

Elizabeth Sauer, ed. *Milton and the Climates of Reading: Essays by Balachandra Rajan*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. xii + 192 pp. \$45.00. Review by JOHN MULRYAN, ST. BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY.

This book contains nine essays by the celebrated Miltonist Balachandra Rajan, flanked by an introductory essay by the editor and an afterword by Joseph A. Wittreich, Jr. Through the selection of these essays from sixty years (1945-2005) of Rajan scholarship, “this book undertakes the daunting literary, cultural, and political work of developing a narrative of Milton criticism over the past sixty years” (3). This is the stated goal, but in fact *Milton and the Climates of Reading* focuses on Rajan’s “efforts at connecting Milton to our contemporary preoccupations” (4), most recently globalization and the war on terror.

Reading Rajan’s prose reminds me of a complaint registered by one of my philosophy teachers at college; he said that English majors had an unfair advantage in essay examinations, because they could write better than anyone else and teachers were so relieved to read an aesthetically pleasing essay that they assumed the arguments were sound. Rajan’s elegant style (marked by Ciceronian periods, metaphor, euphony, clarity, allusion, irony, and wit) is a delight to read; however, only those who have had the privilege of hearing him speak in person can fully appreciate what a marvelous instrument it is. At times the “Rajanic” voice almost drowns out the Miltonic, as critic vies with author for stylistic supremacy. While a number of these essays comment on the dialogic nature of Milton’s discourse, Rajan’s “answerable style” is an even more impressive response to Milton’s work than the dialogic structures within the poems themselves.

A case in point is the first essay, “Osiris and Urania.” Rajan plucks the myths of Osiris and Urania from the classical past and reshapes them as metaphors for the difficulty of Milton’s work and the divine inspiration essential to its completion. Just as Isis had to reassemble the dismembered parts of her brother-husband Osiris and make them into a coherent whole, so the poet must search through the fragments of reality to create a coherent synthesis of events and themes. “The spirit which brooded over the creation [Urania] must now be importuned to brood over what might otherwise be the chaos of the poem” (26). Thus “the Osirist principle of the search” is united with “the Urania principle of vision” (28).

The second essay, “The Poetics of Heresy,” focuses on the unique status of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as both a secular poem and a commentary on the sacred text of the Bible. Thus in his “heretical” way, Milton engages in a dialogue with his readers that reshapes both author and poem. “Indisputably, the poet writes the poem but major poems sometimes rewrite their authors . . . Milton’s poem is written for a contemporary audience in a language as universal as possible, in the sense that it is accessible to more than one reading of the primary and initiating text” (43).

The third essay, “Surprised by a Strange Language: Defamiliarizing *Paradise Lost*,” alludes to Samuel Johnson’s warning that the reader, on first encountering *Paradise Lost*, will be confronted with a new language. But it also focuses on the dialogic nature of the poem (cf. Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva), a structure that opens up the poem to a variety of interpretations, but also threatens its stability: “If the poem’s propositional nucleus is potentially dialogic and if its central engagement of primary genres as well as its only human relationship is also subject to dialogic stresses, we are looking at a work that is much more open, much more the chronicle of its own self-making than previous readings of it tend to suggest. We are also looking at a troubled poem. . .” (62). The fissure that creates this distress is the one that forms between the competing genres of epic and drama, creating a tension that threatens to split the poem apart.

The fourth essay, “Milton Encompassed,” wittily explores the tension between received wisdom and new ideas in “the Milton community” through the metaphor of the compass: “The fixed foot of the compass stabilises the world of Milton scholarship while the errant foot takes what is possible into that world’s circumference” (65).

Essays five (“Banyan Trees and Fig Leaves: Some Thoughts on Milton’s India”) and six (“The Imperial Temptation”) explore Milton’s uneasy relationship to imperialism. “Banyan Trees” refutes the myth that commerce can be separated from imperialism, while also establishing that not even Milton himself could distinguish “the sanctified from the demonic uses of imperialism” (76). “The Imperial Temptation” points up the irony that anti-imperial Milton is himself the author of the most imperialistic poem in the canon: “Despite his safeguarding manoeuvres, Milton contributes considerably to the mainstream of imperial discourse. . . . But the epic voice in *Paradise Lost* is also the voice of the imperial imagination, of sumptuous orchestration, of

metaphorical opulence, the encyclopaedic, outreaching, all-encompassing voice, the voice of the unifying imperative. No one articulates this voice more resplendently than Milton; and no one struggles against it more insistently” (102, 108). He experiences similar difficulties in *Paradise Regained*. While he succeeds in “reducing Satan to a salesman of empires,” and “exposes the gaudiness of empire,” “he does not quite succeed in exposing its emptiness” (108).

The seventh essay, “The Two Creations: *Paradise Lost* and the *Treatise on Christian Doctrine*,” is perhaps the weakest in the collection. Rajan makes an excellent point when he observes that critics who focus on the radical differences between *The Christian Doctrine* and *Paradise Lost* are not permitting the author to “differ from himself,” but this is based on the assumption that Milton is the author of both works, even though Rajan acknowledges that this might not be the case: “It is possible that the *Treatise* was not written by Milton or that not all of it was fully rewritten by Milton. . . . Skills worthy of Miltonists are displayed in this exercise but the display helps us to avoid examining the extent of an author’s entitlement to differ from himself” (119).

The eighth essay, “Milton and Camões: Reinventing the Old Man,” is equally speculative. Here Rajan returns to the theme of imperialism and post-colonialism. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that Milton read the Portuguese Camões’ epic *The Lusiads* (at least in English translation); Rajan hopes that this is so because *The Lusiads* is a secular epic that clearly equates commercial and imperial interests. Where other epics catalog heroes, *The Lusiads* catalogs spices! The “Old Man” referred to in the title of the essay functions as a “countervoice” to Camões’ poem, “arguing that the epic should not be written at all” (129). Here Rajan touches on his own roots as a native Indian whose country was occupied and degraded by commercial imperialists from the West. In a sentence that bears repetition, he notes that in our time so-called objectivity must give way to advocacy: “We can no longer leave our ideologies in the cloakroom as we enter the literary seminar” (125).

The final essay, “Warfaring and Wayfaring,” takes up a “textual crux” (138-39): whether (in *Areopagitica*) the person who turns away from vice and toward the good is a “true wayfaring” or a “true warfaring Christian.” The original text has “wayfaring”; many later texts have been corrected (manually) to “warfaring.” Since *Areopagitica* is a combative text, “warfaring” would appear to be the correct reading, but, as Milton observes, good and evil tend

to collapse into each other, leaving a “wayfaring” rather than a “warfaring” Christian to deal with the collapse of such easy binaries: “Good and evil then elide into truth and error, and error can be treated as a wandering from the truth or more philosophically, as truth’s insufficient presence. Warfaring slips into wayfaring” (144).

In sum, Rajan is suspicious of Miltonists who offer simple responses to complex problems. Wittreich says it best when he contrasts the subtle, nuanced approach of Rajan with the more simplistic assertions of earlier critics: “Rajan displaces the certainties of [C. S.] Lewis, [Douglas] Bush, and [A. J. A.] Waldock with a hermeneutic of suspicion, one of whose initial objectives is to contradict Milton and his critics out of their contradictions” (“Afterword: His More Attentive Mind,” (155). Finally, I am pleased to report that this collection does not mark the terminus of Rajan’s career; as recently as March 2007 he has been pleased to enlighten us on how “Samson Hath Quit Himself / Like Samson” in a seminal article that appeared in *Milton Quarterly*.

Michael Lieb and Albert C. Labriola, eds. *Milton in the Age of Fish: Essays on Authorship, Text, and Terrorism*. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2006. xi + 320 pp. \$60.00. Review by LARRY ISSIT, COLLEGE OF THE OZARKS.

This book vibrantly sets before us nine engaging and informed articles by leading scholars of John Milton in tribute to Stanley Fish, one of “our most provocative, as well as most eloquent, of critics” (ix), and closes with a tenth by the honoree himself. The title is curious—“The Age of Fish” flashes forth the grand elevation usually reserved for volumes on Milton himself, or for other preeminent figures in literature or history (e.g. “The Age of Shakespeare,” “The Age of Elizabeth”). But though the editors remain silent in the Preface as to their choice of words, there is no mistaking the affection and admiration they mean to convey about this “most eloquent” writer and thinker. The Introduction sets the tone and is by Lana Cable who recalls her former student days under Fish’s “analytic and persuasive genius” as he inflamed her classmates to follow his brilliant lead in “the pursuit-of-truth-enterprise” (4). As one would expect in a tribute volume, the essays are varied: half spotlight Milton’s view of himself as author or are examinations of what influenced