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Review of Matthew C. Augustine, *Aesthetics of Contingency*

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Matthew Augustine, *Aesthetics of Contingency: Writing, Politics, and Culture in England, 1639–1689*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. Pp. 288; Hardback £80.00.

This is a provocative, ambitious, and engaging book. Matthew Augustine seeks to revise the ways retrospective narrativization of key authors, their literary careers and political identities, such as Marvell, Milton, Browne, Rochester, and Dryden, have weakened our perception of the ways some of the greatest works of literature—of poetry, especially—were crafted in moments of acutely felt contingency, of unknown political futures. With a methodology that blends sustained close reading with sensitivity to material, social, and historical contexts, *Aesthetics of Contingency* re-evaluates those critical approaches that have tended to teleologize their literary subjects in a period fraught with uncertainty. In an understated but convincing way the book also showcases how new knowledge about book history and reception can challenge and change the ways we understand how authors and their writings were interpreted and evaluated in their own time.

Miltonists come under particular scrutiny in this book, and particularly any whose work has sought to find a unifying or teleological link from the early prose to the later poetry. Milton's self-styling as prophetic poet, or even perhaps as providentialist Puritan, makes the avoidance of this way of reading Milton rather tricky. But the point is well made; quoting Peter Herman, Augustine writes that it is "out of the turmoil of not knowing what to affirm in the wake of the Revolution's failure that Milton creates his finest poetry" (26). In a powerful chapter on Milton's 1645 *Poems*, Augustine argues for the poet's early preoccupation with time and the idea of "becoming": from "How soon hath Time" to the eager addition to the headnote of *Lycidas*, foretelling "the ruin of our corrupted clergy" and laying claim to prophetic gifts that, in Augustine's words, exhibit "a latent teleology of the self" where the "reformist poetic bard" takes precedence over "other possible selves" (38–39). And yet in highlighting Charles Lamb's exhilarating response to seeing Milton's working manuscript of *Lycidas* for the first time, in *The London Magazine* (1820)—"How it staggered me to see the fine things in their ore! interlined! corrected! as if their words were mortal, alterable, displaceable at pleasure! as if they might have been otherwise, and just as good! as if inspirations were made up of parts, and those fluctuating, successive, indifferent!"[1]—Augustine makes a strong case not only for the importance of compositional practices in the characterization of authorial identity, but also for the way this area of textual analysis helps to realize that Milton's "circumstances [...] were neither unitary nor pointed in a single direction but rather heterogeneous and uncertain" (42). The chapter contains a riveting reading of the Nativity Ode, in which Augustine proposes

[1] Charles Lamb, "Oxford in the Vacation," *London Magazine* 3 (Oct. 1820), 367.

that the 1629 poem does not so much promise a poetic birth as signify the poet's "failure to decisively appear" (48); and of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, where Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns's (and Catherine Gimelli Martin's) case for Milton's Laudian youth is reasserted, largely on the basis of the "Caroline aesthetic" of the monastery and the cathedral imaginatively visited in *Il Penseroso*, and on what Augustine describes as "a problematic of recursion" (56). Conversion, too, receives attention in the form of *Lycidas*, taken (as by Campbell and Corns) as the moment of Milton's politicization, with a case for the "two hermeneutics" (the 1637 and 1645 versions of the poem). Augustine treats the pastoral elegy not so much as Milton's poetic climax in the 1645 volume, but rather as the precursor to his pastoral masque, *Comus*.

Augustine argues that his is a "Revisionist" approach to literary history, discerning "the genuine continuities and discontinuities between earlier and later Stuart England," drawing out "the impact of the civil wars on literary discourse and aesthetic production," and helping "to judge accurately the course of seventeenth-century literary careers" (23). This last claim is the most important, in a way, because it is Augustine's claim to a kind of objectivity (to "judge accurately") which makes his book refreshingly bold, at the same time as it aims to do all the things that a "progressive" criticism might claim: to destabilize, to problematize, to highlight contradictions and uncertainties. Labels come under repeated scrutiny: a "middle way" is charted for Milton between the radical Puritan and the Baconian or "atheist;" Marvell is taken, as he has been elsewhere and often, as the epitome of chameleonic performance, of resistance to neat characterization, of closure, or easy "through-interpretation." Indeed, Augustine returns several times to the prevailing problem of the "two Marvells," the sharp divide between the lyric poet and the Restoration prose polemicist. An evocative passage from *Rehearsal Transpros'd: The Second Part* serves to illustrate the way Marvell's prose was just as infused with "argument by images" (25) as his lyrics:

> The Furnace was so hot of it self, that there needed no coals, much less anyone to blow them. One burnt the Weed, another calcined the Flint, and a third melted down that mixture; but he himself [Marvell's adversary, Samuel Parker] fashion'd all with his breath, and polished with his stile, till out of a meer jelly of Sand and Ashes, he had furnish'd a whole Cupboard of things so brittle and incoherent, that the least touch would break them again in pieces, so transparent that every man might see thorow them.[2]

[2] *The Rehearsal Transpros'd: The Second Part*, in *The Prose Works of Andrew Marvell*, 2 vols., ed. Annabel Patterson, Martin Dzelzainis, N.H. Keeble, and Nicholas von Maltzahn (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003), 1:249–250.

The "suturing" of Marvell's prose to Milton's radical reputation—the "Miltonic Marvell"—is the subject of an engaging chapter, an association strategically deployed by Marvell's conformist detractors which Marvell, Augustine argues, sought to avoid. One of the chief problems facing modern commentators is the difficulty in fully aligning Marvell with English republicanism. Instead of over-working the subject, Augustine proposes that it is "the play of contingency" that emerges as a theme across Marvell's lyric poetry and prose, his "pastoral and political careers" (144), and that he "appreciated the fundamental indeterminacy of the political," valuing above any political creed or system liberty of conscience and freedom from arbitrary rule (149).

A careful reading of Thomas Browne suggests that the *Religio Medici* "brilliantly addresses itself to the heresy of certainty under which [Browne] saw the Stuart church beginning to buckle" (83), but the chapter itself is almost equally concerned to unravel the influence of Michael Wilding's chapter on the *Religio* in *Dragon's Teeth* which, Augustine claims, is "steeped" in an historiography "that distorts our sense of the historical and ideological matrix in which *Religio Medici* first found wide readership" (84). Again, Augustine incorporates a closer analysis of the publication history of the *Religio* and the network of printers responsible, positioning the book no longer in an "Anglican" context but newly in one of Cartesian philosophical doubt. This may well, as Augustine argues, make more sense of Browne's opening sentence, in which he styles himself merely, as "a Christian" (98). Augustine draws together a compelling array of examples testifying to Browne's willingness to exercise "dissent and diversity of opinion" in his meditation, aiming chiefly to "deride [...] the parsimony of spirit in later Caroline England" (107). Chapters on Rochester and Dryden allow the *Aesthetics of Contingency* to illustrate in numerous ways the importance of continually re-evaluating writers in their historical moment. Especially in Rochester's case, revisiting the messy textual archive and remembering his penchant for performance and disguise may, Augustine suggests, perplex readers about the authenticity of his conversion. The writers considered here are shown as sceptics towards what might later be termed "master narratives," sensitive to the conflicts, upheavals, and uncertainties of their age. In this highly engaging book, they become exemplary for the ways their works challenge us "to view the seventeenth century [...] as an interlocking series of complex, uneven, and open-ended historical processes" (4).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.