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Dennis Danielson

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**Leonard, John.**

***Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of Paradise Lost, 1667–1970. Vol. 1: Style and Genre. Vol. 2: Interpretative Issues.***

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xvii, 853 + 7 ill. ISBN 978-0-19-968180-8 (vol. 1) / 978-0-19-968181-5 (vol. 2) (hardcover) \$240.

John Leonard—surely the leading Miltonist of his generation—seems to possess a knack for writing brilliant books with dull titles. The title of this book, *Faithful Labourers*, conveys genuine and quite proper *pietas* toward the hundreds of worthy predecessors of those of us still trying to add something to the conversation about Milton's great biblical epic. But the subtitle, *A Reception History of Paradise Lost, 1667–1970*, although accurate, falls far short of signalling the vigour, insight, and fascination contained in this magnum opus—a book, aside from biographies and multi-handed projects, larger than any other single work of Milton criticism ever published.

And it *is* a single work: through-paginated across two volumes and consistently written in Leonard's unique, resonant voice. At the risk of contradicting myself, however, I want to suggest that ordinary readers (of which I am one)—rather than reading straight through a scholarly book as long as *Middlemarch* or *Anna Karenina*—might treat *Faithful Labourers* as a series of nine short monographs, each of them (except for the first) comprising from roughly fifty to just over a hundred pages, on the most important topics facing almost anyone who tackles *Paradise Lost* for the first or for the tenth time. Leonard's opening three chapters together engage the issue of Milton's style as discussed across three periods of criticism: 1667–1800, 1800–1900, and 1900–70. No summary can do justice to this overview, but its contested substance is hinted at by some of the chapters' subtitles: 1.3, “our language sunk under him”; 2.6, “God-gifted organ-voice of England”; and finally 3.6, “Routing the Leavisites.” Leonard's other short monographs (as I'm calling them) correspond respectively to his remaining individual chapters 4 to 11: “*Paradise Lost* and Epic,” “Epic Similes,” “Satan,” “God,” “Innocence,” “The Fall,” “Sex and the Sexes,” and “The Universe.”

The uses and pleasures of Leonard's nine monographs can be illustrated by chapter 5, on epic similes. This feature of Milton's style has long been a favourite of mine, both in private study and in the classroom. As someone educated partly under the influence of New Criticism, I enjoy the similes' compactness and conspicuous openness to close reading—without their distracting entirely

from the narrative flow or matter of the larger poem. I admit I feel so at home with them, moreover, that I've never at all systematically sought out others' readings. But Leonard offers a lively and magisterial account of just how hotly debated interpretations of the similes have been. Front and centre in this chapter is the first epic simile of *Paradise Lost*, the comparison of Satan to "that Sea-beast / *Leviathan*" (*PL* 1.200–01). The discussion comes complete with, among other delights, detailed philological and intertextual examination of the word "foundered" (as in the reference to the seafarer who mistakes *Leviathan* for an island, "The Pilot of some small night-founder'd Skiff; 1.204). However, it turns out that the dominant question regarding the similes overall is whether and to what extent they are homologous—whether they offer a set of true correspondences to, or a microcosm of, the larger narrative in which they are embedded, or, instead, whether their main function is leisurely distraction. Leonard begins with Joseph Addison (329), who in 1712 argued that Milton's similes are indeed digressive, though beautifully so—and traces the whole complex and intriguing debate through Voltaire, Bentley, De Quincey, and many others up to Masson, Raleigh, Whaler, Empson, Lewis, Lerner, and Ricks, concluding that by "1970 most critics had come to accept that Milton's similes are closely homologous [whereas] Addison's view, having been dominant for two and a half centuries, fell out of fashion" (387). It is hard to imagine Leonard's astute literary and intellectual history of the epic-simile debate being superseded, or to conceive of a richer archive of materials for anyone wishing to study that history or to survey its sources. The same, adjusted for topic, could be said of any of the monographs encompassed within this remarkable pair of volumes.

But Leonard truly saves the best for the last. His final chapter, "The Universe," not only reviews the history of discussions concerning the astronomy and cosmology of *Paradise Lost* but also decisively places a majority of them on the slagheap. He begins by acknowledging that even "the word 'universe' is inadequate, for there are two: the created universe of stars and planets and the boundless space outside" (a domain I have proposed be called Milton's Multiverse). Regarding the former, the sidereal universe, Leonard subjects the persistent meme of Milton's Ptolemaism to a singeing and sustained critique, showing how a mere three lines of *Paradise Lost* "come up again and again in arguments for Milton's Ptolemaic conformity" (705)—lines routinely interpreted with disregard for their context or irony. The relevant scene is the parodic "Paradise of Fools" account, in which the superstitious fools themselves hope,

on the strength of the clerical costumes they wear, to rise from their deathbeds into heaven “disguised” (3.480):

They pass the planets seven, and pass the fixed,  
And that crystalline sphere whose balance weighs  
The trepidation talked, and that first moved. (3.481–83)

Leonard’s conclusion concerning these lines, which do incorporate Ptolemaic vocabulary, is best summed up by the Jonathan Richardsons (father and son), whose perceptive comments Leonard reintroduces into the Miltonic conversation. “It is to be Observed Here,” they wrote in 1734,

that this Crystalline Sphere, this *Primum Mobile*, are no more parts of *Milton’s* System of the new Creation than the Wicket Gate in the next line; That must be Sought for in the short account of it at the Latter end of This Book and the Beginning of the Seventh. He very Poetically says These were Some of the Reveries of the Philosophers and Astronomers, *Quaint Opinions* to be Laught at, as VIII. 78. he says This by flinging them into the Paradise of Fools. (quoted on p. 707)

I cite the Richardsons in a review of Leonard in order to illustrate Leonard’s method, which is not simply to impose his own interpretations on the critical tradition but to mine that tradition’s resources for the gold it contains, particularly when the ore has long lain buried beneath heaps of dross. And in this case what emerges is “a simple, startling truth: there are no spheres in *Paradise Lost*” (709).

*Faithful Labourers*, for all its energy and comprehensiveness, cannot of course cart away all the dross, especially given that the book’s *terminus ad quem* is 1970. Certainly the meme of Milton’s Ptolemaism is still with us and still requires much carting away. Fortunately, Leonard promises yet further faithful labour of the sort here so admirably performed: “a sequel that will cover the last three decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the new millennium” (x). Even without a sequel, however, this pair of volumes will stand as a towering monument in the landscape of Milton studies.

DENNIS DANIELSON

University of British Columbia