Erik Gray

Reviewed by Stefanie Markovits.

The past decade or so has seen the publication of *Byron and the Victorians* (Andrew Elfenbein, 1995), *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Stephen Gill, 1998), *Dante and the Victorians* (Alison Milbank, 1998), and *Shakespeare and the Victorians* (Adrian Poole, 2004), as well as related works like Yopie Prins’s *Victorian Sappho* (1999) and James Najarian’s *Victorian Keats* (2002). Now Erik Gray has entered the lists with his elegant monograph. As Gray notes, while Milton’s influence on the Romantics is so profound as to have served (through the work of Harold Bloom) as the wellspring for modern influence studies, his presence in the Victorian period is far more muted. In general, though I might contest this claim in the case of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (and I am sure others could point to their own exceptions), most readers of Victorian poetry are likely to agree with it. Yet, Gray contends, it is precisely the “constant but diffuse” (8) nature of Milton’s effect on the literature of that era that makes it so revealing to consider.

Like all works on influence, Gray’s book is about more than one subject: a two-fronted attack is after all implied by the “and” of the title. In his introduction, in fact, Gray announces a fourfold set of ambitions:

If Milton continues to exert influence on the Victorians, but one different from his influence on the Romantics, then what is its nature? This book studies that relationship to find out what it can teach us about Victorian literature above all,
but also about Romanticism, about Milton, and about forms of poetic influence.

(9) Ultimately, as his final chapter explains, the broadest aims of the enterprise concern critical methodology. This is because consideration of the Victorian Milton vividly reveals the false opposition between “the notion of influence as circumambient and impersonal” (after the model frequently referred to as intertextuality) and the Bloomian “notion of influence as emanating from particular sources” (159): “if we wish to understand the interdependent nature of influence and intertextuality, the Victorian Milton shows the way” (161).

Gray introduces this paradoxical interdependence through his concept of Milton as a “classic”—as “a work that goes without saying” (25), one known even if it has never been read, one that even the first-time reader experiences as uncannily familiar. Such works exert a peculiarly diffuse influence on both writers and readers. Yet at the same time, the name “Milton” asserts a very personal presence, another inherent aspect of the “classic.” Among the most portable aspects of the book, the idea of the classic is nevertheless also firmly rooted in Milton’s own writing: because Milton’s audience not only knows the story of Paradise Lost but is assumed by its author to have “a knowledge of the whole postlapsarian world” (32), even early readers would have experienced it as familiar. By citing contemporary accounts, however, Gray documents how much more such familiarity characterized the responses of nineteenth-century readers. Indeed he argues that while the Romantics tended to approach the text satanically, finding Milton or themselves of the devil’s party, “the Victorian reading” is rather “angelic—more in the manner of Abdiel, who takes God’s presence for granted and does not bother to articulate
news that is already known” (37). Thus “Victorian reticence about Milton . . . is itself Miltonic” (41).

This kind of argument—that Milton’s text teaches Victorian readers to think about Milton in certain ways that can then be considered as simultaneously Miltonic and Victorian—structures many of the critical claims of Gray’s book, as he himself recognizes. It also explains how he fulfills his ambition to write a book about Milton. At the heart of this labor of analogy are a series of luminous close readings of paired texts that show Victorian authors (Christina Rossetti, Matthew Arnold, Tennyson, and George Eliot) responding to specific impulses—if not always specific passages—found in Milton’s works: the idea of the “classic,” “the might of weakness,” “diffusive power,” and “troubled transmissions.” (While he does not do so explicitly, one might include among these qualities the indifference—a version of “diffuseness”—that was the subject of Gray’s excellent first book, The Poetry of Indifference [2005], which opens with the claim that “The first great English poem of indifference is Milton’s Paradise Regained” and includes a reading of In Memoriam that in its allusions to “Lycidas” nicely complements the chapter on Tennyson under review here.) Thus in her use of piled up similes that confuse rather than isolate their shared tenor, Rossetti, “consciously adopting a biblical idiom, in fact adopts a more Miltonic one” (46); Gray compares the effect to that of Shelley’s extended similes, which he sees as more consciously and agonistically allusive. Or in embracing “the might of weakness” learned from so many Miltonic figures, including Abdiel, the Son of Paradise Regained, and Samson (as Stanley Fish has demonstrated), Arnold displays his “deep knowledge and constant awareness of Milton” (79)—not only in his poems and prose, but even in the trajectory of his career,
with its turn from his early poetic vocation to writing “polemical prose and laborious work on behalf of the state” (76). Gray is particularly good at showing how Tennyson recalls not the sublime Milton but the beautiful one: the Milton of earth, not of heaven and hell, of the physical world and the “material texture” (101) of poetry; his reading of \textit{In Memoriam}’s debt not only to “Lycidas” but also to \textit{Comus} and the Garden scenes of \textit{Paradise Lost} is one of the highlights of the book. And while I was not entirely convinced by the suggestion that “Milton represents a proto-Dorothea” (151), Gray’s argument that Eliot associates Milton with “errors of textual transmission” offers an illuminating corrective to readers who see Eliot’s Milton as a representative of male epic success that must be diminished—or at least translated—into the “home epic” in order to fit her own female protagonist (\textit{Middlemarch}, Finale). As both Casaubon’s and Lydgate’s fates attest, epic achievements elude men as often as women. Indeed as Gray demonstrates, Eliot most often invokes Milton sympathetically rather than as counterexample: paradoxically, she fears sharing Milton’s fate.

I had other moments of doubt. Might not Dante be the main source for Rossetti’s similes? And in Arnold’s Preface to the 1853 edition of his \textit{Poems}, where he famously bemoans the lack of “great human actions”—of epic—in latter-day verse, isn’t he lamenting the need for “cultivated inaction” as much as propounding it? While Gray acknowledges the ambivalent feelings of both Milton and Arnold regarding their assumption of a credo of retreat, he seems to consider Arnold as having chosen the position rather than being thrust into it unhappily. But Gray’s extraordinary ear for echoes and his judicious sense of how far to stretch a claim about resemblance makes him particularly fit to set forth his own “great Argument.” He is appropriately sensitive
to the fact of what George Eliot (in a passage referencing *Paradise Lost*) calls the “whispering-gallery” of the world (*Middlemarch*, ch. 41)—of the uncertain acoustics of historical time and space. And his allusive and punning prose style (“both [Arnold and Milton’s Samson] made it their life’s work to rid their land of Philistines” [74]) brings many added pleasures to the reader (even though the condensed litanies of echoes, with their interspersed citations, can sometimes be a little hard to wade through).

The book is also studded with critical comments of great depth and subtlety. Take the observation that “‘Likeliest’ is one of the unlikeliest words for an epic simile, outside of Milton” (51). Or that “Nothing in Arnold’s best poems becomes him like the leaving of them” (89). Or the suggestion (picked up and expanded from Robert Pattison) that the Victorian version of Satan is Lancelot (121). Admittedly, Gray gives practically no attention to the question of what cultural forces might have led the era to reconfigure Milton. (I have myself noted the many references to Milton in the period when attempting to describe and account for the age’s focus on inaction.) He also offers no clear picture of who is acting upon whom (do the Victorians find the Milton they are looking for, or does Milton help make the Victorians after his own image?), generally preferring to speak of “analogy” rather than “causality” (80). But greater historical investigation or attention to material culture would have produced a different book, not a better one, and the question of causes and effects is, we all know, largely intractable.

To me the more significant reticence concerns the issue of genre, precisely because it seems so consistent a subtext of Gray’s argument. In a particularly satisfying moment of the literary-historical scholarship that does undergird the book, Gray notes that “as the century wore on, there was less of a tendency to equate Milton almost
exclusively with his epic” (14). Instead, Milton’s biography (the personal details of his life and the historical medium in which he moved), his shorter poems (above all “Lycidas,” “Comus,” *Samson Agonistes*, and *Paradise Regained*), and his prose gained increasing notice, in part because of the influence of David Masson’s monumental *Life*, which appeared in six volumes between 1859 and 1880 (an index followed in 1894). Given this fact—and his decision to include not only poetry but also the novel in his exploration of the Victorian Milton—it is surprising that Gray says so little about Milton’s role in the generic debates of the Victorian period, especially in relation to the fate of epic. In his introduction Gray notes that the “apparent falling off of [Milton’s] influence is more striking in the case of its chief poets than in the case of its novelists” (11). But might this not to some degree be because the Victorian Milton is himself as much proto-novelist as poet? Milton’s generic indeterminacy has been recognized by critics at least since the publication of Barbara Lewalski’s brilliant *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (1985), which argued that Milton taught his own readers by asking them to reconsider their expectations concerning genre. Gray’s Victorian readers seem most responsive to Milton’s most novelistic aspects. Hence the focus on his proto-novelistic closet dramas and the more earthly elements of his epic. Hence also Arnold’s debt to Milton when he finds he must give up on the epic poetry he so yearns to compose. And hence Milton’s allusive suitability not only for a novelist like George Eliot but also for a poet of novelized epic like Tennyson in his *Idylls of the King* mode (as Herbert Tucker, among others, has argued). Whether conscious or not, Gray’s own recognition of these anti-epic and proto-novelistic impulses appears in his turn to Trollope’s *The Warden* when first attempting to elucidate the theme of “mighty weakness”—that the best
way to win is to lose, or seem to lose” (63); he christens it “The Mr. Harding Principle” after Trollope’s protagonist. But this turn—as well as his penultimate chapter’s treatment of George Eliot—might have been better justified by more extensive theoretical reflection on genre.

Still, in a book that as a whole celebrates the backgrounded presence of Milton in the Victorian period, perhaps this neglect to foreground a theme might be construed rather as a gesture of homage to its subject. Gray’s fine book will no doubt encourage its readers to attend with greater subtlety to every hint of Milton they encounter, as well as to re-evaluate their own conceptions of the notion of literary influence.

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