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For many decades now, literary critics and intellectual historians have traced the afterlife of medieval Catholic meditation in Protestant England. This fascinating new book aims to start the same conversation around another discipline generally associated with medieval Catholicism: apophatic theology. What became of apophatic theology in the seventeenth century, a time we associate with the advancement of knowledge rather than the appreciation of the unknowable? Over the course of an introduction and six chapters, Kevin Killeen ventures a theory: no longer primarily the province of individual mystics, the apophatic found its way into the rhetoric and poetics of early modern natural philosophy, the very discipline aiming to advance universal knowledge. Poetics are central to this argument because early modern natural philosophy was carried out not only in the laboratory (and Killeen does discuss Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke) but in the written and spoken word as well. Killeen focuses on authors whose works are carefully wrought and can be considered “poetic,” whether in prose or verse, which deal with different aspects of the ineffable in different ways. These include Lucy Hutchinson, Thomas Burnet, Jacob Boehme, Thomas Browne, Robert Boyle, Margaret Cavendish, Anna Trapnell, and John Milton.

The book’s first four chapters generally take up early modern apophatic treatments of God and creation, while the last two—while not leaving those matters behind—move into the territories of politics and hell as well. Chapter 1 explores how early moderns read the biblical book of Job less as theodicy than as natural philosophy, as a chaotic and disorienting creation narrative in tension with the more orderly hexameral account in Genesis 1. Killeen cites a number of examples of readers who used this lens, but he gives special attention to Lucy Hutchinson’s *Order and Disorder* for its Jobean disavowal of human knowledge of God’s ways, and above all to Thomas Burnet’s 1681 *Telluris Theoria Sacra*, “a splendid, demented farrago of the biblical and scientific” (p. 38). Chapter 2 then focuses on the apophatic poetics of Jacob Boehme. Like the book of Job, Boehme’s 1623 *Mag-
num Mysterium takes up God’s creation of the world in a defamiliarizing and unsettling way: for Boehme, who influenced religious radicals in England, reality “thicken[s] into being” out of God (p. 61), who is both evil and good, anger and love. The material world, humans included, is for Boehme a negligible outward husk of the inward spiritual being that has its origin in a pre-primordial Ungrund or “abyss” that cannot be approached by rational thought or language. Boehme’s poetics aim not to explain this, but to enable readers to “avoid a state in which things remain merely, rather than apophatically unknown” (p. 65).

Thomas Browne, too, can be located in the apophatic tradition, Killeen argues in the third chapter. Browne’s genre-exploding 1658 The Garden of Cyrus “should be seen as a work of scientific apophasis” which “has its crescendo in the unknowable” (p. 93). Unlike earlier authors in the tradition of negative theology (some of whom are surveyed here), Browne deploys the apophatic “as a way to incorporate our constitutional ignorance of at least certain things into our understanding of the world” (p. 101) rather than in the service of personal piety. The quincunxes Browne saw everywhere in nature fleetingly and obliquely convey facets of the unknowable and unspeakable God. Killeen then turns in his fourth chapter to authors more frequently discussed by historians of science, as he considers the new unknowability of the most seemingly knowable objects with the advent of microscopy and attendant resurgence of atomism. Thinkers such as Robert Boyle, Robert Hooke, Henry Power, and Margaret Cavendish had to grapple with the discovery that ordinary physical surfaces that seemed solid were in fact full of holes: What held them together? While the ancient atomist poet Lucretius was no longer useful to experimentalists scientifically, his De Rerum Natura provided “a provocative poetic for thinking through the relationship between the infinitesimal and the quotidian” (p. 122) that was widely exploited in the period. Among these early modern authors, Killeen shows how Cavendish stands apart, producing “her own, very particular terms of reference” wherein matter knows and moves itself (p. 139).

In chapter 5, Killeen returns the focus to a single author and text: in this case, the Fifth Monarchist Anna Trapnel’s The Cry of a Stone, spectacularly delivered from the Palace at Whitehall over the course of several days in 1654 and (partially) taken down in shorthand by a listener. While Trapnel’s prophesies are political, taking Cromwell to task for his hypocrisy in setting himself over the sometime English Republic, they are also apophatic in that they must represent God, translating “a thing that is like, but is not, anger into human, political-moral terms” (p. 144). The Cry of a Stone is crafted, incredibly biblically informed, and subversive of human authority and the book-learning and false language of university men; it is also “disarranged, awry, and elliptical,” the product of an overwhelming spiritual experience on Trapnel’s part (p. 163). In its disruption of sober, rational theology, Killeen points out, it bears a clear family resemblance to both Boehme’s bewildering theopoetics and even the human-demoting tour de force of the book of Job. With the theodical book of Job in mind, Killeen moves to his last full chapter, on Milton’s 1667 Paradise Lost. Here he acknowledges that Milton seems religiously and temperamentally out of step with both Catholic mysticism and the enthusiasm of religious radicals: Paradise Lost is after all aimed at justifying God’s ways. Nonetheless, he argues, “there is not really any other work of seventeenth-century thought that trades so fully, so brazenly in the unknowable” (p. 168). Focusing especially on its mind-bending anti-depictions of hell and chaos, Killeen concludes (distinguishing his from number of other readings, which he generously cites) that the poem’s “dissonances and contradictions are structural, load-bearing facets of Milton’s theology” (p. 173). Killeen states his final conclusion in contrast with Stanley Fish’s influential idea that “the reader comes to the epic with the answer”; for Killeen, “there is less a neg-
ative theology in *Paradise Lost* than a theology of disorientation” as the poem always insists on the unknowability of its subjects (p. 197). A brief epilogue then closes the book with Killeen’s reflections on “ordinary and exquisite bafflement,” the strange continuities and alliances that show up between royalists and radicals, sober scientists and ranting enthusiasts, when their apophaticism is brought into focus.

To name some drawbacks: especially in the first and last chapters, the book is occasionally open to the charge of asserting more than demonstrating its claims. Killeen’s treatment of Job and Genesis, for instance, might carry more weight with skeptical readers if it contained more quotation and close reading of the Bible and less colorful representation of Job in Killeen’s own voice. (Throughout, for instance, Killeen refers to “the” creation narrative in Genesis, singular, when there are two of these, with the one in Genesis 2 not conforming quite so well to his order-and-disorder binary vis-à-vis Job.) This desire for more and closer engagement with the primary text surfaced for me in the final chapter, on *Paradise Lost*, for instance when Killeen writes we have lost Eden “irrevocably” (p. 167; the narrator declares in the invocation that we will regain it), or that Satan lands “on” a sunspot in *Paradise Lost* 3.588 (p. 177). Satan is the sunspot! At the level of the central argument, at times—when he discussed Hutchinson and Milton, for example—I wondered if Killeen needed a third category between “knowable” and “unknowable.” Just as there was a strong tradition of apophaticism in pre-Reformation Christianity, there was also a strong tradition holding that humans can often speak meaningfully if not perfectly about God and the eternal because of a divinely instituted analogical relationship between ourselves and those realms. Thus Lucy Hutchinson’s account of creation in *Order and Disorder* or Raphael’s in *Paradise Lost* need not be either perfectly understandable nor wholly ineffable, but rather accessing those eternal realities “in some sort,” to use Hutchinson’s wording (*Order and Disorder* 1.58).

These are small quibbles, however, and they go to show how engaging and thought-provoking is *The Unknowable in Early Modern Thought*. The book is well worth a read by historians or literary critics interested in deepening and broadening their understanding of seventeenth-century literature and culture. Killeen has carefully read a number of lengthy, complicated texts and helps us to see not only their “arguments”—he persuasively shows that many are not subject to this kind of reduction—but also to appreciate their poetics. He engages throughout, generously, with relevant secondary work, and he keeps a helpful hold on his overarching thesis. Killeen’s love for his material is on full view, he productively presses us to think more deeply about poetics as constitutive of thought, and he (like Amos Funkenstein before him) moves us a notch or two closer to understanding the peculiar early modern mind.