

have completed the *Variorum Commentary* on *'Paradise Lost,'* we will turn to an even more ambitious project, updating the entire *Variorum Commentary . . .*" (xv). In the same passage from the *PL* 4 "Preface" Klemp substitutes the word "hope" for "will": "we hope to turn to an even more ambitious project" (xv). Gone is the assurance of an update; but again, even if an update happens it will cover only from 1970 to 2000. Furthermore, if the process of updating is "an even more ambitious project"—and I believe it must be—it will take quite a long time to finish this project, since it cannot begin until about 2020. Volumes 3 and 5 of the *Milton Variorum*, when completed and placed on the library book shelf, will disappoint because the editors involved, all Miltonists, declined to present the best possible selection of Milton scholarship.

Feisal G. Mohamed. *Milton and the Post-Secular Present: Ethics, Politics, Terrorism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. + 167 pp. \$21.95.
Review by DANIEL ELLIS, ST. BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY.

In *Milton and the Post-Secular Present*, Feisal G. Mohamed takes on two challenges, one involving the ethical practice of reading and one involving the historiography of literary-critical work. As his title promises, Mohamed examines Milton's writings alongside late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century theory and criticism concerned with the concept of post-secularism. Mohamed attempts to do so in a manner that is methodologically sound—neither presentist nor too narrowly historicist—in order to argue that reading literature can help overcome threats to both individual liberty and the greater social good when religious belief conflicts with secular society.

While the book is organized into five chapters, with a brief introduction and epilogue, several of the chapters are closely connected in theme, so that the book has three movements: chapters one and two examine reading and writing practices as they relate to a concept of truth; chapter three considers the role of truth in the relationship between secular government and religious belief; while chapters four and five take on the topic of religious violence as a response to secular society. Chapters one and two examine Milton's use of plain style in

Paradise Lost and his arguments for unlicensed printing in *Areopagitica*. Plain style in *Paradise Lost*, associated inevitably with the character of The Father, is employed to indicate a transcendent truth; *Areopagitica* in turn asserts the right to freely publish this truth, although it does so under the guise, as Mohamed argues, of a more widespread liberty of the press, a liberty it does not, in the end, endorse. As the example of *Areopagitica* suggests, a transcendent truth presents ethical and political problems because it is not universally accessible: if a system of ethics, government, or criticism is founded on such a truth, divine or otherwise, then those who do not accept or do not have access to this truth are in a position to be excluded, confused, or, in the worst case, become oppressed or subjected to violence. Alongside this discussion, Mohamed presents late twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical efforts to rectify these problems. In the case of Jacques Derrida, among others, this effort entails a rejection of the possibility of such a truth; in the case of Alain Badiou, it entails the embrace of such a truth but without the incumbent political and ecclesiastical structures generally attendant upon such a truth. In either case, these efforts most often fail, and usually because, as with Milton's only apparent broad-mindedness, they conceal their own privileged truths.

Through a consideration of Milton's *Of Reformation* (1641) and *A Treatise of Civil Power* (1659), chapter three then examines the way this truth and these practices manifest themselves in statecraft. The chapter charts out a movement in Milton's thought on the relationship between government and the individual conscience: he supports an activist religious government in the earlier tract, but in the later tract supports a legal order that separates religion from state legalistic regulation altogether. Mohamed builds a literary-historical context here by drawing on Quaker pamphleteers, whose arguments for freedom of conscience have echoes in Milton's later tract. Then, through close reading of Milton's tracts, Mohamed suggests that despite the apparent call for freedom of conscience, Milton's concern for liberty of conscience is restricted to, like his arguments about books, a particular kind of conscience. Mohamed thus derives a defining problem for a post-secular age, which is how to build a community not out of non-believers, but out of those who believe differently, a community that does not simply push aside all difference in the service of the

state. Ideally, such a community would value the critical power that religion can bring to the world, while at the same time not allowing any one belief system to oppress other such systems. Mohamed then considers modern discussion of the same problem, notably by Jürgen Habermas, who most completely, though not unproblematically, argues for the critical value of a position that stands outside the state, and the need to accommodate such positions. However, this outside critical perspective, allowed by religious belief that transcends civil society, can be destructive as well as productive.

Chapters four and five thus consider the threat of religious violence in the post-secular age. Chapter four opens with a discussion of John Carey's argument about *Samson Agonistes*, written for the *Times Literary Supplement* for the one-year anniversary of 9/11. Carey asserts that if Milton's poem justifies Samson's violent destruction of his Philistine enemies, then we must reject the poem. Critics, including Carey, thus attempt to cast doubt on that justification. Mohamed examines these critics alongside the philosophy of John Milbank, who envisions a personal Christian ethics that can transcend the vagaries—and violences—of an historical Christian church. But Mohamed also offers a careful reading of *Samson Agonistes*, along with biblical texts and texts by contemporary writers such as Henry Lawrence and Henry Vane, to argue that Milton did indeed sanction divinely directed religious violence. Mohamed then goes on to examine how the critical history that attempts to mitigate this endorsement, often by applying highly aestheticized interpretations, only ends up masking the violent and dehumanizing thought patterns that underpin an (ultimately unjust) secular state. For Mohamed, producing destabilizing readings does not necessarily destabilize unjust structures—it often simply masks them further. It is more productive to confront horrifyingly problematic texts such as *Samson Agonistes* with eyes wide open, but also with an effort to practice the kind of reading that allows us to see into other subjectivities, even if we must ultimately reject them.

Despite Mohamed's careful concern for historicist method, some of the historical contexts could be built more thoroughly. For example, the discussion of Milton's plain style forms a central part of Mohamed's argument in several chapters. The relationship of style to holy truth

was the subject of a rich discussion of theory and practice for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers, discussions with which Milton was doubtless aware. But the engagement of those discussions here is mainly limited to a citation of Perry Miller and a two-page discussion of Cicero. This approach leaves a very complex intellectual problem of the period, one that directly impinges on Mohamed's argument, largely unexplored. Additionally, while Mohamed's juxtaposition of Milton's texts with recent theorists and critics does produce a book that largely avoids the pitfalls of both new historicism and presentism, his methodology also generates a perhaps unacknowledged question. For Mohamed, writers in all ages (or at least these two ages, the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries) posit timeless, transcendent truths. But these truths are always in fact historically contingent, and the initial drive to posit them ultimately emerges out of self-interest, whether this self-interest is consciously acknowledged or not. Thus Mohamed's work implies that while we ought to be suspicious of the existence of timeless, transcendent truths, we can take for granted that there are, in effect, timeless, transcendent lies. This actually seems a productive assumption with which to undertake this sort of project—but the book might have gained had Mohamed been positioned to more fully acknowledge this curious paradox. Nevertheless, this book offers profound insights into modern critical theories and the difficulties of those theories. At the same time, it provides genuinely new interpretations of some key Milton texts, which allow for real insights into the work Milton's writing was doing in the seventeenth century, and the kind of work it does today.

Andrew McRae. *Literature and Domestic Travel in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xi + 247 pp. + 9 illus. \$90.00. Review by M.G. AUNE, CALIFORNIA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

The work of Andrew McRae, professor of English at the University of Exeter demonstrates a consistent interest in the intersections of literature and history. His first book, *God Speed the Plough* (Cambridge