

Stanley Fish. *How Milton Works*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001. 616 pp. \$35.00. Review by JOHN MULRYAN, ST. BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY.

Several years ago, when I was preparing a revised draft of an article on Mikhail Bakhtin and Milton for *Milton Studies*, one of the readers suggested that I omit a section in which I critiqued F. R. Leavis's claim that Milton's English was out of the colloquial mainstream and markedly inferior to the language of Donne and Shakespeare. The reader argued that the issue had been resolved in Milton's favor, and Leavis was no longer taken seriously by Miltonists. I demurred, responding that many people still held this view of Milton (including some of my students) and that the argument was quiescent, but not dead. Well here it is again, in Stanley Fish's second major book on Milton, along with Leavis's second charge that Milton was obsessively single-minded: "More than sixty-five years ago, F. R. Leavis charged Milton with two crimes of which he has never been, and should not be, acquitted. The first charge is that his style does not sufficiently register the diversity and complexity of human life, especially in comparison with the styles of Donne and Shakespeare. The second charge is that he has an excess of character, by which Leavis means that he is 'disastrously single-minded and simple minded, . . . reveal[ing] everywhere a dominating sense of righteousness and a complete incapacity to question or explore its significance and conditions'" (478). The language suggests that Milton is on trial here, but Fish lets him off with a suspended sentence because his idiosyncratic irascibility and verbal quirkiness enable Milton to speak with the psychological certainty of one who argues from an assured faith, present at the inner core of his being and impervious to external arguments. For as Fish states earlier, for Milton "the true meaning can be discerned only by the heart and mind already informed by it" (85). Or as T. S. Eliot would (more sardonically) put it: "One . . . on whom assurance sits / As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire" (*The Waste Land* 233-34). Both Leavis and Fish are engaged in a circular argument here: if Milton has a unique, unmistakable po-

etic voice, “a voice so distinctive that no one could mistake it” (7), then it must be recognizable as Milton and only Milton—hence an ‘excess of character’ and a ‘single-minded’ approach to his task.

Fish is an engagingly scrappy stylist, and this book is an unmitigated pleasure to read. However, I do not find its thesis convincing—namely that Milton is caught in a dilemma: his writing asserts that obedience to God, from whom all things flow, is the highest virtue, while at the same time this certainty makes all action pointless, even the act of writing divine poetry. Thus “Milton wants at once to celebrate humility and to be celebrated as the celebrator of humility. He is the poet of submission and corporate identity (“Mee hung’ring . . . to do my Father’s will” [PR II.259]) and he is also the poet who would write something the world will not willingly let die” (7). Again, when the Son in *Paradise Regained* speculates that John the Baptist’s baptism “was from above” [I.274], “His belief is not supported by evidence, but constitutes evidence; he does not come and then believe; he believes and then he comes” (64). Since belief is by definition not supported by evidence, and all we have is our belief, we can never be sure we are acting properly or in accordance with God’s will. Thus there is no point in doing anything (chapter 9), saying anything, (chapter ten), plotting out one’s life or story (chapter 11), attempting to understand anything (chapter 12), or attempting to be understood (chapter 13). This is, to say the least, a reductive way of reading Milton’s work.

This, in my view, is “how Fish works.” Milton’s poems and prose compositions were, for the most part, fortunate enough to have escaped the scrutiny of the New Critics, who searched for more ambiguous, ironic fare in Donne and the other metaphysicals, without regard to the historical meanings contained therein. But Fish, now armed with both the New Criticism and Jacques Derrida, searches for ambiguity and confusion in Milton. Take, for example, his gloss on the line “And Devils to adore for Deities” (*Paradise Lost* I.373): “The supposed great opposites [devils and deities] are linked together by alliteration, assonance, and final consonant; and these two verbal mirror images themselves frame an internal du-

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