

Sanford Budick

Kant and Milton.

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2010.

330 pages

\$49.95 (cloth ISBN 978-0-674-05005-1)

Every graduate student knows the anxiety involved in attempting to say something original and not just imitative. Kant, as philosophers well know, is a master of obscure and possibly poor writing but brilliant thought and may be claimed to be the most influential figure of the Enlightenment. Milton may be seen as the best English language poet ever. To say anything original on either of them would be a daunting task in itself. Sanford Budick has attempted the impossible task to say something original on both of them (and to show a hitherto unseen connection between them) regarding the question, 'What makes something original?'

The distinction at the heart of the book is between succession (*Nachfolge*) and imitation (*Nachahmung*), which for Budick inspires both Kant's ethics and aesthetics. A bold claim in itself, but Budick argues further that this distinction was inspired in Kant by reading Milton (and the 'constellation of German Miltonism'). What makes the genius, poetically or philosophically, is the ability to recognize genius *and* further it by means of the creative imagination. Furthermore, at the center of Budick's story is the sublime, which he sees nearly all Kant scholars as de-emphasizing. Yet, precisely the way in which the sublime, succession, freedom, and moral feeling are constitutive of the movement from a posteriori to a priori, which is meant to follow according to Budick from Kant's reading of Milton, is still left somewhat open ended.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the relation of Kant to Milton and the important distinction of succession and imitation. Going back to Homer, the 'poetics of blindness' and particularly 'Miltonic aesthetic light' and 'light and shadow' are fundamental to Kant's writings, from the *Observations* to the second and third *Critiques* as well as the anthropology lectures. Herder, Burke, Lowth, Lessing, Addison, Meier, Lindner, Mendelssohn, Bodmer, Breitingen, Eberhard and others all provided the impetus for Kant's engagement with Milton's sublime poetry. Behind light and shadow is the move from the sensible to the supersensible, best performed in poetry, particularly Milton's poetry. But it is Herder who is 'Kant's opposite pole in the constellation of German Miltonism' (45) in such a way that Herder is 'a mirror image of Kant's Miltonism' (79).

Whereas the first two chapters are primarily aesthetic in nature, chapter 3 introduces Kant's ethics, particularly the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, into the story. The transition from heteronomy or sensible incentives to autonomy and the categorical imperative is a sublime one already in the *Groundwork*, resembling Milton's own fourteen-line reworking of the parable of the talents from Matthew 25:14–30. Disengaging oneself from examples, though, is necessary for sublimity to enter into one's internal act of practical reason.

Chapter 4, 'Kantian Tragic Form and Kantian "Storytelling"', encapsulates the story (told in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, KW 5:88) of the melancholic, empty, lost man who feels that life is pointless. No longer is there any reason for living. The choice of suicide is real, but

for Kant there is a transfer from the sensible to the supersensible, a ‘rebirth, revolution, conversion to a life that is now ... duty itself’ (201). This for Budick is part of the Miltonic transfer, or the form of tragedy (that is, the movement from pandering to humiliation, self-conceit at the point of ‘greatest distress’ to exercising freedom over all ‘sensible’ hopes or hindrances): the movement from the a posteriori to the a priori. In Kantian storytelling ‘the protagonist, the teller, and the auditor-“spectator”, severally confronted with what may seem to be the inevitable response to “such circumstances”—the response, that is, of suicide or of giving up on life—each *discloses*, to himself or herself, both freedom and “a respect for something quite different from life.” This “something quite different” is moral feeling and the self-reliance of hard-won moral reason (208, quoting the *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:73–77, 88, 157).

Chapter 5, ‘The *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Samson Agonistes*’, continues this same line of argument, revealing a closer correspondence between Kant and Milton. The exemplar(s) of the storytelling example is here characterized as Samson, Job, or Christ’s ‘own agonizing, awe-inspiring preparations’ (218). Budick points out that the ‘specificity and concreteness of poetry and its storytelling are indispensable to Kant’s work of moral philosophy’. Challenging such readers as Henry Allison, Karl Ameriks, Paul Guyer, and hosts of other Kant scholars, Budick makes a stark claim: Kant and Milton both represent a poetic philosophy in which ‘human reason has a capacity for achieving the good because of the goodness of the creator’ (222). The *Critique of Practical Reason* essentially resembles the *Critique of Judgment* in the sense that respect for the law (*Achtung für Pflicht*) is the only genuine moral feeling and this is an essentially sublime movement from the heteronomous to the autonomous. The (*a posteriori*) endless progress of humiliations of self-conceit is necessary for an (*a priori*) endless procedure of succession.

Chapter 6, ‘Kant’s Miltonic Procedure of Succession in a Key Moment of the *Critique of Judgment*’, shows how §49 embodies a crystallization of Kant’s thought on aesthetic ideas (in the first half of *The Critique of Judgment*) and natural teleology (in the second half). Here, Budick reads a symbolic ‘typology’ of how theory becomes practice: Jupiter’s eagle and Juno’s peacock reveal, by means of the ‘constellation of German Miltonism’ (especially Meier, Herder, and Klotz), a true analogy of poetry and philosophy, the difficulty of genius and resolution to the debate over secular/sacred representations. ‘[T]he procedure of succession [exemplified in §49] is described as being both to and in Milton’s poetry ... [which] wanders in the magical regions of Greek poetry...he sets out spirit vibrating truly, so that, so to speak it itself poetizes’ (266, 281).

The impossible and incredible task of originality and creativity in bringing these two giants of the 17th and 18th centuries is to be praised and respected. While every graduate student additionally knows that the question of surpassing one’s forbears is not the right question, it is nevertheless possible to achieve exemplarity not by means of empirical examples, but by means of truly sublime poetic infinite succession. As an example of this, Budick claims that: ‘In *Paradise Lost* the Fall represents the loss of the harmony of alternate deprivations that are coordinated between the light and shadow of sun and moon, moon and sun, male and female, female and male... Kant sees a combination and mixing (*vermischen*) of male and female in Milton’s muse of aesthetic light and shadow’ (294). Budick’s *Kant and Milton* is a philosophy that poeticizes and a poetry that philosophizes.

Michael Deckard
Lenoir-Rhyne University