

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Harrison, Timothy. Coming To: Consciousness and Natality in Early Modern England

John Yargo

Volume 44, Number 1, Winter 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081165ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37076>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Yargo, J. (2021). Review of [Harrison, Timothy. Coming To: Consciousness and Natality in Early Modern England]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(1), 247–250. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37076>

Comparing Hardy with Shakespeare allows Hillman, and an English-speaking audience, to be open to Shakespeare, and by making a comparison between *Coriolanus* and *Coriolan* also gives Hillman a reason to translate Hardy's version into English (112).

Hillman also calls attention to two related plays: Hermann Kirchner's *Coriolanus Tragicomica* (1599) and Pierre Thierry's *Tragédie de Coriolanus* (1600) (114). In translation, Hillman makes a wise decision to use the standard medium of early modern French tragedy (as blank verse was in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre): that is, "couplets employing the hexameter Alexandrine, or *vers noble*" (121). Hillman has strategies for coming to terms with punctuation, rhetoric, self-conscious Latinate poetic style, punctuation, and stage directions (121).

By citing the opening and closing couplets in the play, I hope to give a feel for the original verse and the translation. Hardy opens with *Coriolan*: "Sil est vray, Jupiter, que ta dextre équitable / Soit aux actes meschans severe, et redoutable" (55), which Hillman renders "If truly, Jupiter, your punishing right hand / Deals dreadful justice no wrongdoer can withstand" (127). Hardy closes with Volumnie: "Et que mon dueil n'estant pour ce faire assez fort, / En un coup genereux je trouveray la mort" (108), which Hillman translates as "And since my grieving alone cannot stop my breath, / With a blow—courageous, noble—I will find death" (178). This is an edition and a series that deserve attention and praise.

JONATHAN LOCKE HART

Shandong University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37075>

Harrison, Timothy.

Coming To: Consciousness and Natality in Early Modern England.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. Pp. 337. ISBN 978-0-2267-2509-3 (hardcover) US\$95; 978-0-2267-2512-3 (paperback) US\$30.

Anticipating the work of Descartes and Locke, early modern poetry made consciousness thinkable, as Timothy Harrison argues in his insightful book *Coming To: Consciousness and Natality in Early Modern England*. Among contemporary

philosophers, the concept of consciousness has long been recognized as slippery, fragile, contradictory, even pernicious. Thankfully, Harrison does not get embroiled in those debates, but rather redirects our attention to the role poets such as Milton and Traherne played in establishing a cultural vocabulary for how it feels to “come to” consciousness. In this book, the philosopher John Locke—often thought of as a central mover in the emergence of consciousness—arrives belatedly and guides the insights of the poets into a conventional shape.

For the writers Harrison examines here, the moment of birth serves as a shared motif. Natality is the hinge moment in which mental action converts into what we call consciousness. Across these chapters, Harrison analyzes the differences in how this moment was mimetically represented and advances an argument for troubling the distinction between mind and body. *Coming To* follows a doubled trajectory: insisting on poetry’s embeddedness in the history of consciousness and narrating the emergence of consciousness as fundamental to the development of early modern poetry. Harrison brings to life this entanglement through subtle, close readings of the early modern poets Thomas Traherne and John Milton, and the philosopher John Locke, all situated within their shared cultural matrix.

Chapter 1 takes up the recurring trope of “awaking” in *Paradise Lost*. Harrison points out that the first examples in Milton’s epic poem are decidedly not Edenic. The fallen angels awaking in Hell, and Sin “beginning her life as someone else” (38), show up first. After a brief, incisive analysis of these scenes, Harrison turns to how Eve and Adam narrate their experience of natality. In the rich way the self is imagined in these descriptions, Harrison argues that “Milton’s phrases express a relation in which the self lags behind itself” since “to find oneself laid or reposed is to have the presence of some prior force (that which does the laying or reposing) built into one’s sense of self” (42). This book returns again and again to this novel argument about early modern thought: consciousness is invariably intersubjective. Chapter 2 analyzes how Milton’s project of representing nascence served to reinforce and complicate his views of gender, politics, and theology. Comparing *Paradise Lost* to other representations of Eden, such as Hugo Grotius’s *Adamus Exul* (1601), Harrison asserts that Milton’s representation of Edenic natality uniquely affords us a release from the strictures of body-soul dualism. Harrison writes, “Prior to the fall, human life existed purely *as life*, in the absence of any dialectical tension with death” (92). This chapter deepens the historical context of Harrison’s readings and, by

doing so, ladders up from textual analysis to reflect on the wider theological and cosmological importance of claims about neonatal maturity.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze Thomas Traherne's appropriations of the Miltonic vocabulary about nascent thought. A theologian and poet, Traherne was Milton's contemporary, and most of his writings were lost until the late nineteenth century. Harrison offers an original argument on influence here: Traherne engaged directly with the questions of embodied knowledge first raised in *Paradise Lost*. In bringing attention to the poetry and devotional writing, Harrison affirms the complexity of his unadorned verse and even brings to light Traherne's radical claim, by way of a reflection on ant consciousness, that "all creatures 'are to be' enjoyed in and of themselves" (138). Despite this, Traherne emerges as a kind of Bad Reader: a poet who squares neonatal maturity with Cartesian metaphysics, drops the first-person perspective of Adamic awakening in *Paradise Lost*, and consequently drains the radical novelty of Milton's descriptions of waking up. Framed in this way, "Traherne's attachment to Eden is consistently aspirational, never fully recuperative" (149). Chapter 4 puts Traherne's thought into more sustained conversation with his contemporaries William Harvey and Descartes. Exploring the intellectual implications of Traherne representing his own thinking while in the womb, Harrison invites us to reflect on what it meant for thought to precede birth and the acquisition of language.

In Chapter 5, John Locke's treatment of Adamic consciousness is historicized and analyzed. With this focus, Locke "maintains the relationship between thought and consciousness as presented by Descartes," but "eliminates two important features of Cartesian thought: first, the notion that the essence of the mind is to think; and second, the position that the mind is always thinking" (228). Furthermore, the problem of natality troubled Locke's philosophy because he held that origins were integral to any understanding of idea formation, though he disputed that ideas were innate or inborn. Through an analysis of his reflections on innate ideas, Locke—who could have been a foil in the story related by *Coming To*—is instead recognized for a nuanced, ambivalent perspective on consciousness and natality.

This book builds from isolated moments of "awaking" to create an expansive history of consciousness in late seventeenth-century poetry. Harrison's prose is alive, its arguments winding toward sudden bursts of insight. Driven by a sustained engagement with key terms like "enjoy," "experience," and

“soft,” Harrison’s textured close readings animate *Coming To*’s history of ideas. As just one example, the careful reading of Eve’s language during the temptation scene illuminates the larger claims made about how *Paradise Lost* positions experience in the formation of the self and knowledge. Harrison’s book will be of interest to scholars of Renaissance literature, religion, and philosophy, particularly in the areas of experiential spirituality, devotional writing, and embodiment. Additionally, *Coming To* contributes to our understanding of the entwined early modern discourses of subjectivity, consciousness, and identity.

JOHN YARGO

University of Massachusetts Amherst

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37076>

Heffernan, Megan.

Making the Miscellany: Poetry, Print, and the History of the Book in Early Modern England.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. Pp. 336 + 33 ill. ISBN 978-0-8122-5280-4 (hardcover) US\$65.

In *Making the Miscellany*, Megan Heffernan makes a significant contribution to the study of the poetic design of early modern printed books, how volumes of compiled poems responded to changes in media, the material organization of printed poetry, the contribution of conventions and innovations of arrangement to vernacular poetic craft, and the consolidation of individual authorship. Heffernan argues “that the design of printed compilations contains a largely unstudied and undertheorized archive of poetic form” (4). She maintains that compilers experimented with individual poems in larger volumes, exploring the relation between poems and their organization and between imaginative writing and the material text. Moreover, Heffernan studies this history of textual design in connection with bibliography, book history, and literary studies, which have “obscured—the formal qualities of early modern poetry compilations and the practices that produced them” (4). Heffernan’s book revisits these editorial and critical approaches and “recovers a moment when compilers, poets, and readers were alert to a poetics of organization that exceeded the limits of the individual poem” (4). She examines “the influence of poetic form, style, and genre on