

## **The death of Beelzebub**

Will Self

When it became time for Beelzebub to die, he settled down on a dung heap near to Babylon. This was formerly one of the exiled Israelites' houses – one that Nebuchadnezzar had had demolished. In the Book of Daniel it says that these houses were thereby rendered 'like unto dung heaps', but really there was no similitude, for after they'd battered down the mud-brick walls and stove in the wooden roofs and floors, the God-King's men dragged up truckles of ordure and deposited these on the defiant Jews' former dwellings.

It was thus the right place for the Lord of the Flies to die in two respects, for he was also known as the Lord of the Manor. Indeed, the Jews themselves, punning in Hebrew, had changed *zebul* into *zebub*, thereby transforming something august into something else, pestilential. Not that Beelzebub himself accepted this – any more than he did his paradoxical elevation in the Christian pantheon: 'It's not fair,' he'd kvetched to anyone who'd listen when he still had some vitality: 'I command the flies to leave the places and hence the people, I am the enemy of all disease – and now these yet more insipid and vindictive monotheists make of me the very epitome of evil.'

In his extremis these complaints rose in pitch and frequency until his whining penetrated to all four corners of the earth. And so they came: Beelzebub's subjects – hastening to attend him at the moment of his surcease; they came, first in little aerial dribs and drabs, then in twisting streams that finally coiled together into a great and humming vortex, the tip of which wavered over the demon's head. 'Get away from me!' he cried, and 'Shoo!', as he made feeble motions with his fearsome hands, the fingers of which were equipped with talons as sharp and as curved as scimitars.

The subjects paid him no mind – for hadn't he himself taught them to evade all but the swiftest of blows, directed by the keenest sight? Instead, at first tentatively but then with increasing temerity, they settled on his dry and leathery skin, then took short excursions into the thickets of hair on his chest and onto his head. Feeling their damp feet skittering and their proboscises wetly nuzzling, Beelzebub groaned and thrashed about. This made things worse, for once thickly-coated in the ancient dung he became yet more divine in their eyes. — Compound eyes that met his, as these worshippers swarmed about on his mighty and tortured face.

Before he finally expired, Beelzebub realised this: the Jews had been right – there was no dominion without decay, just as there's no civilisation without its discontents. And the puling, weakling Christians had also been right, for he had wielded great power, and by that fact alone he had – if inadvertently – become deeply corrupted. His subjects lapped up Beelzebub's pus and laid their eggs in his excreta: they understood the situation better than he – all life comes forth out of death, zips around for a while then collapses back down and subsides into its own rotting and generative origins.

It was, however, an understanding that was difficult to grasp fully even for them – and even now: for as Beelzebub’s whines became groans, and his groans began to rattle, as his foul breathing became more and more laboured, so they died like... Well, there was no similitude in this either: they died because they never did live for long, caught up as they were in their senseless and manic whirl. And still are, even now their Lord is dead. No wonder that their wisdom – such as it is – consists in the artful juxtaposition of the ephemeral and the eternal. No wonder they express this in codes and symbols – rebuses, chiasmuses, epistrophes and acrostics. No wonder they have recourse to numerology, not only to factor matter into the energy through which they mutate and multiply – but also to conceal the meaning of this power from themselves. For as Beelzebub once said: *I am legion...*

### **Will Self**

Will Self is the author of many novels and books of nonfiction, including *How the Dead Live*, which was shortlisted for the Whitbread Novel of the Year; *The Butt*, winner of the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for Comic Fiction; and *Umbrella*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. His latest work is *Will* (2019).

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

© Will Self