

*IDLING THE ENGINE: LINGUISTIC SKEPTICISM IN AND AROUND CORTÁZAR, KAFKA, AND JOYCE*, by E. Joseph Sharkey. Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006. xvi + 283 pp. \$64.95.

In *Idling the Engine: Linguistic Skepticism in and Around Cortázar, Kafka, and Joyce*, E. Joseph Sharkey presents a highly original and compelling discussion of “linguistic skepticism” manifest in the works of the modernist writers he examines. Among the precursors to twentieth-century linguistic skepticism, *Paradise Lost*, *Don Quixote*, and *Tristram Shandy* stand as great literary examples.<sup>1</sup> But whereas in Miguel de Cervantes human limitations are confronted through mockery, and in Laurence Sterne through the comic mode, in John Milton, the “orientation to human finitude” is tragic (1). Sharkey argues that the “tragic orientation” of Milton’s characters prefigures their twentieth-century counterparts, and he borrows *Paradise Lost* “as a kind of primer” for his chapters on Julio Cortázar, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce (10).

In chapter 1, “Introduction: *Paradise Lost* as an Allegory of Finitude,” Sharkey first analyzes Milton’s Satan “who exhibits two qualities characteristic of the skeptical protagonists of Cortázar, Kafka, and Joyce: an unjustified and insatiable pride, and . . . a specious logic used to justify a preexisting emotional bent” (4). Second, he looks at the perpetual “cycle of self-destruction” through the choice of one’s own will over God’s and the suffering and self-pitying that such a choice engenders (4). Finally, the author takes up Raphael’s moment of doubt and his role “as the epic’s internal literary theorist,” a figure also seen in Cortázar, Kafka, and Joyce: “faced with a challenge to the story he tells, Raphael must offer a solution both for himself and for Milton, and do so without dragging his author into the skeptical confusion of his characters” (4).

Sharkey reads *Paradise Lost* in the light of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose “common role in the twentieth century as dissidents from the faith of linguistic skepticism” is of particular value to the book (22). For Sharkey, Gadamer and Wittgenstein are “united by a profound appreciation for the efficacy of language” (22) and by recognition of epistemological limitations it imposes. Gadamer’s observation that we become conscious of language when it fails to work and Wittgenstein’s metaphor for this phenomenon, “idling the engine,” point to the dissatisfaction with language’s distancing effect.<sup>2</sup> Sharkey employs this metaphor to describe “all habits of thought that ignore the historicity of our being and understanding, all attempts to arrest the self in order to get a good look at it” (24). In the three chapters that follow, Cortázar’s Horacio Oliveira, Kafka’s Land-Surveyor K., and Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus are presented as the skeptics *par excellence* of modernist literature.<sup>3</sup>

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on Cortázar and Kafka respectively, but it is chapter 4, "The Sceptic and the Hermeneut in Joyce," that is of immediate interest here, as well as the book's conclusion, "Joyce's Teacup." Chapter 4 offers sub-sections on Stephen Dedalus and on Leopold Bloom. The premise of the former, titled "Stephen's Rejection of Finitude," is that Stephen Dedalus, proud to a fault, models himself after Satan and, like Satan, he "abandons and recuperates himself perpetually" (192). Stephen's "egregious moment of self-absorption"—in effect, his refusal to grant his dying mother's request for prayer—is echoed, according to Sharkey, in Cortázar by Oliveira's refusal to respond to the dying Rocamadour (194). The two protagonists share a deep suspicion of language even as it becomes the medium of their artistry.

The second subsection in this chapter, "Bloom's Finite Existence and Hermeneutical Aesthetics, *Bloomitas*," centers on Bloom as a protagonist unlike the ones discussed thus far: he "is not hyperself-conscious, though he is far from unselfconscious. Not perfectly happy, he is not unhappy, even though he is every bit as finite as Stephen or Oliveira" (226). Sharkey sees Bloom as a "fitting hero" for *Ulysses* because Bloom "is not rebelling against finitude" (226). The kind of systematic philosophical discussion we see applied to the characters of Kafka and Cortázar—and to Joyce's Stephen—is not (cannot be, really) sustained when it comes to Bloom. After situating the thrust of Bloom's aesthetic as ontological rather than epistemological, and falling "somewhere between Stephen's and Lynch's" (229), Sharkey designates Bloom's aesthetic as "kinetic-historical" and, therefore, hermeneutic (230). The author then promptly moves his discussion to Gadamer and back to Stephen, only to resume his focus on Bloom in interpretive terms that depart from philosophical/hermeneutic ones employed earlier in the book.

Chapter 5, a seven-page conclusion titled "Joyce's Teacup," opens with an ambitious statement, "[n]ow we can attempt a deeper account for all the engine idling in and around twentieth-century novels" (254), and brings us back to *Paradise Lost*. The hardest lesson of the Fall, states Sharkey, concerns "the nature of God's presence in postlapsarian Creation" (255). And if the idea of the "presence-as-absence of the Divine in creation" is difficult to tolerate (255), the twentieth-century skeptics take it a step further by insisting "on a kind of knowledge that would never have them as knowers" (256). Sharkey contends that "this nonsensical demand is the seed of the kind of skepticism we have studied. We don't want God, but we do want God's certainty. We relent on neither count because we have yet to accept finitude" (256). He also submits that Joyce, in his "loving attention to the finite," may have achieved what "all the other Raphaels and Miltons had hoped to achieve" (258). Sharkey's state-

ment that Joyce, in not seeking the transcendent in his fiction, is “unbothered by the linguistic skepticism that troubles Cortázar and Kafka’s critics” (259) could be debated. Recognition on Joyce’s part that humans are historical and finite beings is reflected in abundantly factual language that ascends to ethical and aesthetic proclamations while leaving them unspoken. “Joyce’s teacup,” concludes Sharkey, using Wittgenstein’s metaphor,<sup>4</sup> “holds more than a teacup, and finite language points beyond finitude” (260).

Reviewed by Jolanta Wawrzycka  
Radford University

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Scott Elledge, 2nd ed. (1667; New York: W. W. Norton, 1993); Miguel de Cervantes, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, trans. J. M. Cohen (1605; New York: Penguin Books, 1950); and Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Graham Petrie (1759; London: Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Sharkey refers to Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), pp. 64 and 177, and to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (1953; New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1958), paragraph 132.

<sup>3</sup> The first two named are protagonists of Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (1963; New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), and Franz Kafka’s *The Castle*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, with Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (1926; New York: Schocken Books, 1982), respectively. Further references to the Cortázar work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Sharkey cites Wittgenstein’s metaphor about the supernatural dimensions of ethics vis-à-vis words that can only express facts—“as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water . . . if I were to pour out a gallon over it”—see Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” *Philosophical Review* (January 1965), 7.