

Michael Bryson. *The Tyranny of Heaven: Milton's Rejection of God as King*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2004. 208pp. ISBN 0-87413-859-0. \$43.50 (cloth).

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Michael Bryson's *The Tyranny of Heaven* offers a new reading of the old problem of Milton's God, arguing that Milton deliberately presents, in the Father, an unpalatable portrait of a divine monarch in order to attack the whole tradition of imagining God as a king. Along the way, he proposes that mainstream Milton criticism has gotten a number of important things wrong. He champions a countertradition of oppositional readings, upon which he draws heavily, and proposes a new way of understanding both the political force of Milton's epic and its author's theological commitments. Many readers will find this book engaging and compelling. Others, however, are likely to find parts of it infuriating (given his polemical tone, Bryson appears to anticipate, even to relish that possibility). The heterodox form of Christianity that Bryson ultimately argues Milton expressed in his poetry (it is revealed fully in the book's final chapter to be a mixture of various tendencies, some Pelagian, some associated with Quakerism, some Arian or Socinian, and some rooted in less clearly defined forms of mysticism) is one that many modern readers will find congenial in both political and spiritual terms. That it is more congenial, however, does not, of course, make it Milton's, and some readers will balk at Bryson's more radical claims. Objections, however, do not diminish the book's bracing ambition: *The Tyranny of Heaven* makes a number of important contributions to ongoing discussions about Milton's antimonarchism and his various heterodoxies.

The book is very well structured, presenting its basic argument and "grounding principles" (23) in the first chapter and then reiterating these in a series of four chapters, each adding a new layer of complexity. Bryson's core idea is that the Father is not Milton's figure for the God in which he actually believed (and in which he wanted his readers to believe). He is not even a figure for an aspect of that God. The man who wrote the antimonarchical tracts, Bryson argues, would never have thought monarchy a proper metaphor for understanding the true nature of the divine, and this explains why so many readers have found the portrait of the Father as an absolute monarch problematic. Milton deliberately made it unpalatable in order to push seventeenth-century English readers to reject their habit of imagining God that way, a habit that he believed made them too quick to accept the authority of an earthly monarch. The first two chapters of the book outline this basic approach, taking many critics to task for apologizing for the Father and for refusing to see the ugly parts of the portrayal for what they are: signs of the inevitable ugliness of any absolute authority. The second of these chapters describes the way the tradition of imagining God as a king developed in the course of the Hebrew Scriptures, the reasons Milton had for

rejecting that tradition, and the way he treated both heavenly and earthly kingship in his prose.

At the end of this chapter and in the three that follow, Bryson offers an extended reading of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. He argues that the Father's behavior in the two great poems makes complete sense only if we see that it is set off by two great foils, those of Satan and the Son, who represent opposite responses to the central authoritarian figure. Chapter 3 describes Satan's rebellion as genuinely heroic, but also as tragically misguided. Satan is a hero in his opposition to God's tyranny (Bryson draws extensively on Empson for this part of his argument), but the rebel angel makes a tragic error in the way he mounts his rebellion. In seeking to depose the Father by external, military means, he only ends up imitating his enemy's mode of authority, which he implicitly embraces as legitimate, claiming only that it does not belong *exclusively* to the Father. Because the Father's mode of authority is defined by coercive power, Bryson argues it cannot be truly opposed by the same means. This is why Satan himself becomes an autocratic tyrant (exactly what he at first claims to hate). Satan, fails, therefore, not primarily because his opponent is immeasurably more powerful than he is (that, according to Bryson, is Abdiel's argument, and merely a justification of coercive power), but because he sought only to take that opponent's place. He fails, in other words, to offer his followers a truly liberating alternative, caring only for his own liberty, which he again defines as a matter of power. Bryson does some very good work in this chapter on the way Satan's claims for legitimacy—especially his critique of the Father's right to "beget" the Son and place him above the angels—are rooted in contemporary Protestant theories about resistance to tyranny. Bryson argues that Milton felt these did not go far enough. They should have rejected not only tyranny—and not only monarchy, for that matter—but the very notion of "external authority" itself in both politics and religion.

It is here that Bryson's most radical thesis begins to reveal itself: it is the Son who embodies the real alternative. His response to the Father in Book 3 is not only a proper response to the claims of coercive power, but is in itself a figure for the true nature of the divine, an embodied example of how God is truly known. In the Son, whom Bryson treats in Arian terms, divinity is revealed as operating by "internal authority." God is discovered in the heart or inner voice of a believing creature (and the Son is, for Bryson, a creature). Like Satan, Bryson's Son is a heroic rebel, but his rebellion takes a radically different form. The last two chapters of the book present an account of his spiritual biography, from his "begetting" in Book 5 of *Paradise Lost* to his final triumph atop the temple at the end of *Paradise Regained*. In this developmental narrative, Bryson tracks the Son's gradual discovery of where God really dwells. At first he allies himself with the Father's external military authority, but by the debate in Book 3 he has begun to intuit the deeper power of divine mercy and of the need for the ruler of heaven to act by persuasion and personal example rather than coercion. By the end of the "brief epic" he is confirmed as the "True image of the Father" (4.596) because he is guided by the divine nature within, which the angelic choir at the end of the poem associates with the "paradise within" promised to Adam and Eve in Book 12 of *Paradise Lost*.

In Bryson's reexamination of what critics like Irene Samule and Michael Lieb have called the "dramatic" nature of the Book 3 dialogue (chapter 4), the Son, in effect, deposes the Father by refusing to play by the rules He ostensibly imposes.

The Father, in His judgment of mankind, declares a principle of violent, autocratic justice (the “tyrant’s plea” of necessity), and the Son refuses to accept any such principle. He does not, however, respond the way Satan does to the begetting in Book 5. In that scene Satan also refuses to accept some of the principles embodied in a divine declaration, but he does accept the legitimacy of eternal authority itself. He, we might say, actually *believes* in it. The Son, instead, reads past the Father’s unjust dictates, refusing—like Abraham in Genesis 18.25 and Moses in Exodus 32 and elsewhere—to believe that the God of justice could really be that unjust or that unmerciful. Bryson rightly argues for the central importance of these allusions, although in citing a 1992 essay by Gordon Campbell (182) he neglects to note that it was Newton who first suggested the parallel with Abraham in a note in 1749. Cowper was, I believe, the first to mention the relevance of Moses, also in a note, in 1810 (although he refers to Numbers 14.13, rather than the Exodus passage that Bryson deals with more directly). Among modern critics, John Parish, Merritt Hughes, Michael Lieb, and others have all discussed this aspect of the dialogue.

Bryson concentrates more than these other critics, however, on the ways the Son, in affirming such principles, both bends the Father’s will to mercy and in doing so challenges Him to act in ways that cultivate the inner divine nature of His creatures. The Son, indeed, offers the Father His first explicit example of such cultivation. God as external authority (a figure in Bryson’s scheme for the mistaken idea that there is such an external God to be obeyed at all) is taught in this dramatic scene by one of his own creatures (the one he calls his only “effectual might”), not simply to be nicer, but in effect to disappear. According to Bryson, Milton is trying to teach us that only once we have smashed the iconic Father, a figure that is merely an idol that mistakes external power for the divine, can we begin to perceive the God he really did believe in, a God who passes show except in the embodied action of the Son, and ultimately in ourselves.

This is a fascinating reading of the two great poems, and I think many readers will admire the boldness of Bryson’s attempt to assert it. One of its principal virtues is the fact that it refuses to ignore or apologize for the unpleasantness of the Father, either to dismiss it as a flaw or to claim that it is actually easy to accept once it has been properly understood. This is perhaps the best thing about the book. By claiming that the ugly aspects of the portrayal have a heuristic function, he follows Fish’s influential attempt to bridge the gap between the “Satanists” and the “anti-Satanists.” By claiming, however, that the function depends on their *remaining* unacceptable, he takes that line of argument in a strikingly original direction. His approach, in fact, owes more to Empson, who confronted the difficult parts of Milton’s portrayal of the Father more boldly and frankly than any other critic. Again, however, Bryson has clearly taken a tack that is also different from Empson’s.

Most readings of Milton’s God depend in one way or another on a reader’s acceptance of or rejection of the ugly parts. For Empson, they were unacceptable, and so was theism itself, which he thought even at its best entailed some rather wicked propositions. He felt, however, that the poem’s orthodoxy was bent at certain points toward the heterodox as the result of a hopeless attempt on Milton’s part to find a reasonable defense for the unreasonable. The most famous example of this dynamic for Empson is the climax of the Father’s final speech in the Book 3 dialogue, where he proposes that God declares his intention to abdicate his

throne at the end of time (see lines 305-41). For Empson, this abdication, the “democratic appeal” of what it seemed to promise for the future, “made the whole picture” of the tyrannical Christian God “just tolerable” (*Milton’s God* 130-35). Bryson agrees enough to hang a very large part of his argument on the implications of this passage and its “democratic appeal,” especially in light of the way it seems to have been called forth or enabled by the words and actions of the Son. We can see here how political and theological propositions are closely allied for Bryson (another strength of his work). Building on Empson, he offers a striking vision of how what Milton thought proper in politics is tied up with how he imagined God, and with how he wants his reader to imagine God.

Bryson’s argument, however, presents two problems that may keep some readers from assenting as well as admiring. The first concerns a claim made frequently: that Milton could not have meant his readers to accept a portrayal of God as a monarch. The other concerns the fate of “submission” (and behind that of the crucifixion) in the heterodox theology that Bryson believes underpins the poetry. Bryson asserts as a “grounding principle” that “it is unlikely that the man who labored so hard to destroy the *Eikon Basilike* would set up a poetic *Eikon Theios* as if it were an absolute representation of the real thing” (24). This is one of Bryson’s pithiest formulations of his premise, and on the surface, it seems irrefutable. But it begs the question. Our acceptance of that proposition depends on our simply accepting an especially radical antimonarchical Milton, one who refuses to accept not only monarchy on earth, but even monarchy as a figure for divine authority. This, of course, is an assumption that the book has to establish before it can require us to accept it as a “grounding principle.” Because Bryson mostly repeats the assertion in more elaborate form later in the book, rather than actually explaining why it *has* to be so, a large part of the argument comes across as tendentious. He dismisses, but never really explains, for example, what is faulty in the logic of the more simple argument that many critics have offered for why it is not “unlikely” at all that Milton might describe the Father as a monarch: that Milton certainly hated earthly monarchy, but that he deployed the metaphor of monarchy in heaven to humble rather than encourage earthly monarchs. Only God, the old argument goes, can be worshiped as an absolute authority, so any king who claims such authority is an idol and tyrannizes over the free consciences of his subjects. Bryson also completely ignores the psychological approach of a critic like William Kerrigan, who offers another kind of explanation for the split between a Milton who could not tolerate an absolute political authority, but who needed to believe in a God who required absolute obedience (experienced externally first, and only then internalized). For Kerrigan, obedience to the divine king actually made the rebellion against earthly kingship possible.

Bryson also never explains why it is so “unlikely” for Milton to have deliberately represented the divine in terms of something he himself found difficult to accept. It is of course possible that he did so because he honestly felt that the divine *was* difficult to accept, but that it is also necessary to accept it, difficult parts and all. In other words, Milton may have believed that this is simply part of the package that comes with belief—however uneasy it might be—in what Bryson calls an “exclusive personal deity” who is omniscient, omnipotent, and an “absolute, originating principle of the universe conceived in anthropomorphic terms” (13).

That belief in such a deity entails what Bryson correctly calls certain “darker implications” (13)—about, for example, submission of the will or the treatment of unbelievers—might be reason for someone to reject the idea of such a deity, but that does not mean that Milton did so. It matters that the one thing that critics like Empson, Kerrigan, Fish, and even C. S. Lewis all agree on is that Milton did believe, for better or worse, in such a deity (and, of course, only one of the four actually shared that belief with him). As long as it is possible to imagine a logically consistent way in which Milton could have been aware of the “darker implications” and yet still have believed that absolute submission to such a God was paradoxically the only way to genuine freedom and true light, it is hard to embrace Bryson’s vision completely. Even if Empson is right, after all, that Milton imagined God’s intention to abdicate at the end of time, dissolving His external authority into the divinized nature of His renovated creatures, Bryson still has to account for the importance of figures of absolute submission to “exclusive personal deity” that shape the narrative in the meantime.

Undoubtedly, this fascinating and challenging book will, however, provoke the most controversy by its discussion of the extent of Milton’s heterodoxy. Despite what Bryson and others have identified as a critical settlement in favor of an orthodox Milton that became dominant in the later decades of the last century, it has become more and more common in recent years for critics to argue that Milton had very strong heterodox tendencies. Indeed, it is now almost eight years since the publication of Rumrich and Dobranski’s important collection, *Milton and Heresy*, and even longer since questions surrounding the provenance of *De Doctrina Christiana* forced many critics (on both sides) to rethink or solidify their positions on the matter. It is probably time we stopped starting books and essays by tearing down a supposedly monolithic universe of Milton critics ruled by a desire to save Milton for some mainstream Christian tradition. While, as I said, many readers will disagree with important aspects of Bryson’s argument, the only parts they are likely to wish he had not written are those in which he seems compelled to set up and then attack paper tigers.

Bryson’s actual argument is, happily, far more interesting than the contentious way in which he presents it. Still, that does not make it wholly convincing. In one of his more reckless moments, for example (part of his reading of *Paradise Regained*), Bryson implies that Milton purposely elided the Crucifixion. This is an interesting way of approaching the old question of why Milton never succeeded in figuring it directly, and why he chose the temptation in the wilderness rather than the Passion for the subject of the brief epic, but it goes too far. Bryson’s reading suggests that the heterodox side of Milton might have been attracted, perhaps we should say “tempted,” to believe, as Bryson asserts, that all was restored to humankind by the mere *willingness* of the Son to be sacrificed in Book 3 (this is what wrought mercy in God in the first place, according to Bryson) and his overcoming of the temptation in the wilderness. As Bryson puts it, “[t]he Son is emphatically a man [...And] if a man can resist the blandishments of Satan, and if a man can regain ‘lost Paradise’ (*Paradise Regained* 4.608), then each man can potentially secure his own redemption—once again, Milton confidently strides where all but the ‘heretical’ theologian Pelagius had feared to tread” (155). He then goes on to insist on the importance of the fact that “Milton does not write the Son as a savior; the Son does not sacrifice himself on a cross anywhere in *Paradise*

Regained. Paradise is regained without the blood the Father had demanded in *Paradise Lost*" (157).

That is a pretty astounding claim, and it is not really made easier to accept by the careful way that Bryson tries to disassociate what happens in the poem from what Milton actually believed (that Milton did not "write" the Son as a savior in his poem, does not mean that Milton did not believe he was one). The problem, of course, is that Milton did, if perhaps indirectly or prospectively, write him as a savior in Books 3 and 12 of *Paradise Lost*, and of course there is no way that he could have imagined his readers would have forgotten what most of them believed was an historical fact, that Jesus, who was the Son of God (whatever particular sects might have taken that to mean), did die willingly on the cross. Bryson argues that the emphasis on the humanness of the Son at the end of *Paradise Regained* "borders on the Socinian" (156), and perhaps it does. Given what Milton did write, however, did he refuse, as did the Socinians to associate the crucifixion with atonement and a penal exchange of the Son's life for mankind's sin? Michael Lieb's essay, "Milton and the Socinian Heresy," in the collection *Milton and the Grounds of Contention* (Duquesne UP, 2003), would have been very useful here, although it was in all likelihood unavailable at the time Bryson was completing his study. Nevertheless, this last section of Bryson's book would have been much more compelling if he had taken the time to discuss Socinian theology more fully and systematically. In any case, if it had seemed to Milton that the inner insight and strength that the Son discovers in himself were enough to redeem him, pointing out to us how we might redeem ourselves, then there would have been no need for him to have written twice that the Son submitted to the crucifixion for precisely the reasons of atonement and what the Father calls the "rigid satisfaction" of His judgment (see 3.212; similar language is used by Michael at 12.386-465, especially 419). In his declaration of submission to the Father's rigid requirement, the Son never says that he will not really have to go through with it, only that he will not be dead for long, and that he knows—has faith, I think we should say—that the Father will raise him up after the event and grant him redemptive power. Bryson is right to suggest that the speech affects the Father, perhaps even inspiring the striking vision of his abdication, but then to suggest that in *Paradise Regained* the Son discovers that he need not, in fact, satisfy the judgment at all seems difficult to credit. Bryson is also right to call our attention to the surprising lack of direct interest the brief epic shows in the coming crucifixion, to insist that the Son's resistance to temptation is meant to be exemplary, and that Milton followed Luke's order in the narrative in order to make the last refusal a refusal of kingship (i.e., for Bryson both earthly and heavenly) [167-8]. The text, however, never actually denies that, after a very brief sojourn as a private man in his mother's house, this man will—in public and on the stage of history—submit to one of that king's most difficult judgments. For Milton, mercy's power seems only to be revealed *after* that submission is complete. So who is ultimately the source of both the judgment and the mercy, the might that is effected in the glorified, resurrected Son only after the obedient acceptance of the crushing of his mortal body? One answer might be that figure of authority, "dark with excessive bright" that Milton did believe was signified by his metaphor of a sometimes terrible absolute monarch. In other words, despite the striking heterodoxies he identifies, Bryson still has not convinced me that Milton did not mean us to accept the idea of an exclusive, personal God with all the "darker implications" this

implies, and that the figure of the Father does not indeed point directly and consistently in the direction of that difficult idea. To repeat what was said at the start, the fact that Bryson—or you or I—might not want to accept such a God is not an argument that Milton did not.

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