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Scott Paul Gordon. *The Power of the Passive Self in English Literature, 1640-1770.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xi + 279pp. US$60. ISBN 0-521-91005-1.

By the time Adam Smith wrote his *Wealth of Nations* (1776), the autonomous self-interested individual seemed a fact of nature, and universal self-interest a logical starting point for a study of political economy. As Scott Paul Gordon points out, however, the only reason Smith could take self-interest as a given was that in the course of the previous century it had been "naturalized," replacing prior assumptions of a stable hierarchical world where everyone knew his or her place. The emergence of the rational, autonomous Enlightenment self has been central to teleological narratives of history written from the perspective of modern individualist cultures. Postmodern critiques of individualism have subsequently taught us to be sceptical of hegemonic views of early modern selfhood. Neither traditional nor postmodern histories have acknowledged the strands of belief in the disinterested self that persisted alongside Enlightenment theories of universal self-interest. In this informative and illuminating study, Gordon recovers a counter-tradition of Enlightenment thought that articulated an idea of selfhood that was not self-interested and whose agency was not self-generated.

Gordon locates a "discourse of passivity," which affirms "the loss rather than the assertion of agency" (p. 17), in certain strands of seventeenth-century Protestant thought. As he explains, "the belief that one is 'acted by another' ... frees subjects from doubt over the worthiness of their actions ... and in so doing licenses, rather than precludes, acting in the world" (p. 53). In chapter 1, Gordon identifies this "passivity trope" in Cromwell's references to "a superior force that prompts his actions" and in the tradition of radical Dissenters who drew authority from a higher power when they challenged religious and political authorities. This ideal of a radically active "passive self" did not survive intact into the eighteenth century, but was transformed and reappeared in a range of secular writings, including moral philosophy, theatre criticism, and the sentimental novel. In chapters 2 and 3, Gordon examines the challenges to traditional discourses of disinterestedness in Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Addison and Steele's *Spectator.* In subsequent chapters, he demonstrates how Shaftesbury, Richardson, and eighteenth-century theatre critics deployed an updated version of the passivity trope in order to "rescue belief in disinterestedness and produce legible subjects" (p. 90). Modern scholars, having lost touch with this conception of a self "acted by another," have tended to misread and misunderstand key works of eighteenth-century thought by attempting, wrongly, to map them against a norm of "the self-enclosed individual." Gordon's archaeology of the "disinterested self" complicates our understanding of the emergence of modern Western notions of the civic individual and obliges us to recognize "an alternate way to imagine what is possible" (p. 214).

In his analysis of Hobbes, Gordon focuses on Hobbes's challenge to the tradition of romance-heroic discourse, which privileged heroically disinterested behaviour and helped popularize an ideal of "competitive selflessness" (p. 62). In promoting his view of self-interested human behaviour, Hobbes attempted to restore an older Herculean tradition of heroism, based on physical prowess

rather than selfless chivalry. Hobbes's version of human nature would be refuted by eighteenth-century writers who attempted to "devise alternate theories of how to achieve social agreement" (p. 86) such as polite conversation and moral interchange. Yet Gordon observes that "politeness ... looks perilously close to what one might call strategic self-fashioning" (p. 87), which then is consistent with a Hobbesian vision of self-interest. Breaking from traditional scholarship that sees Addison and Steele's *Spectator* as engaging in polite persuasion, Gordon focuses on Mr Spectator's "coercive Power," which ultimately "grounds all conduct, even the virtuous conduct [he] aims to produce, in prudential calculation" (p. 90).

Having laid out Hobbes's and Addison and Steele's challenges to seventeenth-century ideals of disinterested selfhood, Gordon then demonstrates how Shaftesbury, Richardson, and a certain type of theatre criticism help reconstitute belief in the disinterested self. Working from traditional narratives of universal self-interest, scholars have frequently misunderstood Shaftesbury's work, because they failed to see that his notion of "moral Sense" was not an extension of rational self-agency but an external force coming from Nature. Shaftesbury posits not a "free agent," but an "agent acted upon," thus fashioning an eighteenth-century version of the seventeenth-century passive self (p. 121). Similarly, while twentieth-century theatre critics saw David Garrick as a technical genius, able to produce passionate emotion at will, eighteenth-century viewers generally saw Garrick as "more the subject of projections than the dispenser of new acting theory" (p. 159) because they assumed that such evocation of passion must "arise 'naturally' from a source outside the actor's conscious control" (p. 164).

Like the passions produced through Garrick's body, so the tears *Clarissa* produced in adequately "sensible" eighteenth-century readers were also presumed to be outside their control. Such tears would have been understood as evidence of enrolment in "an exclusive group identity of the sensible" (p. 208). Novels such as *Clarissa* thus redeploy the trope of a passive, disinterested self; the tears of both characters and readers serve as testimony to that disinterestedness. Coming full circle from his first chapter on radical Protestantism, Gordon observes that the ultimate result of the cult of sentiment was that readers came to "consider themselves feelers rather than doers" (p. 211). While the passivity trope in the hands of seventeenth-century Protestants was a potent source for political action, its re-emergence a century later in the sentimental novel led to potentially disabling passivity or inaction.

The strength of Gordon's book lies not merely in the fascinating trajectory he outlines from active (Dissenting) to passive (readerly) "disinterestedness," but in the rich detail he covers along the way. In moving from Shaftesbury to Richardson, Gordon acknowledges the complex interrelationship among passivity, sensibility, and class status. His work also helps us reconsider the link we usually assume between passivity and femininity. Gordon does not specifically address the question of how disinterestedness may have challenged a particular construction of the *Whig* individual, or how it shaped the partisan debates of the period. By recovering the category of "passive selfhood," however, his work sets the terms for future research into this and other related fields. *The Power of the Passive Self* is an impressive and original book that makes

an important contribution to current scholarship on the origins of the modern individual.

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