as well as missing out on a wealth of insight into the same topic from a like-minded poet and critic. Emerson is clearly forging the same path that Walsh treads when he says in "The Oversoul":

The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul. In its experiments there has always remained, in the last analysis, a residuum it could not resolve. Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Always our being is descending into us from we know not whence. The most exact calculator has no prescience that somewhat incalculable may not balk the very next moment. I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.

Emerson offers a vision similar to that of Walsh in his description of beauty in his essay "The Poet": "A beauty not explicable, is dearer than a beauty which we can see to the end of." Walsh's argument clearly shows fruitful parallels to Emerson's thought, inviting more deliberate examination, because at the heart of Walsh's argument is a critical text about Emerson, Richard Poirier's *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*.

Walsh's use of other literary examples is likewise problematic. Some of his choices (like Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and James Joyce's "The Dead") are right on the mark and examined to great advantage. His chapter on Virginia Woolf, however, offers a fundamental misreading of *To the Lighthouse*. It is as if Walsh applies too literally Woolf's own phrase that "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end." Walsh seems to assume that the point of *To the Lighthouse* is to portray this halo without any significant center point or sense of coherent meaning. He states that in *To the Lighthouse* "all things are mysterious. . . . the Great Mystery simply envelops all things in a luminous haze," but nowhere does he address Mrs. Ramsay's presence and subsequent devastating absence as the central pivot for the text. Instead, Walsh comments that there is no "suspicion of a larger conspiracy bonding the story's silences together"—a comment which even a cursory look at Woolf criticism would have made questionable.

In short, the true value of *The Dark Matter of Words* is Walsh's impassioned argument that we as literary critics ought to see the texts we study not as dissectable tidbits over which we smack our critical lips, but as works of art which deserve a different sort of scrutiny. The absences and silences which mark great works of literature do not merely mark ideology, but may also intimately connect the written word to experiences which can be felt but not articulated. If the ideas aren't particularly new, Walsh does a good enough job in making his argument fresh. However, what ultimately, and most seriously to my mind, weakens the impact of Walsh's discussion is his dogged resistance to all recent critical theory and the superficial readings of many of the works he offers as examples. As such, I found *The Dark Matter of Words* as frustrating as it was enlightening.