

Cogito Ergo Sum: The Life of Rene Descartes. By Richard Watson

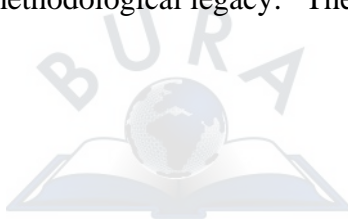
Reviewed by David Lavery

In his 1580 essay “Of Repentance,” Michel de Montaigne wrote, “If I had been able to see Erasmus in other days, it would have been hard for me not to take for adages and apothegms everything he said to his valet and his hostess. We imagine much more appropriately an artisan on the toilet seat or on his wife than a great president, venerable by his demeanor and his ability. It seems to us that they do not stoop from their lofty thrones even to live.” More than four hundred years later, Richard Watson notes in *Cogito, Ergo Sum: The Life of René Descartes* that “We are so in need of squeaky-clean heroes that we present our great thinkers as Paradigms of Truth and Virtue rather than as the cranks they really were. Of course great men have to get only one or two major things right for people to forget the hundreds of things they got wrong.”

On 18 January 1982, a member of the extremist Animal Liberation Front slashed a portrait in London’s Wellcome Art Gallery with a knife and escaped without being caught. The victim was a representation of René Descartes, who, as the ALF would later proudly point out, was also one of the founders of modern vivisection. In a new, aspiring-to-be-definitive, forty-years-in-the-making biography of the father of modern philosophy, Richard Watson makes use of subtler weapons in ripping to shreds received opinion of the French thinker.

Offering the first life of Descartes in nearly a century to be based on substantial new research, Watson is through-and-through—as he readily admits in the introduction—“skeptical.” Iconoclastically disenchanted with the centuries-old coverup by the “Saint Descartes Protection Society,” he blasphemes regularly, presenting strong, inferential evidence against many a treasured Cartesian myth. We learn that Descartes was probably not the late-sleeping “chambriste” at La Flèche, the Jesuit school he attended for eight years; that the legend of his fateful first meeting with Isaac Beeckman, the polymath who would prove so influential on Descartes’ developing scientific interests, is just legend; that the location of the 10 November 1619 “Pentacost of Reason” (in Jacques Maritain’s memorable phrase)—the night of Descartes’ famous seminal dreams—is quite likely misidentified; that Descartes almost certainly did not, like a demented Terry Southern character, seduce a chambermaid in order to study the mechanism of reproduction; that it is doubtful his father’s supposed denunciation of his son, “*Celui-là n’était qu’à se faire relier en veau*” (“He is fit for nothing but having himself bound in calf”), was ever spoken; that most of the existing portraits, including the one in the Wellcome, may be inauthentic. (The most likely bona fide likeness, by Jan-Baptist Weenix, graces *Cogito*’s cover.) Perhaps most surprising, we learn that Baillet’s often psychoanalyzed versions of the dreams are probably made out of whole cloth.

Throughout *Cogito, Ergo Sum*, Watson leaves us in no doubt about his own opinion of his subject. In an introductory chapter (“The Curse of Cartesianism”) and a conclusion (“The Ghost in the Machine Fights the Last Battle for the Human Soul”), he joins the company of such anti-Cartesians as Maritain, Johann von Hamann, Giambattista Vico, Karl Jaspers, Morris Berman, Allen Wheelis, Susan Bordo, Marjorie Grene, William Barrett, and Arthur Koestler in blaming the multiple failures of modernity on Descartes’ methodological legacy: “The modern world is Cartesian,



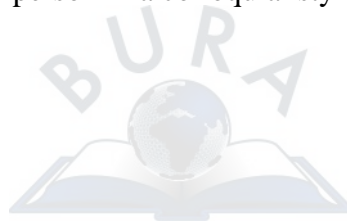
then,” Watson insists, “not because it led professional philosophers to seek certainty (and to end up peering into their own navels) but because Descartes’ method of analytic reasoning allows ordinary people to be masters and possessors of nature. Descartes made control easy, step by step.” Watson even calls Descartes names—many names: “the father of machismo,” “the most vilified innovator this side of Karl Marx,” “a drone, a family parasite,” “a proud, excitable, egotistic little man.”

Expert at debunking the myths of Descartes, Watson is equally skilled at uncovering fresh insights about one of the most examined figures in the history of thought. We learn about how Descartes was probably toilet trained, his likely height (five foot one or two), the governing logistics of his many moves in the Netherlands, the rationale for his obsequious correspondence with his brilliant critic Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, the likely breed of his dog Monsieur Grott (“Mister Scratch,” Watson remarks, was—given his master’s fondness for vivisection—quite lucky to have been sent back to France from the Netherlands), and about Descartes’ almost certain fascination with the Rosicrucians. We learn, too, that Descartes may have been the first to describe the conditioned reflex, probably slept in the nude, may have been a mathematically gifted gambler, and likely smoked pot.

Like any good biographer, Watson is just as fascinating off-message as on. American vs. Dutch licorice, porridges, swaddling, wet nurses, the use of mustard in weaning, the “Little Ice Age” of the seventeenth century, childhood considered as a disease, diets at the time of the “health nut” Descartes, the construction and maintenance of *zee-dijks* (the low walls the Dutch built to hold back the sea)—these and a hundred other tangential matters attract his passing attention, and each visit remains memorable. The Library of Congress classification for *Cogito* will place it on the shelf with other books on Descartes and “Philosopher—France—Biography.” But it is much more, most notably a travel book in which Watson takes us along on his scholarly perambulations, which are geographical, serendipitous, and autobiographical as well.

Of all the complex moments in Descartes’ “torn and jagged . . . life curve” (the words are Karl Stern’s in *The Flight from Woman*), none presents a greater conundrum to a biographer than the great French thinker’s acceptance of Queen Christina of Sweden’s invitation to become her tutor, a decision that would prove fatal when Descartes succumbed to congestive heart failure in 1650. Watson is more than up to the challenge. In an earlier version of his chapter titled “On the Zeedijk,”* Watson had offered an academic analogy for Descartes’ fatal choice. Queen Christina was able to “add Descartes to her collection” because he was “like the professor in the sticks who waits all his life for the fabled call from Harvard. And lo, one day it actually comes. But it is too late, he is past his prime, he is an extinct volcano, recognition is as much a burden as a joy to him now. But he has to go anyway.” Unwilling to entirely reject such a hypothesis, Watson now finds his analogy flawed (“compared to the French court, Stockholm was the minor leagues—not Harvard; Ohio State maybe”) and offers a new, more reductionistic, but well-argued elucidation (“I believe Descartes went to Sweden because he was nearly flat broke”) and a more complex psychological interpretation that includes his own motivation as a writer.

Two hundred seventy five pages into *Cogito* we realize conclusively what we have suspected throughout—that Richard Watson is not entirely a disinterested scholar. Contemplating Descartes’ journey to the far north, he makes a startling admission. Throughout *Cogito*, Watson often mixes both modes of life writing, autobiography and biography, foregrounding the scene of writing (and researching), intruding into his narration to speak to us in person in a colloquial style. (Watson is certainly the



first biographer of Descartes to use the word *yech*, or to state, in the context of the Cartesian debate about the souls of animals, “Jesus didn’t die for no stinking dogs!” or to relate a Morris Raphael Cohen Descartes joke with all the shtick of a borscht-belt veteran.) When he is about to go into elaborate detail about genealogical matters or family finances, Watson warns readers (whose attention he hopes to keep) that what follows will likely be boring. And, contrary to generic norms, the biographer’s wife Pat becomes an important character, his fellow climber on a perilous journey in the Alps in search of a Descartes locale, the skeptical spouse who questions his plan to reenact Descartes’ journey to Sweden, the woman who joined him on trips to Lourdes “just to see the show.” (“The procession of the cripples,” Watson observes, “is fabulous.”)

But up until chapter thirteen, Watson has not been *this* personal, *this* confessional. “Once you reach this stage of awareness in life,” he explains, thinking of the mental state in which Descartes found himself in the late 1640s,

you can never recover timelessness—not even in the most idyllic moments. Gone forever is that sense of vast and endless horizons that thoughtlessly framed your life before. The transition takes place at different times for different people. I am sixty-nine (having lived already more than a dozen years longer than Descartes), and it seems to me that sometime between forty-five and fifty, I began to calculate how much time I was spending doing this and that. I started eliminating projects that I had undertaken without thought in the past, before the change. There comes a time when one begins to worry whether there will be time, not just to do all the things one wants to do but time to finish even one last good one, like writing this book.

Historian and biographer Edmond Morris’ authorized biography of Ronald Reagan, *Dutch* (1999), provoked substantial controversy by including a fictional version of the author as a participant-observer in various events of our fortieth president’s life, events that occurred long before Morris had become Reagan’s official Boswell. How dare a biographer make use of an imaginary persona in a supposedly scholarly work, critics and pundits questioned.

The inextricable role of the fictional in the making and interpretation of autobiography has been recognized for decades, but biographers, we still hope to convince ourselves, are in no way akin to novelists. Watson, however, is not just a distinguished professor of philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis and a Cartesian scholar; he is also a novelist (*The Runner*, *Under Plowman’s Floor*, *Niagara*) and a nonfiction writer (*The Longest Cave*, *The Philosopher’s Diet*). So it should not surprise us that he makes use of all the tools at his disposal, even the biographically unorthodox, in order to tell his story.

The narrator of Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel *Nausea*, Roquentin, seeks to write a biography of the eighteenth-century figure M. Rollebon, but he finally abandons the project—for how can a man who finds his own existence unfathomable pretend to write the life of a specter out of history? If Richard Watson experienced Roquentin’s dilemma during the multidecade creation of *Cogito, Ergo Sum*, he certainly did not capitulate. With astonishing perseverance, rich historical imagination, and revelatory skepticism, he has succeeded in producing a life that dethrones both biographer and subject, making Richard Watson the biographer more human and Descartes the crank more real.

