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Leonard, John. The Value of Milton

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résonner ce « silence éloquent » indispensable à l'intériorisation des paroles par le spectateur. Enfin Margaret Shewring montre comment des représentations contemporaines de *Hamlet* ont pu déjouer la censure et dénoncer, en creux, des régimes oppressifs (« “The rest is silence” : Productions of *Hamlet* and the Politics of Silence »). Un bel hommage au barde, dont on vient de fêter le 400^e anniversaire de la mort, en conclusion de ce riche volume !

VÉRNIQUE DUCHÉ

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Leonard, John.

The Value of Milton.

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xi, 161. ISBN 978-1-107-66479-1 (paperback) US\$26.99.

Making the case for one's scholarly specialty to a general readership is harder than it looks. For Milton, moreover, one might wonder if the subject has been at least temporarily exhausted, since a flurry of “why Milton matters” publications appeared around 2008, the quatercentenary of the poet's birth. John Leonard's *The Value of Milton*, happily, makes a fresh and compelling case, in a plain style that informs without pedantry and engages without condescension. The book mostly avoids its genre's usual drawbacks: platitude, inflated claims, obsolescent pop-culture references, strained attempts at “relevance.” This is a book that non-academics with an interest in poetry could read, and might even want to.

The “why Milton matters” conversation proposed various answers. For Nigel Smith, Milton is “the poet who placed liberty at the center of his vision” (Smith, *Is Milton Better than Shakespeare?*, xv) For Joseph Wittreich, Milton's poetry is “marked, not marred, by contradictions” (*How Milton Matters*, xxii) For Theo Hobson, Milton's “approach to Christianity holds the key to its contemporary renewal” (*Milton's Vision: The Birth of Christian Liberty*, xi) For Stanley Fish, “it's the poetry, stupid.” (*Milton Studies* 44, 10). Leonard declines to make a move in this game: “I have no grand overarching thesis as to ‘why Milton matters.’ Milton matters to different people for different reasons, some religious (or anti-religious), some political, and some purely literary” (ix).

The book devotes five of seven chapters to Milton's poetry, with emphases characteristic of Leonard's work: reception, classical references, diction, imagery, and poetic syntax.

How to handle scholarly debates is one of the challenges in writing for a broad audience. Avoid them, and you risk saying little but platitudes; plunge into them, and you risk losing your readers in the weeds. Leonard manages to clear paths through the weeds. In his chapter on Milton's political prose, for example, Leonard takes up a recent challenge by William Walker to the consensus view of Milton as a political revolutionary (*Antiformalist, Unrevolutionary, Illiberal Milton*). Walker argues that we should not consider Milton a revolutionary because he would have rejected the label. In Milton, as in seventeenth-century usage generally, "revolt" and "rebel" are used pejoratively to describe actions taken against legitimate authority. Leonard adds that in the period, "revolt" could mean "backslide" as well as "rebel"—and so Milton also uses it, as when in *On the Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) he describes Presbyterian moderates as "revolters from those principles" for which they lately fought against Charles I. "Walker is therefore right to insist that it is not a word Milton ever embraced, but the 'revolters' he deplored are often conservatives, not radicals. His usage is not consistent" (57). The broader issue is how much weight to place on arguments from self-description. That Milton would not have called himself a revolutionary doesn't mean that he wasn't one, by modern lights or in the eyes of his contemporaries. Leonard grants Walker's point that *Tenure* is not revolutionary as a matter of constitutional principle. The tract defends the execution of Charles Stuart, not the abolition of English monarchy. Milton argues that the Parliamentary forces had already effectively deposed Charles by taking up arms against him, so that his execution was not technically regicide but tyrannicide. But Leonard observes, rightly, that most of Milton's contemporaries would have dismissed this distinction as pettifoggery, nor indeed did Milton always observe it himself. This discussion is a model of clarity and efficiency. In five pages, Leonard intervenes in a live scholarly debate, models a close attention to the nuances of seventeenth-century English, illustrates the complexities and strains in Milton's reasoning, and conveys a sense of the liveliness of Milton studies.

One of Leonard's most significant scholarly contributions has been his revisionist view of the cosmology of *Paradise Lost*. A brief version is included in this book. Most critics have understood Milton's cosmology as poised uncertainly

between Ptolemy and Copernicus, either carefully noncommittal or confused. For Leonard it is neither, but something more speculative and unexpectedly modern. Milton's epic, he argues, posits an infinity of stars in space, with hints at the possibility of extraterrestrial life. Our universe, "this pendent world," appears from afar as a point within this infinite space; when Satan approaches it after his voyage from Hell, he finds it enclosed with a hard outer shell with a hole at the top. He alights on this shell, peers down through the opening, and then flies through. All readers of *Paradise Lost* know these passages; Leonard challenges us to revisit them without imported cosmological assumptions.

In books of this type, one has to draw connections between past and present. Among Milton's works, *Samson Agonistes* lends itself most readily to presentist reading, given its concern with religious violence. Leonard outlines the critical debates around *Samson* and terrorism with his usual efficiency, and comes down (correctly, for this reviewer) on the side of those who see Samson as heroic in Milton's eyes. He adds that we need not shrink from the elements of terror in the play: tragedy involves terror, and *Samson Agonistes* is a tragedy. With cheerful anachronism, Leonard reads the temptation scene in *Paradise Lost* in light of a 1922 cony-catching pamphlet, *Confessions of a Confidence Man: A Handbook for Suckers* by one Edward H. Smith. This may sound like mere whimsy, but Leonard matches Smith's six-step anatomy of a confidence trick to Milton's temptation scene more neatly than one might expect, and his broader point is well taken: in representing Satan as a master con artist and Eve a none-too-easy but finally gullible mark, Milton handles one of the many difficulties his subject presented: how to make Eve's fall credible.

Students in Milton courses at any level will find this book valuable. Professional scholars are not its main audience, but even Milton experts will profit from its informed assessments of longstanding critical debates, and from its brief statements of scholarly cases that Leonard has made at greater length elsewhere. Perhaps the ideal reader for this book would be a Milton-curious nonacademic: someone who enjoys poetry but has not yet found success with Milton, and who may be persuaded by Leonard to try again.

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