John Donne Biathanatos; A Modern-Spelling Edition. Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin (Editors). New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1982 [Garland English Texts, No. 1], 398 pages, $50.00.

Reviewed by Richard C. Frushell, Indiana State University

An English scholar and philosopher respectively, Professors Rudick and Battin of the University of Utah have served their disciplines well with this critical edition of John Donne's provocative discursion on self-killing, *Biathanatos* (literally forcedeath, from βιάθάνατος), which the reader soon discovers to mean not only suicide. First published by his son in 1647—by which time Donne was sixteen years in his grave—*Biathanatos*, completed in 1608, since that time has been controversial, even if little read in modern times save by professionals. The 1647 quarto subtitle intimates both the reason for its being disputatious as well as Donne's method in writing the piece; for it is a "Declaration of that Paradox, or Thesis, that Selfe-homicide is not so naturally Sinne, that it may never be otherwise. Wherein the Nature, and the extent of all those Lawes, which seeme to be violated by this Act, are diligently surveyed." A major English writer of the high Renaissance, John Donne was also Dr. Donne the Anglican divine whose essay on self-killing directly beards received notions in his day about categorical prohibition of that act. Since *Biathanatos* is ostensibly the first substantial study printed in English to engage so originally in such ethical polemics, it has historical significance, and not the least because of its contribution to the debate on the subject in the century following Donne's. For students of English literature and Donne specifically, *Biathanatos* is interesting as a demonstration of seventeenth-century dialectical prose by a celebrated metaphysical poet who was everywhere concerned with definition and the nature of right action or right inaction. *Biathanatos* also provides some evidence of the growth of an artist's philosophical mind involving the question of literal living and dying and not only literary figurations about both. As Professor Battin shows in her conclusion to the edition's introduction, Donne's treatise in moral theology has point today, especially in the vexed struggles of modern bioethics. There can be little doubt, then, about the worth of having this book, and Donne's editors here approach their task seriously and execute it quite expertly.

In mounting this first full modern edition of *Biathanatos*, Professors Rudick and Battin have in some 400 packed pages given readers an admirably complete "backgrounds" general introduction, with 97 wide-ranging notes, dividing their writing in accordance with their several lights in the material. Not an easy read, the editors' introduction is worth the effort, and it does serve as an introduction *to the work edited* and not to the author or the times. We learn that even though Donne did not want his work published he also did not want it burned. Writing formally for an audience and not for himself as a sort of surrogate act for his own suicide (as a few critics have proposed), Donne, according to Rudick and Battin, has pursued a "coherent, interesting, and significant argument" that suicide is not in every case sinful (p. xxi). Their reading of *Biathanatos* is a corrective to such criticism of the work as that by A.E. Malloch, Joan Webber, and Rosalie Colie, who see irony, paradox, and indirection as Donne's intention and method. Rudick and Battin are properly not severe with these

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serious and sensitive interpretations, just confident in their own reading and proofs. A major contribution by the editors is their insistence and demonstration, based on a close reading of what Donne actually wrote, that the work is not autobiographical (except incidentally), not obscure, not ironic, and not disunified. They read the work as straightforward, although they admit to its complexity.

Responsible for roughly the first half of the introduction, Rudick is especially good on how Donne's sources—scores of them which Rudick himself consulted and analized—direct us to a proper understanding of the essay. Augustine's *De civitate Dei* was of course influential along with Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*, the latter subtly by ubiquitously contributing to the very structure of *Biathanatos* in that Donne adapts the theologian's three-part definition of sin as being against nature, reason, and God's law. Aquinas' sixteenth-century Spanish followers, largely theologians themselves, at the University of Salamanca—for example Friar Domenicus Sotus and Bartholomaeus de Medina—also contributed to Donne's work by their casuist method of inquiry: "Donne undertook the maximal task in defense of suicide: he chose the most dogmatic of antagonists, those who would listen to no reasons but their own and who would debate in no style but the one familiar to them, and his project was to employ their own means to undermine the dogma those means had sustained" (p. xxiv); in short, Donne set out "to break the scholastic argument [against *all* suicides] on its own terms" and by using the schoolmen's very modes of presentation and argumentation. These observations go far in explaining why Donne is casuistical in method at least. The Church Fathers, canon law, and secular law (of which Donne was a serious if short-term reader) were the major shapers of Donne's thinking for his treatise, with the rather predictable emphasis on the primacy of motive and conscience (including the "moral status" of erring, naive, or doubting conscience) and not just act in judging culpability of suicides. Donne was a relativist of sorts and strongly in favor of Christian compassion in adjudicating the sinfulness of suicides. He would and did, therefore, argue against uncharitable severity on the part of persons who witness attempted or realized suicides.

Contrary to popular misunderstandings of *Biathanatos*, Donne does not condone all suicides; he does not even cite the Stoics since their arguments for the act are not acceptable to him. He in fact would allow only one instance of suicide: if the act furthers the glory of God. The sinfulness and "naturalness" of suicide are in large the subjects of the second half of the introduction, that part undertaken by Professor Battin. In a compelling examen of *Biathanatos*, Battin has as her belltone (claiming it was also Donne's) that Donne is most original in his treatment of the morality of suicide by arguing that man "naturally" wants to die. This is, we are reminded, opposite to Aquinas' man who loves himself, or ought to, and who naturally wants to live. Examples used are the suicides of some Christian martyrs, gladiators, servants following the lead of masters, and such mass suicides as the Jews at Masada. Battin considers Donne's argument for suicide-in-certain-cases as "wholly original and not derivative from earlier defenses," say those by the Stoics (p. lxxxvi).

An O *Altitudo* centerpiece of *Biathanatos* is Donne's approval of suicide in the one instance of its being committed for God's glory, for example the case of the biblical Samson. In Donne's schema, intention is all important and conscience determines if the act is done for the furthering of God's glory or if done for self-interest, which for Donne makes the act wrongful, a sin. Battin asserts that "For Donne, particular external acts do not have moral status in themselves, and are not intrinsically right or wrong," but conscience and intention make them one or the other (p. lxxi); and again, "we can say that Donne's view categorically prohibits rational suicide, where

self-interest is the primary intent" (p. lxxxv). In her treatment of part three of *Biathanatos*, wherein Donne applies and confirms his theory of suicide given in the first two parts, Battin extrapolates from Donne's text that after ransacking the bible the author decides that "suicide is not generally prohibited by the Biblical text" *per se* and that the fifth commandment against killing—the obvious footer for Christian exegesis on the matter—does not forbid suicide in all cases. Another surprise by Donne is his proposition that "partial" suicides, or "approaches" to the act such as statements of willingness to die, have the moral status of suicide. (One would surmise that this is on the order of committing adultery by wishing it even if not actually doing it.) It follows logically even if not orthodoxly that Donne would conclude with the death of Jesus as self-homicide since he voluntarily "emitted his own soul" in an act, according to Donne, of "perfect charity" (p. lxxx), this last observation not a para-dox (see subtitle of *Biathanatos* above) but of course quite ortho-dox.

As others before her, Battin points out that Donne never explicitly says that Jesus was a self-homicide but that Donne strongly implies it. As an act of perfect charity (*caritas* the acting for the love of God), Christ's "suicide" was not only moral and sinless but even obligatory. Battin allows that "Christ is the model, the example *par excellence*, of those suicides which are religiously acceptable, and the measure by which all other men's suicides should be judged" (p. lxxxii). Lest anyone should mistake him, and they *have* over and over again since 1647, Donne would disallow any suicides that are not Christ-like. This admits precious few. Donne was, then, *not* for suicide at will; and his fear that readers might think otherwise dictated that he not personally publish his *Biathanatos*.

Crucial to any critical edition, old-spelling or modern-spelling, is the textual introduction with its statement of editorial principles and practices, which in this edition is clear in conception and execution, centered, and responsible. (The general introduction is constituted by the long essay highlighted above and the "Text and Editorial Treatment" section treated below, both coming to 109 pages.) The editors have adopted as their copytext—"base text" they call it since not an old-spelling edition—the 1647 quarto (Q) but have consulted and used the manuscript scribal copy (M) with its marginalia in Donne's hand, this version probably dating from the period 1610-1614. The second edition, printed in octavo in 1700, has no authority, it too deriving from the quarto, the most "reliable" of all versions. After discussing the nature of M and Q, the editors give five principles they used in preparing the edition, the modernity of which is somewhat defined by this statement concerning surface features: "Modernization of spelling, of punctuation, of capitalization, and of italicization is carried out silently, as are paragraph divisions, which are infrequent in M and arbitrary in Q. Abbreviations are expanded silently when their full forms are clear" (p. civ). Their most difficult editorial decision was settling on a format (including how to render Donne's many quotations) because of the nature of differing configurations in M and Q. Their decisions seem to me commonsensical and usable, except for their decision on line numbering discussed below.

Next in order comes *Biathanatos* itself. The editors properly correct and enlarge where appropriate Donne's notes and place them above the dividing line at the foot of pages. Their own textual notes come below Donne's, the former cued to a line-numbering scheme that seems to me to result in a presentation both jejune and unnecessarily busy. From the title page forward, each fifth line is assigned an arabic numeral. If one must have such a thing, surely every ten or twenty lines would do nicely. While one appreciates consecutive numbering throughout a work rather than a new series of numbers beginning with each section, one normally sees the number-

ing start with the work proper and not with the preliminaries: in *Biathanatos*, title page, dedications, list of authors, and (long) contents sections. Professor Rudick has geared his substantial and scholarly "Commentary" on the essay's lines (83 pages in all) to this numbering system, and this in part explains the editorial choice of such a plan. But I believe it does not excuse it. Too much of the reader's attention is drawn to the apparatus, which in a modern-spelling edition should be kept as unobtrusive as possible. Words the editors have elevated to their text that are not readings from the copytext (Q) seem to me the result of an editorial rationale that is uniformly sensible and acceptable, though I must admit bafflement over the authority for their admitting *cases* to their text in line 2915 when *cures* occurs in both Q and M (the note on this word-choice fails to convince). One further word is needed on the "Commentary" section. Rudick successfully fulfills his headnote claim, for he goes on to write learned, *helpful* notes, which fall under these heads: glosses, translations of Latin passages, background, sources, and editorial decisions on crux passages.

An "Index of Names" (with only a few errors) concludes the edition. And while any reasonably accurate index is better than none in such an enterprise as this, a subject-name index may have been more beneficial as a tool, albeit one more difficult to fetch up. It is possible, though, that such an index was considered and dismissed by the editors as superfluous because of the detailed contents (28 printed pages) section composed by the editors from Donne's sidenotes—called "A Distribution of this Book into Parts, Distinctions, and Sections." The contents is an outline epitome of the *Biathanatos* and could serve as a kind of unpaginated subject index. But because of its positioning and the absence of page numbers, the contents section as an index is less valuable than a subject-index would have been.

The book is handsomely printed on acid-free, 250-year-life paper similar to the paper Garland uses in other series, in durable boards of red and gold. The book as object, then, should be able to serve its purpose for many years. At $50.00, though, it will unfortunately be found mostly on library shelves. One cannot help but wonder what the Clarendon Press will charge for their forthcoming old-spelling edition of *Biathanatos* by Charles T. Mark, or if we really need two critical editions of Donne's book. For serious students of this subject, writer, and period, the Rudick/Battin is worth the price. But the potential audience for their edition, according to the editors, "prepared for as wide a readership as may have reason to appreciate the work" (p. ix), will perhaps be attenuated by the price. This is, however, to rail more against the inflation gods than the editors or even the publisher, all three of whom are to be commended for this valuable volume.

The Unique Animal. Don D. Davis. New York: Prytaneum Press, 1981, 336 pages, $25.00.

Reviewed by James Bense, University of California, Davis

Although it is a truism of the scientific method that more may be learned from error than confusion, the irony of this fact becomes especially clear when "confusion" takes the form of a reductionist proof. In *The Unique Animal*, Don D. Davis presents a testable theory which differentiates between human intelligence and the intelligence of all other animals.

The central thesis of this book is that the human capacity to learn is superior to that of all other animals not merely in degree, but in kind. Davis begins by reviewing and illustrating past issues concerning "man's" uniqueness—"tool using and making," "abstraction," "humour," and various types of "language," to name a few. By process of elimination, he concurs with a presently prevailing theory that the ability to create arbitrary symbols "is a genuine difference of kind," setting "us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom" (p. 64).

But this is only part of the picture. The capacity to symbolize is inextricably related to another human capacity, and this relationship, hitherto unrecognized, has an empirical basis which is clearly demonstrable. Davis argues that human intelligence demonstrates this dual capacity: the ability to symbolize and to hypothesize. These "are actually two aspects of the same underlying ability," designated, for lack of a better term, as "imagination" (p. 214). The ability to symbolize is evident in human language and "representational art." Mr. Davis asserts that the written symbol of language has a separate origin from the spoken symbol, having "its roots in two-dimensional art," or the pictogram (p. 59). Thus, these forms of expression are closely connected. The ability to hypothesize is evident in society's development of magic, religion, and science. Magical and religious hypotheses are not testable and therefore not falsifiable. Unlike magical hypotheses, religious hypotheses posit the existence of powerful, unseen beings. Similarly, scientific hypotheses posit the existence of unseen entities. But unlike those of either magic or religion, scientific hypotheses *are testable* and therefore falsifiable. Thus, these forms of knowledge share a common empirical nature.

How are the abilities to symbolize and to hypothesize related? The relation becomes explicitly clear as Davis defines each:

> Symbolize: to decide to assign a relationship between two dissimilar and previously non-contiguous events.
>
> Hypothesize: to propose a relationship or connection between two or more non-contiguous events. (p. 214)

He goes on to explain that "symbolizing and hypothesizing are two sides of the same coin, they both involve proposing a relationship between non-contiguous events" (p. 214). The spatial-temporal equivocation implicit in these definitions requires explanation. Davis devotes a chapter to "contiguity," but sums up here as follows: "There

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is a very basic similarity between deciding that a particular word and a particular object are related to each other (i.e., symbolizing) and proposing that two events separated by time have a connection (i.e., hypothesizing)" (p. 214).

Here lies the crux of Davis's theory—its empirical basis. He defines a "non-contiguous," or "separated relationship," as "a connection between any two or more events separated by 60 seconds or more" (p. 98). The exact number of seconds, of course, is not important. Davis documents issues of "primary" and "secondary" learning using the model of positive reinforcement, and concludes that scientists agree concerning the maximum interval (30 seconds) for contiguous (primary) learning among all animals. He gives an extended illustration of how Semmelweis discovered the cause of childbed fever as proof of the human capacity for non-contiguous learning.

This bare summary of theory does not do justice to other informative aspects of Davis's study, his thorough and systematic examination of vast fields of knowledge: levels of learning among animals, plausible speculations about "pre-historical science," the relation between hypothesis and "social norms," and more. The veracity of many of his conclusions—based as they are on past and current knowledge in anthropology, archeology, linguistics, and psychology—would seem to be strong indeed. His proposed theory attempts to provide a hypothesis which is both testable and falsifiable. Granted his facts and working defintions, the demonstrable proof of Davis's theory on its own terms may never be contested.

Yet after all is said and shown, the unique human ability to learn from "separated events" (as defined) would seem to be a finding that is reductionistic in a very weak sense—and most dependent upon reified terms which conjure up semantic equivocations and hover on the brink of absurdity. Mr. Davis speaks of "intervals." During an interval of less than 60 seconds, "events" remain "contiguous," or *touching*. After 60 seconds, they are "separated by time."Davis's theory is based upon conclusive experiments in which intervals are not "marked" by "extraneous events" (pp. 87-88). May such "intervals" be said to have duration? The idea of events touching or not touching in time suggests that an interval with a shorter duration may have some sort of mooring effect, and one with a longer duration a drifting effect, on what are contrived to be pertinent "events." In any case, a differentiation between contiguity and non-contiguity which depends upon the length of an "unmarked" interval suggests that a duration, without "interference," changes somehow from contiguous to non-contiguous at some point (i.e., 60 seconds). To speak of a continuous duration is redundant; a noncontinuous duration would seem to be a contradiction in terms. None of this sophistry would come to mind were it not for Davis's assertion that a "true hypothesis" occurs only after seemingly related events are separated by more than 60 seconds, and that this human ability makes our intelligence different *in kind* from that of other animals. Just how a quantitative measure of duration translates at a certain point into a difference of kind rather than degree is a topic Mr. Davis does not broach.

Though Davis makes a point of treating magical and religious hypotheses fairly, in terms of the empirical nature which they share with those of science, and his clarification of this point is lucid, as are many points of clarification throughout his book, he makes some tacit assumptions which are significant to note: he asserts that religious (i.e., spiritual hypotheses) are not falsifiable, but he assumes that such things as spiritual forces cannot really exist unless their influence is predictable. He asserts that the function of magical, religious, and scientific hypotheses, alike, is to relieve human anxiety in the face of natural forces and to exert some degree of

controlling influence over those forces, but he assumes that the laws of nature are ultimately those of cause and effect. He asserts that an objective point of view is attainable if we do not confound "cognition" and "behavior" in our study of human intelligence, but he assumes that the perceiver does not alter the perceived—except in ways that are consciously manipulative. In sum, Davis is so rooted in a rationalistic empiricism that he wishes to conceive only of a world of findings and correlations; he has no use for creative forces which may produce their own correspondences.

Ironically it is through an unwitting manner of style that Davis demonstrates the capacity of human intelligence to act in correspondence with a world of its own making. His habit of repeating assertions and reiterating what he has previously established becomes tedious in many places. Such a forceful strategy of clarity and coherence might be effective in a lecture hall but is exceedingly tiresome on the page. It is when Davis senses that his verbal momentum must roll over barriers of considerable resistance that his engagement with reified language becomes markedly obsessive. His book may not be peculiar for this reason; it simply needs editing. On the other hand, even a great concern for clarity may not account for excessive over-writing. Davis's style in *The Unique Animal* suggests that to be human is not merely to possess langauage—but to be possessed by language.