

plication in the nearly identical sounds of 'adore' and 'for.' The entire line breathes sameness at the same time that it insists on the perspicuousness of a distinction" (485).

This is a simple case of Milton's using balance and antithesis to set forth his meaning. The fact that it took such a torturous analysis of Milton's poetics to find such "sameness" shakes one's confidence in the reading. However, if, following Derrida, we forsake the obvious and deconstruct the author's intentions, we can then introduce difficulties in "perspicuous" texts and mystify ourselves to the point where we ask pointless questions like "What then is the line saying?" (485).

In the process of documenting this inactivity and unverifiability in Milton, Fish takes us through Milton's *Apology against a Pamphlet, Areopagitica, Artis Logica, Christian Doctrine, Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, Eikonoklastes, Of Education, Of Prelaticall Episcopacy, Tetrachordon, The Likeliest Meanes, The Readie and Easie Way, The Reason of Church Government, "At A Solemn Music," Comus, Nativity Ode, Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, and Samson Agonistes*—a thorough, unified presentation of a Milton many will find unpalatable. Ironically, Fish's description of *Paradise Lost* applies equally to his own work: "As many have observed, this is a poem [book] one cannot read without being provoked to argue back. . . . the more it attempts to fill every nook and cranny—the more energetically will those at whom it is directed struggle to escape it" (508).

Victoria Silver. *Imperfect Sense: The Predicament of Milton's Irony*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. xiv + 409 pp. \$49.50. Review by DAVID V. URBAN, OKLAHOMA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY.

In this ambitious work, Victoria Silver seeks to demonstrate "the calculated presence of irony" in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (ix), paying particular attention to its manifestation in Milton's God. In addressing this subject, Silver draws heavily upon Old Testament theologian Gerhard van Rad, the philosophers

Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, and the writings of Luther and Calvin, who, in Silver's words, emphasize that "the hidden God's difference from us is consummate and ineffable" (x). Connecting these Reformation theologians' emphasis on the hidden God to Milton's writings, she "argue[s] that it is this abiding, sometimes anguishing, distinction between creator and creature which fosters the apparent eccentricities of *Paradise Lost*." In doing so, Silver hopes that this distinction will explain "those qualities"—both in Milton's writing and in Milton himself—"which continue to perplex and divide the poem's readers." The result is a brilliant yet often obscure study that sheds considerable fresh insight on the subject of Milton's God.

Silver's introductory chapter addresses the uneasy responses readers have had to Milton's attempt to "justify the ways of God to men." Here, she discusses William Empson, whose *Milton's God* she acknowledges as a seminal influence, as well as Samuel Johnson, the first critic "to try to reconcile readerly disdain with consummate artistry" (8). Noting that Milton's readers tend to relate Milton himself to Milton's God, Silver suggests that Milton's deliberate use of irony brings about not only two Miltons, but also two Gods in Milton's epic. Asserting that "irony and allegory can express the human difficulties of meaning without purporting to resolve them by contradiction or hermetica" (14), Silver observes that both Wittgenstein and Luther hold that the incoherence found in language is the fault of language's "interpreters, who are inclined to refuse any order of meaning that conflicts with their own conceptual customs, no matter the human suffering that ensues" (23). Luther's own conversion is credited to his new understanding of grammar, an understanding that freed him from previous angst-ridden notions of a righteous God who judged without mercy. In his new understanding of the phrase "righteousness of God," Luther departs neither from the text of Romans nor its God, but rather his "interpretive egoism" (24). For Luther, God's "hiddenness" signals "the limits of human understanding" (26), and God can only be understood within the confines of these limits. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of Job, who, like

the Satan of *Paradise Lost*, was (before his final submission) guilty “of mistaking the incommensurable in God for the unjust, and his inscrutable will for an eternal tyranny” (43).

In her second chapter, “Milton’s God,” Silver outlines the “peculiar hiddenness of the reformers’ God” as a vehicle both to explain her notion of Milton’s two Gods and to propose “a solution” to the “strangely kindred conflicts” for readers of *Paradise Lost* (44). While Silver spends the vast majority of the chapter discussing Calvin and Luther’s writings concerning the hidden God, she does, early on, connect their ideas to Milton’s own presentation of the hidden God in his epic. Silver contends that Milton must argue a “veil of ignorance” that has to do simply and absolutely with the hidden God whose ways he sets out to make right with humanity. He must talk about God as though he knew deity in some sufficient shape or form . . . as though there were some clear and determinate correlation between God’s intent and Milton’s account of it, when theologically there can be neither in his view . . . as Judeo-Christian scripture had done long before, Milton must propose a purely functional parity in his representation between things human and divine that would allow for our experience and understanding of deity, even as this representation must somehow acknowledge the incalculable differences between what it says about God and what deity says about itself. (48)

Silver develops this idea in chapter three, “Milton’s Text,” which illustrates the above “ironical mode of revelation” (xii) by means of Milton’s polemical and doctrinal writings. His prose writings show his insistence that disputed theological matters need to be decided by the biblical text itself, claiming that attempts to reconcile biblical incongruities apart from the text amount to artificial impositions that “seek to bring the hidden God into conformity with extra-scriptural ideas of truth and conformity” (108).

Chapter four, “Milton’s Speaker,” discusses the irony involved in Milton’s autobiographical proems. These proems, which introduce Milton’s grand scheme of the justification of God, exchange the typical poetical invocation for the intense drama of Lutheran spiritual angst, because “the speaker’s desire for intimacy

with the divine arises precisely from his sense of God's remoteness" amidst his various physical and spiritual afflictions (199). It is profoundly ironic that the very speaker who attempts to "justify the ways of God to men" is himself a figure longing for justice. As Silver notes, "it is one thing to justify God's ways from a (false) position of God's certainty, as those readers who subscribe to the notion of Milton's rationalism suppose for him. But it is something else altogether to attempt this from the position of felt injustice and suffering in which Milton's proems place his speaker" (206). The inexplicable disparity inherent in a representative of human suffering seeking to justify God again challenges us to incorporate the hiddenness of God into our understanding of deity.

"Milton's Devil," Silver's strongest chapter, observes that the initially sympathetic character of Satan is exposed as suspect when we recognize, by the appearance of Sin and Death, the thoroughly allegorical nature of his character. It turns out that all along he has been deluded by "the presumption of correspondence . . . first into comparing and likening himself to God, and then into defying and competing with this figure" (221). As Silver demonstrates by means of Luther and Milton's respective discussions of the fourth chapter of Galatians, the allegory which corresponds to a given appearance is for Milton an expression of the law, not the gospel. The supreme irony of all this, however, is that it would be an equal mistake to associate the figure of the Father with the truth of deity. We succumb to such a belief because the poem's argument is conducted by means of these apparent vagaries of figuration:

Satan's graphic splendor and graphic degeneracy, the Father's alternately prosaic and despicable figure, the erratic and grotesque intrusion of allegory on the profundities of the Genesis myth . . . [Milton] no more wants us to believe in the mimetic integrity of his figures than he wants us to suppose that heaven and hell are as he describes them. Yet this is just what we do when . . . we propose to see deity or "the numinous" imaged in the Father, as against one aspect of our delimited, mediated, ironical knowledge of the divine, which the figuration of *Paradise Lost* expresses. (223-24)

"Milton's Eden," Silver's concluding chapter, examines how Adam and Eve bear the image of God, noting that this image signifies both God's special covenant with his creations as well as "the infinite dimension of difference between divine and human being, the creator and creature, which obliges us to speak figuratively in the first place" (289).

Silver's study is especially valuable for the innovative yet carefully argued manner in which it encourages us to read Milton's text from a genuinely new perspective, one that affects not only how we will perceive Milton's God but every aspect of creation that relates to him. Her extensive use of Luther and Calvin enables her to place her argument within the rubric of an established theological tradition leading up to Milton, something that safeguards her from charges of reckless innovation; although it could be argued that she overstates her case at points, I found her connections between Luther and Milton to be genuinely insightful, shedding new light on Milton's thought and character. Silver's book demonstrates real brilliance, and she works intelligently with writings that cut across several academic disciplines. The substance of her argument, however, is often obfuscated amidst the layered complexity of her material. Silver would have done her readers a favor had she introduced more clearly her essential argument for each particular section. Nonetheless, this book is deserving of the concentrated effort it requires. We also may note that Silver almost gives the impression that readers of *Paradise Lost* have been uniformly negative towards Milton's depiction of deity; some mitigating reference to Dennis Danielson's *Milton's Good God* would have been appropriate. That aside, Silver's reading of Milton's God is an important one indeed, and I expect *Imperfect Sense* to have considerable influence on Milton studies in the years ahead.