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Review by Andrew Fleck

Shawcross, John T. *The Development of Milton's Thought: Law, Government, and Religion*. Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2008. 293 pages.

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Over the course of more than five decades, John Milton left traces of his thoughts on a variety of topics and in a variety of texts. Should we be surprised that over such a long period of time his ideas might develop in unanticipated ways? Not according to John Shawcross, who has himself contributed to our appreciation of Milton and other early modern poets for about half a century. Shawcross understands that the poet's views would not be the same at the end of his life as at the beginning of it. In fact, one of the great strengths of *The Development of Milton's Thought* is that Shawcross recognizes that the great poet was not simply an intellect. The poet and polemicist was a man who lived through many significant events that shaped his outlook on the subjects to which he returned throughout his life. Shawcross argues, importantly, that aside from a few bedrock beliefs—such as the existence of a benevolent deity—Milton's understanding of many secular, ecclesiastical, and theological concepts developed in response to lived experience and his encounters with the ideas of others. Shawcross eschews the term “growth,” so as not to imply teleology, employing the term “development” instead to allow for the unpredictable directions in which Milton's views would proceed. Shawcross persuasively demonstrates that Milton's views responded both to external stimuli and to internal logics, amassing an impressive array of references to trace the pathways in which the great thinker moved.

Shawcross deftly shows the development in Milton's ideas about law and politics in the first two brief chapters of his study. Milton's attitude toward usury and his evolving treatment of “fraud” and “conveyance” offer an opportunity for Shawcross to trace the nuances of the poet's developing attitudes toward law. And the political schemes Milton outlined in the emergency circumstances of the Restoration's approach offer an opportunity

to observe some developments in the polemicist's political thought. The quick sketches in these initial chapters quickly give way to more substantial investigations of Milton's thought in the rest of the book.

The three dense chapters at the heart of *The Development of Milton's Thought* showcase Shawcross at his best. In the first, he takes up Milton's conception of the church as events unfolded over the middle part of the century. In addition to the paths an individual follows in his or her thought, Shawcross reminds the reader, "the happenings outside ourselves have their toll on our knowledge, certainly, and then on our thought, attitudes, and emotions" (63). And the crisis within the Church of England, into which Milton was born, and which he came to reject, stands as one very significant happening that affected the poet's thought. If the visible church was not one to which an individual could subscribe, where could a person find communion with other believers? From a discussion of Milton's inability to conform to the church that had taken shape under Laud, Shawcross takes up two theological issues that persistently engaged Milton's thought throughout his lifetime: belief in the Trinity and his understanding of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In both instances, Shawcross argues that Milton begins with the received teachings of others, only to apply his own reading of scripture to investigate carefully these articles of belief, ultimately rejecting the Trinity, the Son's divinity, and the person of the Holy Spirit. In an important chapter that highlights the significance of Cyril Lucaris to mid-century debates on the Trinity and to Milton (through the Diodati family) in particular, Shawcross argues that Milton confronted the difficulty of the traditional notion of the Trinity and came to reject it. Similarly, in the subsequent chapter Shawcross pursues these implications as they relate to the "presence" in the contested subject of transubstantiation. Marshalling a dizzying array of references from across Milton's body of work, Shawcross shows how Milton's own views of the individual's relationship to the divine may have been idiosyncratic but were certainly not heresy in the poet's mind. The book's final chapters remind readers that Milton wrote his great works over time and that the development of his thought may be embedded at different points. As Shawcross pointedly asks near the end of the book, "Is he not, like all of us, one who is not always certain, who does change his mind about some things, who may

fall short of complete analysis of all the mysteries of life, who may simply not allow himself to entertain reconsideration of some fundamental beliefs even though hints of the possibilities may be discerned by readers?" (173).

Shawcross's intimate familiarity with Milton's oeuvre allows him to pepper every moment of his argument with references to what has come before and what will follow in Milton's life. The generous critic has led generations of Miltonists to a better understanding of the great works as he does in this book. In *The Development of Milton's Thought*, Shawcross leads us back to the man himself to remind us that Milton was a frail human being in search of a personal understanding of the world and the divine. It is an important reminder.

*Andrew Fleck*