

Gábor Ittzés and Miklós Péti, eds. *Milton Through the Centuries*. Budapest: Károli Gáspár U of the Reformed Church in Hungary and L'Harmattan, 2012. 337 pages.

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In September 2008, colleagues at Károli Gáspár University successfully hosted a significant international conference titled “Milton Through the Centuries” in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the birth of John Milton. It is noteworthy that this event, which drew distinguished scholars from twelve nations and three continents, was one of only two international conferences convened in Europe in Milton’s jubilee year. The purpose of the conference was to enliven Hungarian Milton scholarship by tracing for the interested public the history of “the Milton impact,” that is, “how Milton was received, reproduced, or recreated throughout the centuries” (vii). The eponymous collection of the conference proceedings appeared in 2012. Its editors, both contributors themselves, view the volume as “represent[ing] a rough cross-section of the diversity of approaches at the ... conference” (ix) with an admitted focus on Milton’s poetic oeuvre and its reception over the centuries.

The title of the volume serves also as its organizing principle, as the papers are divided into two categories under the headings of “Milton” and “Through the Centuries” respectively. It is here that my single contention lies. Namely, that the two somewhat vaguely titled units could have been further subdivided to better show the connections between the papers and highlight the most prevalent scholarly trends.

The first section, consisting of twelve papers, “presents contributions with ... [an] interest in general interpretive problems of Milton’s poetry” (ix). It begins with two studies on *Paradise Regained*. In his paper “Reason’s Martyrs: Poetry and Belief in *Paradise Regain’d (...)* to which is added *Samson Agonistes*,” Marshall Grossman argues that the two briefer epics were not randomly yoked together in Milton’s 1671 volume, but rather can and should be read as two parts of a single work featuring poetry and belief as central themes. Grossman draws an apt typological parallel between Samson and Jesus and their inward journeys, processes of reasoning about God with the help of which they “pursue union with the divine.” For Milton, argues Grossman, “poetry is a key mode for making visible that about which we reason” (4). Joseph A. Wittreich, in “Milton after Four Centuries: *Paradise Regain’d* as a Mental Transport,” writes approvingly of the nineteenth-century decision to publish *Paradise Lost* with *Paradise Regain’d* and argues that while in the former, Paradise leaves mankind, in the latter, Paradise returns to humanity. The briefer epic, Wittreich also lyrically contends, “may be read anew as the anatomy of a moment stretched out in time” and reminds readers

of the “urgency of the ‘now’” in the process of regaining Paradise (31). The two papers on *Paradise Regain’d* are followed by Gábor Ittzés’ thorough, refreshing, and amply illustrated account of the structure of Milton’s universe. Ittzés, in his study “The Structure of Milton’s Universe: The Shape and Unity of the World in *Paradise Lost*” explores heaven and hell, chaos and cosmos, with a special emphasis on “borderline areas” (51) such as hell’s gate or heaven’s wall, where much of the action takes place. Ittzés invokes the curious world of M. C. Escher to give his readers a better idea of the subjectivity or relativity of Miltonian spaces and mentions the tantalizing possibility of a similar exploration of time in Milton’s great epic. The remaining papers in the section explore *Paradise Lost* from various intellectual perspectives including the theological, phenomenological, and political. Mary Fenton, in her theologically based study with the enigmatic title “Interrupting Joy” takes as the basis of her paper Satan’s remark in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost* that he wishes to “interrupt his [God’s] joy” (370) and argues that far from being a second-rate enterprise, this is actually a violent and cataclysmic scheme to break or tear apart (*inter+rumpere*) the very essence of God, his love and joy. Contrasting the joy of God, which “clearly stands at the top of a hierarchy of passions” (73) with the happiness of man, which “has its etymological roots in chance and fortune, in hap” (75), Fenton interprets all of *Paradise Lost*, indeed all of human life, as an unceasing yearning and struggle for complete joy and union with God. Dávid Levente Palatinus, in “‘Before Mine eyes all real’: Body, Language, and the Phenomenology of Sensation,” offers a philosophical reading of *Paradise Lost*, or rather, as he puts it, “an attempt to think about the concepts of language and body *alongside* Milton, in *Paradise Lost*” (78). He argues—poignantly if we consider Milton’s blindness—that “in the poem the optical faculties emerge as the primary mediators and determinants of experience, knowledge, and power” and that the story of the Fall, as detailed in the poem, may be interpreted as a “clash between the spectator and that which is looked at... between the normative and corporeal uses of language” (79). Gilles Sambras in his politically-oriented contribution “‘Die he or justice must’: God’s Limited Monarchy in *Paradise Lost*” holds up the fascinating and novel possibility that the God of Milton’s epic is not the absolute monarch that readers have assumed him to be—and such readings, he adds, have caused quite a bit of tension in the minds of scholars attempting to harmonize a staunchly Republican Milton with his evident support of the absolute monarchy of Heaven in his epic. Sambras reaches back to Aristotle to define an absolute monarch as someone who is absolved of, or unbound by law, and argues that the God of *Paradise Lost* is no such ruler. God himself is limited, however, by the free will of the angels and of mankind, which is “fundamentally the ability to choose (between good and evil, between obedience and transgression)” (99). Robert Erle Barham in “Persuasion in *Paradise Lost*” offers a provocative rhetorical reading of the poem through the lens of eloquence. He argues that while the Renaissance handbooks of rhetoric known to Milton linked integrity with eloquence and were profoundly sure of the necessary triumph of eloquence, in Milton’s epic “it is principally Satan who eloquently persuades” and that the conscious use of rhetorical tropes in the poem “challenges Renaissance rhetorical theory with successful infernal rhetoricians and ineffective pious ones” (115). Barham’s brief discussion of Satan as a failed rhetorician in *Paradise Regain’d* serves as a promising parallel that might be fleshed out in a future essay.

The second section, “Through the Centuries,” features thirteen papers “addressing the historical, transnational, and transdisciplinary reception of Milton’s poetry” including Milton’s afterlife in Hungary and Spain, his place in the European literary and philosophical traditions, and Milton’s relationship with and impact on the visual arts. Ágnes Péter’s essay “Milton in the Hungarian Cultural Memory: Two Case Studies” traces the progress of Milton’s works and personality across the canvas of Hungarian culture. Dividing the story of Milton’s influence into three phases, she writes of the first (belated) translations into Hungarian in the late eighteenth century by György Bessenyei, key figure of the Hungarian Enlightenment, of Bishop László Ravasz’ powerful introduction to the 1930 publication of the Hungarian translation of *Paradise Lost* by Franklin Publishing House, and of Antal Szerb’s four-and-a-half page reflections on Milton’s poetry in his *History of World Literature*. Péter contends that while Bishop Ravasz read Milton with the aim of upholding an anachronistic social order, Antal Szerb approached *Paradise Lost* in a forward-looking way, using an account of a crisis past to find solutions and hope amidst the crises of the present. In his essay placing Milton within the European literary tradition (“‘Conceived altogether in Homer’s spirit’: Milton’s Transformation of an Iliadic Type-Scene”), Miklós Péti explores two powerful scenes from *Paradise Lost*, of Satan and of Christ respectively as they gaze upon chaos, contending that the two scenes are firmly rooted in the Homeric (Iliadic) tradition from whence they draw some of their power and influence. Although the influence of Virgil’s images of the underworld in the *Aeneid* on Milton’s descriptions of hell has long been known, in Virgil’s account, Aeneas and the Sybil’s journey into Tartarus is merely narrated by the prophetess; in Homer’s (and Milton’s) epic, however, the “passage from the brink of chaos to the created world” (214) is part of the main plot and is viewed from the vantage of a spectator who gazes into the hazy distance over a dark deep. It is in this sense that Péti contends he has found two new scenes to be “conceived [as Addison put it] altogether in Homer’s spirit” (215). Following some more essays on Milton’s place in the European literary and philosophical tradition, the second section closes with four essays addressing either the effect of the visual arts on Milton, or the impact of the poet on visual representation. Anna Zsófia Kovács in “Milton Dictating to his Daughters: Varieties on a Theme from Füssli to Munkácsy” writes first of the popularity of portraits of Milton’s private life, which were first published within volumes of his works but later came to inhabit large canvasses and to exist independently of publications of Milton’s oeuvre. Kovács focuses on the most popular scene of Milton dictating to his daughters and evaluates the possibility of such an event having taken place. She notes that despite its likely fictional nature, the scene has been immensely popular among fine artists both in England and on the Continent. After analyzing in detail a number of paintings of the scene (by Johann Heinrich Füssli, Moses Haughton, Jr., George Romney, and Jules Laure respectively), Kovács concludes with a contemplation of Munkácsy’s masterpiece, explores the reasons for its unparalleled success and proposes the possibility that Munkácsy, like Milton, functioned as a “great Inhibitor” to artists after him who toyed with the idea of interpreting a grand theme (335).

The volume as a whole is a handsome, artful piece. The twelve black and white figures and twenty lavish color plates emphatically underline Milton’s powerful imaginative impact on the visual arts. The ennobling effect that a great subject has on

one who attempts it can be felt throughout the volume, as can a non-sectarian, sensitive, intelligent, and unashamed Christian undercurrent. All of the fine essays, most readily Ágnes Péter's and Anna Zsófia Kovács's perhaps (by nature of their topics), may be said to have contributed to the initial goal of the 2008 conference to inspire Hungarian scholars and general readers to embrace and wrestle with the Miltonic oeuvre. In looking over the essays I have chosen to highlight, I have discovered that my instinct has been (subconsciously, it seems) to select papers that may prove useful in the baffling but unflagging effort to introduce Hungarian undergraduate students of English literature to Milton. It is notoriously difficult to teach Milton in the twenty-first century, and this difficulty is compounded when one's students are second-language learners of English. It is therefore heartening to meet with a volume of papers on Milton that—besides being an example of top-notch scholarship—also features essays with sufficient breadth and clarity to lure that most skittish of creatures, the undergraduate student of English literature, into the lush forest of delight that is the Miltonic oeuvre.