BOOK REVIEW


The stakes involved in Ryan Netzley’s new study, Lyric Apocalypse: Milton, Marvell, and the Nature of Events, are justifiably quite high. He covers a wide range of issues, from the unrealistic expectations of revolution to the aims of literary criticism to the programmatic pedagogy we employ in the classroom. Needless to say, this is a provocative study that asks us to explore “how something means” rather than “the more readily assessable measures of what it means” (49). The study’s astute and precise prose renders it a very quotable book; by providing some excerpts, I am, however, defeating its purpose: “one must march through the experience of a thought for understanding to occur” (11). Nevertheless, I should like to draw attention to some key features of each chapter as well as some of the book’s conclusions, which ask us to reevaluate conventional wisdom about Milton and Marvell.

Netzley begins by reassessing assumptions about historiography and poetic form. The introduction counters Alan Badiou’s claims that historical change is characterized by radical breaks—an ultimately disempowering and futile search for an escape from the conditions of one’s existence—with Agamben’s and Deleuze’s insistence that poetry models a lived-in temporality that (re)activates one’s engagement with the world. Netzley follows recent students of lyric like Jonathan Culler in asserting that lyric, as a genre, is “like revelation, a present presentation of immediacy, not its promise in the future or its declension into the past” (17). Lyric, Netzley insists, reminds us that “Now is an event that occurs inside poems, not the representation of events” (17).

Chapter One considers Marvell’s Cromwell trilogy and Royalist elegies. It shows how these poems, notoriously difficult to reconcile, “lau[d] the instruments that transform the world into something new” (27). Marvell, Netzley argues, eschewed political opportunism and, instead, was fascinated by Cromwell and Lord Francis Villiers, for example, because they both “suggest that there is no such contemplative space that is not already populated by force” (51). Netzley links “the forces that comprise” ambiguity, natural forces, and “the internal exercise of conscience” (45). He posits, in fact, that Marvell rejects any post hoc justifications of past events and states of equilibrium—order or “restful resolution”—because forces demand that we “gran[t] respect to the transformations that must attend an apocalyptic future” (56).

The second chapter analyzes how Milton’s sonnets adapt the Petrarchan form to fit a model of apocalypse. Netzley’s extensive close readings are an appealing feature of the study. In this chapter, his interpretations are accessible and particularly amenable for sharing with undergraduates. I especially enjoyed this chapter’s focus on the volta (72–85) as it drives home in concrete ways how our expectations for a revelatory turn are bound to disappoint. “Potential ends,” Netzley writes, “occur all the time within continuity and are the only ways of conceiving our daily lives as anything more than pointless private dramas or, what amounts to the same thing, a useless, boring holding pattern” (79). I was fascinated, too, with how Netzley describes Milton’s critical openness: “it connotes something closer to an active
contemplation of possibilities that results in new habits and adaptabilities” (99).

Chapter Three turns to Milton’s Lycidas, a pastoral poem that tests Netzley’s thesis because we traditionally think of this genre as escapist. This section, too, argues that we mischaracterize Milton as lamenting how the English frittered away their opportunities for instituting a republican government. Milton, for example, treats the apocalypse as a “way of conceiving present potential without submitting this potential to a necessary teleological, typological, dialectical, or performative development toward final expression” (113). Literature, for Milton, does not lay the groundwork for or presage “political transformation”; it is the site of agential action itself. This “commitment,” Netzley insists, “does not waver throughout his career and does not respond, in the later poems, to an experience of defeat at the Restoration” (134). Scholars of Paradise Lost will need to address this bold new argument.

After two chapters on Milton, Netzley returns to Marvell. Upon Appleton House allows Netzley to conclude his study because, as a country-house poem, it provides the ideal venue to reframe retirement without fetishizing ends. Marvell’s 1651 poem “begins to ask what an immanent apocalypse looks like, before it becomes cannibalized by a history of winners and losers” (159). Mary Fairfax serves as a key figure for Netzley because she operates as a symbol in the sense that she acts “with both immanent and imminent force in the poem, as the only possible mechanism for endings, poetic or apocalyptic” (183). The symbol immerses the reader in the world of the poem, linking “imagination and action” (184). Because Mary acts as an “organizing force” of the poem (186), she escapes “the prevailing poetic logic of substitutive comparison that would turn all immanence into deferred imminence and all imminence into the tired, pre-understood script of typology” (190). His employment of the term symbol endeavors to defy our tendencies to fit the characters in the poem into extra-textual or preexisting meaning systems; but perhaps a distinctive nomenclature would have better expressed this dynamic.

Lacing his criticism with Chernaik and Dzelzainis’s groundbreaking collection Marvell and Liberty as well as newer volumes (Hirst and Zwicker’s Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane [2012] and Joan Faust’s Andrew Marvell’s Liminal Lyrics [2012]), among others—that is, interweaving aesthetic, formal, and historicist criticism—Netzley makes a convincing case for the ways in which Marvell elevates symbolic forces within the poem as political events instead of limiting poetry to politics’ handmaiden. Conceiving Marvell through Netzley’s framework both animates mid-seventeenth century England and, as he points out, frees us from the very modern rut of deferral and reaction. He, therefore, aims to estrange the familiar, highlighting how previous critics have missed the attainable revolutionary potential in his poems.

This is a tightly focused book looking at a specific genre, limited timespan, and, almost exclusively, Milton and Marvell. Would it benefit from a wider engagement with authors and forms? Perhaps; but Netzley’s laser-like attention stems from his unwillingness to evade his insistence that the lyric does not defer meaning or point to other expressions or practices. I hope this is one of many studies that reconsider our approaches to what it means to act and how to adjust our teaching to accommodate these modes. In the conclusion, Netzley seeks to reanimate the classroom: apocalyptic lyrics “disavow the pieties about tutelage, apprenticeship, and maturation that dominate our understanding of learning” (204). I am not quite sure how to usher in the alternative, but this study teaches us to engage with the lyric as an opportunity to infuse our discussions of literature with immediacy and potential.

Denys Van Renen, University of Nebraska at Kearney

30