1950

Augustan criticism of Milton, 1667-1725

Richard L. Darling

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AUGUSTAN CRITICISM
of
Milton
1667 - 1725

by

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B.A., Montana State University, 1948

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Montana State University
1950

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The purpose of the following study is two-fold; first, to trace the rise of criticism of *Paradise Lost*, the only poem of Milton given critical attention until later in the eighteenth century, and to contribute a few chapters to a history of Milton criticism; second, to gather together in one study the scattered criticism of *Paradise Lost* of the three earliest Milton critics, John Dryden, John Dennis, and Joseph Addison.

Even though Milton’s poetry was not so completely neglected as some later writers would lead us to believe, even though Milton’s poetry may well have been read and criticized orally by the coffee-house critics, the first widely circulated and widely influential criticism of Milton was contained in the writing of these three critics. Because Dryden criticized Milton only incidentally, it may be argued that he can hardly be called a Milton critic; however, since both Addison and Dennis considered him as such, and since both later critics found it necessary to answer certain strictures Dryden had made, it is not only logical, but necessary that Dryden be the first critic considered in this study in order to understand the two later critics.
No earlier study has attempted to cover this material.

While Professor Havens' *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry* is essential to an understanding of Milton's influence on later poets, it does not attempt to deal in detail with Milton criticism. Saintsbury's *History of English Criticism*, since it is interested chiefly in the development of criticism, *per se*, and in the evaluation of critics, makes no attempt to trace criticism of any particular writer.

William Riley Parker, in *Milton's Contemporary Reputation*, deals entirely with the period of prose controversy and with attacks on Milton and on his prose pamphlets. Only in a supplementary list of allusions to Milton does he enter the period in which criticism of the poetry was appearing.

A. J. A. Waldock's *Paradise Lost and its Critics*, despite its title, is chiefly devoted to the exposition of Mr. Waldock's own theories on the meaning and significance of the poem, not with the history of *Paradise Lost* criticism. A complete history of Milton criticism still waits to be done. The study to follow provides a partial introduction and three chapters for such a history.
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

No critic writes in isolation from the critical thought and critical problems of his day. It is necessary, therefore, to examine the tenor of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century criticism to understand Augustan criticism of Milton, a part of a large body of critical writing. The problems that faced the critics in examining other works could not be ignored in examining the works of Milton. In fact, it is in terms of these problems that most criticism of the period was made.

However, it is impossible to find a neo-classical theory of criticism applicable to all critics, or even to one critic. Each critic is different from the next and is inconsistent with himself. Nothing more is possible than to trace varied and fluctuating theories, suggesting here that a majority of critics endorsed a particular idea, and there that no two people seem to agree. When they seem to agree we find them contradicting themselves a few pages later. The only broad generalization that can be made is that all the critics approach certain problems, though from several points of view.
The problems with which the Augustan critics were concerned fall into two general groups. The first group consists of problems which had been handed down to them from critics of the past and which seem to be problems of concern, to some extent at least, to critics of every age. Among this group we find such questions as whether rules or natural genius avails the most in creating works of art and whether poetry should instruct the reader or should delight him. The second group of problems was peculiar to their own time. Among these we find the problem of taste, the problem of rhyme versus blank verse, the battle of the ancients and moderns, and the problem of the role of language in the creation of art. Every critic, in one way or another, was forced to take some stand on these problems.

- 1 -

English neo-classical critics inherited a wholesale set of rules for writing from French neo-classical critics and from ancient critics. What importance to attach to these rules was one of the most momentous critical problems of the day. On this question, whether rules or natural genius availed most, raged one of the greatest controversies of the age.
Boileau, in his "Art of Poetry" had said "To leave known rules you cannot be allowed," and had demanded strict adherence to the unities. Rapin had expressed much the same doctrine and, following Rapin, whom he translated, Thomas Rymer believed in similar ideas. The main trouble with the English poets, he thought, was that they did not follow the rules, or did not know them. He said, in his preface to the translation of Rapin, (1674),

...how unhappy the greatest English poets have been through their ignorance or negligence of these fundamental Rules and Laws of Aristotle. In A Short View of Tragedy (1692), Rymer goes even farther, demanding that the English writers return to the ancient Greek forms and rules for tragedy. Particularly must the chorus be included in English tragedy because the chorus is necessary to keep the poet to the rules of place and time. "The Chorus," Rymer says, "was the root and original, and is certainly always the most necessary part, of Tragedy."  

Charles Gildon, in The Complete Art of Poetry (1718), represents the same narrow point of view. Without the rules poetry becomes incoherent and mad. It is necessary, he says, to use

1Barrett H. Clark, European Theories of the Drama, p. 160.  
3Ibid., 209.
the Rules of Art, in Poetry, without which all
must be governed by unruly Fancy, and Poetry
become the Land of Confusion, which is in
Reality, the Kingdom of Beauty, Order, and
Harmony.4

It is interesting to note that the critics of this extreme
position were, in general, those whose reputations barely
outlasted them. Rymer was attacked by Swift in The Battle
of the Books as was Gildon by Pope in the "Epistle to
Augustus."

The majority of Augustan critics, feeling that the
rules were useful guides, nevertheless, felt that they were
not all-important. This group was able to find support
from ancient critics, for Horace had said,

It has been made a question, whether good poetry
be derived from nature or from art. For my part,
I can neither conceive what study can do without
the aid of a rich natural vein, nor what rude
genius can avail of itself.5

This middle-of-the-road position was the one which most of
the critics followed.

Addison is most representative of this middle-of-the-
road school.6 In his essay on taste he advises the person
who would develop good taste to read all the critics and
to be familiar with all the rules. However, he goes on to
say,

4Willard Higley Durham, Critical Essays of the Eighteenth
Century, 1700-1725, p. 18.
6For more detailed information on Addison see Chapter V,
below.
I must confess that I could wish there were authors of this kind, who, beside the mechanical rules, which a man of very little taste may discourse upon, would enter into the very spirit and soul of fine writing, and show us the several sources of that pleasure which rises in the mind upon the perusal of a noble work. Thus, although in poetry it be absolutely necessary that the unities of time, place, and action, with other points of the same nature, should be thoroughly explained and understood, there is still something more essential to the art, something that elevates and astonishes the fancy, and gives a greatness of mind to the reader, which few of the critics beside Longinus have considered. 7

Addison, himself, attempted to fill this need by codifying the more intangible delights of poetry in his papers "On The Pleasures of the Imagination," 8 giving further evidence that he believed the mechanical rules alone were insufficient.

Edward Phillips, a lesser critic, is close to Addison in his attitude toward the rules. In his preface to Theatrum Poetarum (1675), like Kymer, he asks that English tragedy return to the ancient form, adding the chorus to ensure adherence to the unities, but later in the same work he says,

...may, though all the Laws of Heroic Poem, all the Laws of Tragedy were exactly observed, yet still this tour entrejeant, this Poetic Energie, if I may so call it, would be required to give life to all the rest. 9

7 Spectator 409.
8 Spectator 411-421.
The Earl of Mulgrave, praised by Pope in the "Essay on Criticism," can also be included in this group, for though he sets up rules for writing in "An Essay upon Poetry" (1682), he says that they are nothing without genius.10

Although Pope, at times, advised the poet to follow the rules, and indeed had a healthy respect for them, it is safe to say that he considered natural parts of great importance. In Part I of "An Essay on Criticism," when he says,

Those Rules of old discover'd not devis'd,
Are Nature still, but Nature methodiz'd:
Nature, like liberty, is but restrain'd
By the same laws which first herself ordain'd.11

he seems to be defending the rules, which he equates with nature, but in Part II of the same poem he indicates clearly what the result will be if a poet does nothing but follow the rules.

But in such lays as neither ebb nor flow,
Correctly cold, and regularly low,
That, shunning faults, one quiet tenour keep,
We cannot blame indeed—but we may sleep.12

In this statement Pope is, in reality, closer to the third group, defenders of the Ancients in the "Battle of the Books" and precursors of Romantic thought.

The third group, a comparatively small group of critics,

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10Ibid., II, 286.
11Lines 88-91.
12Lines 39-42.
speaks almost deprecatingly of the rules. These critics say that the rules have some use but are beyond doubt the least important factor in the goodness or badness of poetry. In his essay "Of Poetry" (1690), Sir William Temple says,

> The Truth is, there is something in the Genius of Poetry too Libertine to be confined to so many Rules; and whoever goes about to subject it to such Constraints loses both its Spirit and Grace, which are ever Native, and never learnt, even of the best Masters.13

In the same essay he says,

> ...the utmost that can be atchieved (sic) or, I think, pretended by any Rules in this Art is but to hinder some men from being very ill Poets, but not to make any man a very good one.14

Leonard Welstead, in "A Dissertation Concerning the Perfection of the English Language, The State of Poetry &C." (1724), gives even less credit to the rules than does Sir William Temple. He says of the rules,

> All that the Ancients, or the Moderns copying after them, have written on this Scheme, is no more than a Sett (sic) of very obvious Thoughts and Observations, which every Man of good sense naturally knows without being taught, and which never made a good Poet, or mended a bad one.15

Robert Wolseley, in the preface to Valentinian (1685), represents a similar attitude when he says that "too nice

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14Ibid., III, 84.
a Correctness will be apt to deaden the Life and make the Piece too stiff. 16

The majority of the English neo-classical critics, then, did not believe that the rules were the final test of literary excellence. Attempting to apply rules they found it necessary to condemn most of their greatest poets, and this they were unwilling, for the most part, to do. Rymer, indeed, condemned Beaumont and Fletcher, Shakespeare, and Milton, because their works were irregular, but most of the critics believed that these writers were great even though they did not follow the rules. Edward Phillips expresses the sentiment of most of them when he says,

...let us observe Spencer, with all his Rustie, obsolete words, with all his rough-hewn clowterly Verses, yet take him throughout, and we shall find in him a gracefull and Poetic Majesty; in like manner Shakespeare, in spight (sic) of all his unfiled expressions, his rambling and indigested Fancys, the laughter of the Critical, yet must be confess't a Poet above many that go beyond him in Literature some degrees. 17

--- 2 ---

But if the rules did not explain the greatness of some of their greatest poets, some other explanation had to be

17 Ibid., II, 271.
found. The Augustans then turned to the Neo-Platonic ideas on natural genius and the sublime of Longinus, for a classical justification of "natural parts."

Longinus does discount the mechanical rules, although, at the same time he sets up a new set of rules, a set of rules for attaining the sublime in writing, which made him completely acceptable to the neo-classicist. Rules, he says, can be determined in the sublime, rules of degree, of fitting occasion, of unerring practise, and of application.\textsuperscript{18}

Art, to some extent, can aid in the achievement of the sublime, for among the sources of the lofty style are the proper handling of figures, which again seem to fall under two heads, figures of thought and figures of diction; then noble phraseology, with its subdivisions, choice of words, and use of tropes and of elaboration; and...that cause of greatness which includes in itself all that preceded it, dignified and spirited composition.\textsuperscript{19}

However, despite these rules, Longinus believed that great natural genius was important in attaining sublimity. "Sublimity," he said, "is the note which rings from a great mind."\textsuperscript{20} The two most important sources of sublimity are derived from nature.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18}Longinus, \textit{A Treatise Concerning Sublimity}, p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 13.
\item \textsuperscript{20}Ibid., p. 14.
\end{itemize}
First and most potent is the faculty of grasping great conceptions, .... Second comes passion, strong and impetuous. These two constituents of sublimity are in most cases native-born....

Great conceptions we may understand as those which give "much food for reflection." He says, again, on passion,

I should feel confidence in maintaining that nothing reaches great eloquence so surely as genuine passion in the right place; it breathes the vehemence of frenzy and divine possession, and makes the very words inspired.

Following up the Platonic idea of the divine possession of the artist, Longinus says that "other qualities prove those who possess them to be men, sublimity raises them almost to the intellectual greatness of God." The man raised thus high has little need for a set of rules to guide him, and, indeed, can be forgiven little faults, since "precision in every detail comes perilously near littleness." "This may perhaps be a necessary law," Longinus says,

that...humble or modest genius, which never runs a risk, and never aims at excellence, remains in most cases without a failure and in comparative safety; but that what is great is hazardous by very reason of the greatness.

This "law" became one of the mainstays of neo-classical criticism.

Addison and John Dennis, perhaps, show more of the

\[21\textit{Ibid.}, \text{p. 13.}\]
\[22\textit{Ibid.}, \text{p. 14.}\]
\[23\textit{Ibid.}, \text{p. 66.}\]
\[24\textit{Ibid.}, \text{p. 61.}\]
influence of Longinus than any other critics of the period. In at least two papers, Addison recommends the reading of Longinus to his readers and certainly he had read Longinus carefully himself. In several papers he discusses natural genius and sublimity. He says that there are beauties in the works of a great genius who knows no rules of art that can never be found in the writings of a lesser poet who follows them scrupulously. What is more,

We may often take notice of men who are perfectly acquainted with all the rules of good writing, and notwithstanding choose to depart from them on extraordinary occasions. I could give instances out of all the tragic writers of antiquity who have shown their judgment in this particular; and purposely receded from an established rule of the drama, when it has made way for a much higher beauty than the observation of such a rule would have been. *(this) is what we call the sublime in writing.*

In another paper he divided great geniuses into two groups; first, the natural geniuses who reach the sublime by nature; and second, the geniuses who have used art to reach the sublime. "Among great geniuses," he says,

those few draw the admiration of the world upon them, and stand up as the prodigies of mankind, who by the mere strength of natural parts, and without any assistance from art or learning, have produced works that were the delight of their own times, and the wonder of posterity. There appears something nobly wild and extravagant in these great natural geniuses, that is infinitely more beautiful than all turn and polishing of what the French call a bel esprit, by which they would

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25*Spectator* 160 and 592.
26*Spectator* 592.
express a genius refined by conversation, reflection, and the reading of the most polite authors.27

Longinus had said that another road which led to the sublime was the "imitation and emulation of great writers and poets, who have been before us".28 It is partly on this distinction that Addison bases his second group.

The second class of great geniuses are those that have formed themselves by rules, and submitted the greatness of their natural talents to the corrections and restraints of art.... The great danger in the latter kind of geniuses is, lest they cramp their own abilities too much by imitation, and form themselves altogether upon models, without giving the full play to their own natural parts. An imitation of the best authors is not to compare with a good original.29

What John Dennis calls "Poetical Enthusiasm", is actually the sublime under a different name. "Poetical Enthusiasm," Dennis tells us,

is a Passion guided by Judgment, whose Cause is not comprehended by us. That it is a Passion, is plain, because it moves. That the Cause is not comprehended is self-evident. That it ought to be guided by Judgment, is indubitable. For otherwise it would be Madness, and not Poetical Passion.30

Genius, he tells us, is "nothing but passion."31 Genius, however, is not ordinary passion. It is enthusiastic passion. Ordinary passions are derived from things, while

27 Spectator 160.
29 Spectator 160.
31 Ibid., I, 135.
enthusiastic passions are derived from the thoughts which those things produce. Here we hear echoed Longinus' great conceptions which give "much food for reflection." In order to raise the enthusiastic passions in the reader, they must be raised in the poet. When he is full of enthusiasm he will find the words and harmonies necessary to convey the spirit of his poem. "Poetical Genius is the power of expressing such passion worthily."32

Dennis believed that religious subjects are the best to furnish thoughts capable of exciting the enthusiastic passions and of rising to the heights of sublimity.

For all which is great in Religion, is most excited and amazing; all that is joyful, is transporting; all that is sad, is dismal, and all that is terrible, is astonishing.34

Shaftesbury shows most clearly the importance of one Longinian idea for English criticism. It is Longinus' idea that the great natural genius comes near to the intellectual greatness of God that Shaftesbury follows up. "No poet," he says, 

...can do anything great in his own way, without the Imagination or Supposition of a Divine Presence, which may raise him to some degree of Passion we are speaking of. (Enthusiasm) For Poets are Fanaticks too.33

Shaftesbury felt that the poet had divine inspiration and was above the rules.

32 Ibid., I, 222.
33 Ibid., I, 218.
34 Earl of Shaftesbury, Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, I, 61.
Something there will be of Extravagance and Fury, when the Ideas or Images receiv'd are too big for the narrow human vessel to contain. So that Inspiration may be justly called Divine Enthusiasm; For the Word it-self signifies Divine Preference, and was made use of by the Philosopher whom the earliest Christian Fathers call'd Divine, to express whatever was sublime in human Passions.

From this idea of closeness to God we derive the theory that finally enabled the English critics to account for their greatest poets. If the poet was sublime, he came close to divine perfection. Poetry that was in some way divine could not be forced to submit to man-made rules but soared above them. Rules, then, were for a lower level of creation. The higher level was exempt from the regulations placed upon baser matter. The merely good poet might be forced to follow the rules, but the great poet or natural genius, even though he had imperfections and did not follow rules, because of his divinity could be explained and praised.

In order to decide whether or not a poet came closer to divine perfection, the neo-classicist critic pointed out the "beauties and faults" of his works and then added them up and weighed them in a balance, one against the other. If the beauties, particularly beauties of sublimity, sufficiently outweighed the faults, it made little difference that the rules had not been followed completely. Longinus had said,

\[35\text{Ibid., I, 53.}\]
I know, for my own part, that genius of surpassing greatness has always the least clear record. Precision in every detail comes perilously near littleness.86

Such a statement, as well as his general theory, supported the Augustan critics in their method.

-3-

Another major problem for the neo-classical critic was whether poetry was most bound to instruct or to please. This problem had been raised by Horace in his "Art of Poetry" when he said,

Poets wish either to profit or to delight; or to deliver at once both the pleasures and the necessaries of life.... He who unites the instructive with the agreeable, carries off every vote, by delighting and at the same time admonishing the reader.37

Horace, then, felt that both Utile and Dulce were of equal importance. Many of the English critics, however, were unable to accept this equal division of instruction and delighting.

This problem manifested itself chiefly in the controversy over poetic justice. Rymer was one of the critics who most strongly insisted on strict poetic justice. In Tragedies of the Last Age Consider'd and Examined by the Practice of the

Ancients and by the Common Sense of All Ages (1678), he says,

And besides the purging of the passions, something must stick by observing that constant order, that harmony and beauty of Providence, that necessary relation and chain, whereby the causes and the effects, the virtues and rewards, the vices and their punishments are proportion'd and linked together, how deep and dark soever are laid the Springs and however intricate and involv'd are their operations.\(^\text{38}\)

In the same book he says that because history shows the same evils befalling the just and unjust alike, historical truth is improper to illustrate the universal truths of poetry. The poets,

Finding also that this unequal distribution of rewards and punishments did perplex the wisest, and by the Atheist was made a scandal to the Divine Providence, They concluded that a Poet must of necessity see justice exactly administered, if he intended to please.\(^\text{39}\)

We see from this that Rymer believed that what pleased could only do so if it showed morality in the most instructive manner. For him, then, delight and instruction are both the same thing, namely, instruction.

Sir Richard Blackmore, the poet-physician, author of several epics which were considered dull even by his contemporaries, expresses even more positively the same attitude. He says, in the preface to Prince Arthur, An Heroick Poem (1695),

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., II, 188.
To what ill purposes soever Poetry has been abuse'd, its true and genuine End is, by Universal Confession, the Instruction of our Minds and Regulation of our Manners...  

More specifically dealing with poetic justice he says that the poet's duty is "to represent Vice as the most odious, and Virtue as the most desirable thing in the World." In the same preface Blackmore attacks the stage on much the same grounds that Jeremy Collier was to attack it three years later. Such a non-literary attack on the stage could only have been made if the critics believed that the business of poetry was to teach the most narrow sort of moral truths. Certainly they did not believe that delight had any primary purpose in poetry, nor did they apply any catharsis theory to the stage of their day.

The only important opposing stand on poetic justice was taken by Addison. In one of his papers on tragedy he said,

The English writers are possessed with a notion, that when they represent a virtuous or innocent person in distress, they ought not to leave him till they have delivered him out of his troubles, or made him triumph over his enemies. This error they have been led into by a ridiculous doctrine in modern criticism, that they are obliged to an equal distribution of rewards and punishments, and an impartial execution of poetical justice. Who were the first that established this rule I know not; but I am sure it has no foundation in nature, in reason, or

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40 Ibid., III, 227.
41 Ibid., III, 228.
in the practice of the ancients. We find that good and evil happen alike to all men on this side the grave.42

Addison probably did not believe that completely vicious characters should go unpunished, but his ideas about rewarding the virtuous certainly were more liberal than were those of most critics of his age. More than half a century later Dr. Johnson could still criticize Shakespeare for his treatment of Cordelia in King Lear. Addison was attacked by Dennis for his attitude toward poetic justice, but was defended in an anonymous letter to the Spectator.43

Closely connected to this problem was the problem of choice of subject. A few of the critics maintained that the subject of poetry had to be great in order that the poetry be great. The Earl of Roscommon in "An Essay on Translated Verse" (1684), said,

Take then a Subject proper to expound:  
But Moral, Great, and Worth a Poet's Voice,  
For Men of sense despise a trivial Choice.44

Dennis shared this point of view, to some extent at least, for it is apparent from his remarks on Milton that he felt that a great part of Milton's success in Paradise Lost was due to his choice of subject.

But the majority of the critics, following Boileau, did not share this attitude. Boileau had said,

42 Spectator 40.  
43 Spectator 548.  
There's not a monster bred beneath the sky, but, well-disposed by art, may please the eye.  

Addison echoes his thought when he says that "anything that is disagreeable when looked upon pleases us in an apt description."  

Robert Wolfeley, defending Lord Rochester against the Earl of Mulgrave, makes a similar statement.  

He says,  

...it never yet came into any man's head who pretended to be a Critick, except this Essayer's, that the Wit of a Poet was to be measur'd by the worth of his Subject, and that when this was bad, that must be so too: the manner of treating his Subject has been hitherto too thought the true Test.  

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For those critics who felt that the rules were not the final test of art, some other method had to be found for judging. In "taste," which Addison defines as "that faculty of the soul, which discerns the beauties of an author with pleasure and the imperfections with dislike," they found a standard. "...Nothing which is found charming or delightful in the polite world," says the Earl of Shaftesbury,  

--- 4 ---  

46 Spectator 418.  
48 Spectator 409.
nothing which is adopted as pleasure or entertainment of whatever kind, can any way be accounted for, supported, or established without the pre-establishment or supposition of a certain taste. 49

Where this taste came from greatly disturbed the critics.

One school of thought held that taste was innate, that only he who was born with taste could ever have it. On taste Leonard Welstead says,

Many of the Graces in Poetry may, I grant, be talked of in very intelligible language, but intelligible only to those who have a natural taste for it, or are born with the talent of judging: To have what we call taste, is having, one may say, a new sense or faculty, superadded to the ordinary ones of the soul, the prerogative of fine spirit, and to go about to pedagogue a man into this sort of knowledge, who has not the seeds of it in himself, is the same thing, as if one should endeavour to teach an art of seeing without eyes: True conceptions of poetry can no more be communicated to one born without taste, than adequate ideas of colours can be given to one born without sight. 50

Addison, to a great extent, agreed with Welstead. "The faculty must in some degree be born with us," Addison says. However, he goes on to say that there are methods of procuring taste. It may be acquired by reading "the most polite authors," by conversing with men "of a polite genius," and by knowing well the works of the best critics,

ancient and modern. Pope believed, apparently, that taste was innate, but he believed that every man had at least the foundation of taste already.

The general tenor of opinion, however, was that taste is not innate. Locke had already proved in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, that we have no innate ideas. We are born with minds like clean slates or like empty cupboards. According to Shaftesbury, taste comes from "use, practise, and culture."

A legitimate and just Taste can neither be begotten, made, conceived or produced, without the antecedent labour and pains of CRITICISM.

He says that the means of acquiring taste is through forming the judgment on "right Models of Perfection."

In this respect he resembles Addison.

Taste, then, whether innate or not, could be improved by learning. Even though every man might or might not have the seeds of taste, we can assume with Addison that "a man of a polite imagination is let into a great many pleasures that the vulgar are not capable of receiving."

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51 Spectator 409.
52 Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism" Part I, Lines 19-20. "Yet if we look more closely, we shall find, Most have the seeds of judgment in their mind."
54 Ibid., I, 338.
Whether it was best to use rhyme or blank verse in writing poetry was another problem that vexed the neoclassicist. Rhyme was used more widely than blank verse, of course, though more poetry was written in blank verse during the period than is commonly supposed. Dryden praised the use of rhyme in his "Essay of Dramatick Poesy" and used it, for the most part, in his own writing. Rhyme was, however, constantly under attack.

Roscommon, in "An Essay on Translated Verse" says,

Of many faults rhyme is perhaps the Cause; Too strict to rhyme, we slight more useful Laws; Shaftesbury is even more violent in his sentiments toward rhyme.

But so much are our British Poets taken up, in seeking out that monstrous Ornament which we call Rhyme, that 'tis no wonder if other Ornaments, and real Graces are unthought of, and left un-attempted.

He does not condemn the British poets completely, however, for he praises them as the first modern poets in Europe to attempt "to throw off the horrid Discord of jingling Rhyme." Perhaps the most moderate approach to the problem is that of Dennis, who believed that blank verse was best for some kinds of poetry and rhyme for others. Blank verse

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was best for noble and vigorous poetry, but rhyme best for tender and soft poetry. 58

The use of archaic and obsolete language was also under attack. Many of the critics believed that current usage was the test of the language to be used in poetry. Robert Wolseley says

That present Use is the final Judge of Language... which forbids us those antiquated Words and obsoleted Idioms of Speech whose Worth time has worn out. 59

Pope also believed that current usage was the standard for word choice. Some of his most oft-quoted lines were written on this subject.

Some by old words to fame have made pretence,
Ancients in phrase, mere moderns in their sense.
Such labour'd nothings, in so strange a style
Amaze th' unlearned, and make the learned smile.

In words as fashions the same rule will hold,
Alike fantastic if too new or old.
Be not the first by whom the new are tried,
Nor yet the last to lay the old aside. 60

Leonard Welstead says virtually the same thing about foreign words introduced into the language. "Nor does anything," he says,

require greater Skill or Delicacy, than to improve a Language by introducing foreign Treasures into it; the Words, so introduc'd, ought to be such, as, in a manner, naturalize themselves; that is, they ought to fall into the Idiom, and suit with the Genius of the Tongue, they are brought into, so luckily, as

almost to seem, originally, of its own Growth; otherwise, the Attempt will end in nothing but an uncouth unnatural Jargon, like the Phrase and Stile of Milton, which is a second Babel, or Confusion of all Languages; a fault, that can never be enough regretted in that immortal Poet, and which if he had wanted, he had perhaps wanted a Superior. 61

Dryden, Dennis, and Addison, as we shall see, did not object to the use of old words. These were the chief problems of the Augustan critics. It was with these problems in mind that the three critics with whom we shall deal in more detail, Dryden, Dennis, and Addison, approached Milton's work. Not only did these critics have the problems we have discussed closely in mind, but also a general theory of the epic based on Aristotle and on the commentaries of the French critics, modified, of course, by certain English ideas, and by the ideas of the individual critics concerned. It is with this basic epic theory that we shall concern ourselves in the next chapter.

Chapter II

Augustan Theories of the Epic

Even though Aristotle had said that tragedy was the highest form of poetry, Augustan critics, who felt for the most part that the chief function of poetry was to provide moral instruction, and that the epic was most capable of instructing, considered the epic the greatest genre. To say that the heroic poem was the greatest work of mankind became almost a commonplace during most of the period, and most critics of the period had something to say about the epic. The interest in the epic was not merely critical, however, for many poets of the Augustan period attempted to create a work in the epic genre. In 1650 Sir William Davenant published his Gondibert. Cowley published his Davideis in 1656. But Sir Richard Blackmore was probably the most prolific writer of epics in the period with Prince Arthur (1695), King Arthur (1697).

1 Much of my discussion of epic theory is based on H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., The Theory of the Epic in England, 1660-1800, University of California Publications in English, Vol. XV, University of California Press, 1944. Mr. Swedenberg's arrangement of his quotations in anthology style makes that material particularly helpful.

and Alfred (1728). This interest manifested itself, also, in the many translations of both Homer and Virgil made during the period by such writers as Dryden, Pope, Ogilby and Hobbes.

The actual theories of the epic of the period found their basis in the criticism of Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus, and in the writings of the Italian critics of the Renaissance. More directly affecting English epic theory, however, were the French neo-classical critics, particularly Bossu, whose Traité du poème épique was the accepted manual of epic criticism in England. Critic after critic quotes from Bossu or cites him as an authority on heroic poetry. Boileau and others influenced English criticism of the period — Boileau, in particular, was instrumental in interesting the English in the sublime in epic poetry. English criticism itself has practically no discussion of the epic until after the middle of the Seventeenth Century.

The bulk of English epic criticism begins about the time of the publication of Davenant's Gondibert in 1650. Thomas Hobbes gives an unusual definition of the epic in "The Answer of Mr. Hobbs to Sr. William D'Avenant's Preface before Gondibert" (1650).


4For a discussion of English epic criticism before 1650 see Ibid., pp. 27-31.
For the Heroick Poem narrative (such as is yours) is called an Epick Poeme: The Heroick Poeme Dramatick, is Tragedy.... The Figure therefore of an Epick Poem, and of a Tragedy, ought to be the same, for they differ not more in that they are pronounced by one or many persons. Which I insert to justify the figure of yours, consisting of five books divided into Songs or Cantos, as five Acts divided into Scenes has ever been the approved figure of a Tragedy.

No later critic followed this dramatic definition of epic form.

Much more widely accepted was Bossu's definition of the epic.

L'Epopee est un discours inventé avec art, pour former les moeurs par des instructions déguisées sous les allegories d'une action importante, qui est racontée en vers d'une manière vrai-sensible, divertissante, & merveilleuse.

Almost all Augustan critics accepted this definition, though many of them did place the major emphasis on different parts of the definition. Sir Richard Blackmore's definition in the preface to Prince Arthur (1695) sounds almost like a loose paraphrase of Bossu.

An Epick Poem is a feign'd or devis'd story of an Illustrious Action, related in Verse, in an Allegorical, Probable, and Admirable manner, to cultivate the Mind with Instructions of Virtue. 'Tis a feign'd or devis'd Discourse; that is, a Fable.

Both Dryden and Dennis merely repeat Bossu's definition. Addison, Trapp, and several others differ only in minor parts of their definition.

5 Ibid., p. 156
6 Ibid., p. 155, as quoted from Traite du poeme epique.
7 Ibid., p. 157.
Following Bossu, the English Augustan critics divided their discussions of the epic into several specific parts. Most important, and always discussed first, were the fable and the action. There was a great deal of confusion about the actual meaning of these terms. Bossu thought of the fable as an actual fable like those of Aesop, fashioned to teach a preconceived moral. Many of the English critics followed him without question. Dryden says,

For the Moral (as Bossu observes) is the first business of the Poet, as being the groundwork of his Instruction. This being formed, he contrives such a Design, or Fable, as may be most suitable to the Moral.  

The fable or design for Dryden is apparently the whole plan of the poem. Dennis was in close agreement with Dryden. Addison believed that the fable relates the action, making action a more confined term than fable, and in this, Blackmore closely resembles him.

Joseph Trapp, in his preface to Aeneis (1718) attempts to clarify the meaning of these two loosely used terms.

By Those who commonly discourse of Heroic, and Dramatic Poetry, The Action, and the Fable seem not to be sufficiently distinguished. The Action is a great Achievement of some illustrious Person, attended with an important and memorable Event. The Fable is That Complication of Incidents Episodes, and other Circumstances, which tend to the carrying on of the Action, or give Reasons for it, or at least embellish and adorn it.  

8 Ibid., p. 170.
9 Ibid., pp. 178-9.
Trapp's use of these terms makes it easier to understand the use of the other critics. The fable included the story together with episodic materials while the action concerned only the main project of the leading character.

Most commonly said about the action was that it should be one, great, and complete. Sir Richard Blackmore in *Essays upon Several Subjects* (1716), says

> As the principal action ought to be one, so it ought to be important; the reason is, that it may excite admiration, which is essential, as before has been shown, to this species of poetry.  

Addison says virtually the same thing in *Spectator* 267.

> This action should have three qualifications in it. First, it should be one action. Secondly, it should be an entire action; and thirdly, it should be a great action....

Almost no one would have disagreed with them, since greatness was necessary for instructing and since an incomplete or disunified structure would have failed to point the moral.

Most of the Augustans believed that the action should end happily and successfully for the hero. Addison and Blackmore were the chief dissenters from this orthodox opinion. Blackmore said,

> There is no necessity that the hero should finish the action with victory and renown, if we reflect, that the end of the epic

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Poet may be equally attain'd, tho' the Event should be unfortunate; various and important Instructions will arise as well from a calamitous as a happy Issue, and which perhaps will have a better Effect and a more lasting Impression on the Mind.\textsuperscript{12}

Dennis opposed this attitude, saying that if the ending were unhappy it would be contrary to all poetic justice and that, as a result, all instruction would be destroyed.

Like Bossu, most of the critics believed that the moral should be chosen first by the poet. Both Dryden and Dennis followed Bossu in this. Dryden says, in "The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy," (1679)

The first Rule which Bossu, prescribes to the Writer of an Heroic Poem, and which holds too by the same reason in all Dramatic Poetry, is to make the moral of the work; that is, to lay down to your self what that precept of morality shall be, which you would insinuate into the people: as namely, Homer's, [which I have Copy'd in my Conquest of Granada] was, that Union preserves a Common-Wealth, and discord destroys it.\textsuperscript{13}

Dennis says virtually the same thing in "Remarks on Prince Arthur" (1696).

But here it will not be amiss to observe what has been all along hinted. That the Action is only fram'd for the Instruction; and that it is design'd for a proof of the Moral;\textsuperscript{14}

Even more indicative of the prevalence of this idea is the Answer to Question 4, \textit{Athenian Mercury} (January 26, \textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 175.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 196
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 198.
which says,

Consequently to construct the Fable as it ought to be, a Good Choice must be made of the Instruction and Moral, which is the ground of it.16

Not every critic agreed, however, for Blackmore expressly disagreed. "I cannot," he says,

conceive that Bossau's Assertion, however ingenious it may be, is founded on good Reason, which is, that the Poet must in his first Intention be dogmatical and pitch upon some considerable Moral, and then contrive his Fable suitable to that Design: if it be well observ'd it will evidently appear, that no Author can form the Narration of any great and memorable Action but some Moral will arise from it, whether the Writer intends it or not: And since Homer and Virgil do not expressly draw any Doctrine from their Fables, it is uncertain whether they design'd any, tho' they ought to have done it; and it is still more uncertain, whether they intended those particular Morals which are generally ascrib'd to them, because many such Lessons of Instructions will result from the Imitation of any illustrious and extraordinary Action, either in Epick or in Tragicck Poems.18

Blackmore was not alone in this attitude, although those who shared his belief were in the minority until later in the century.

The attitude expressed by Blackmore and others on the devising of the moral does not indicate that they felt the epic did not need to instruct morally. On the contrary, they, and every other critic of the period, felt that the epic should give moral instruction. Almost all critics

16Ibid., p. 196
18Ibid., p. 203.
agreed that the epic could instruct through allegorical characters. They went so far as to derive allegorical meanings from all Homer's gods. In addition they believed that the poet could teach by inciting his readers to admiration.17

All critics agreed that the epic must have unity of action. The chief discussion of unity was concerned with the place of episodic material in the action of a poem. Most of the Augustans allowed episodes provided that they were closely enough connected with the main action. Dryden says in his Dedication to the Aeneis (1697)

The least and most trivial Episodes, or under-Actions, which are interwoven in it, are parts either necessary, or convenient to carry on the main Design. Either so necessary, that without them the Poem must be Imperfect, or so convenient, that no others can be imagin'd more suitable to the place in which they are.18

Most of the critics were less liberal than Dryden.

Blackmore expresses the more general attitude when he says,

The Episodes then, or Incidents, are the integral Parts of the Poem, which are consider'd as united, make up the Matter that is essential to the Constitution of the Work; and if taken singly the Absence of any one would leave it mutilated and defective.19

There was some discussion of unity of time, but for the most part, this unity was considered unimportant in the

17 Ibid., pp. 194-5.
18 Ibid., p. 222.
19 Ibid., p. 224.
epic. Pope, however, felt that the epic should not cover more than a year. Arrangement of material was discussed quite widely. A majority of the critics believed the Homeric order, beginning in *medias res*, was preferable, although a few critics allowed the natural chronological order.20

Another question which received much attention was what part the marvellous should play in an heroic poem. Every critic believed that the epic should contain the marvellous. Their main difficulty was to harmonize the marvellous with the probable so that the reason of the reader would not be offended. The way to make the marvellous probable, they decided, was by introducing supernatural characters, although not all critics were able to agree on this. Most of them did agree though, that if gods were used they should be Christian, rather than Pagan since, obviously, no one believed in the gods of the pagans.21

The characters of the epic were frequently discussed. The hero, they felt, should be some great prince or commander. He should be a very virtuous man, although he might have some small defects in his character. Dryden, however, said, in the preface to *Aeneis*.

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Though were a Character of perfect Virtue is set before us, 'tis more lovely; for there the whole Heroe is to be imitated.²²

Very few critics would allow the hero to be completely good as 'ryden did. Dennis expressly forbids the hero to be completely good when he says,

...the greater the Resemblance is between him who suffers, and him who commiserates, the stronger will the Apprehension, and consequently the Compassion be. And therefore a Poet, who forms a Character, by whose Calamities he designs to melt or terrifie his Audience or his Readers, ought to make that poetical Person resemble them as much as he can. Now the way to give him a general Likeness, is neither to make him guilty of great Crimes, nor to make him sovereiguly virtuous, but to compound him of Virtues and Faults; for so the Generality of Mankind is composed.²³

Blackmore, in his preface to A Paraphrase on the Book of Job (1700) says the same thing.²⁴

The manners and sentiments of epic characters were often considered. Most of the remarks on these qualities were based on Aristotle. The manners were to be historically accurate, to be in keeping with race, sex, age, and rank, and to be consistently maintained. The sentiments, which are the thoughts and behavior of the characters, were to be well adapted to the character and to the time and place.²⁵

²²Ibid., p. 316.
²³Ibid., p. 315.
²⁴Ibid., p. 316
²⁵Ibid., pp. 307-10.
Language and versification were usually considered least important, although most critics gave them at least passing notice. Almost every critic believed that the language should be sublime, although some critics said that it could be on a lower level when the subject descended to a lower level. Not that the Augustans felt that sublimity was a matter of language alone, for they certainly believed that sublimity was chiefly a matter of raising emotions. But certainly sublime language could be used to express sublime sentiments. Witty and humorous language, however, were never to be used, since such language can never be sublime and is below the serious tone of heroic poetry. Technical language was objected to by many critics, although there was no unanimity among them. The use of foreign and antiquated words was discussed but nothing was said, in this respect, about epic language which did not pertain to other kinds of poetry as well. Some objections were made to the use of too extended similes, and to extended descriptions. Dryden and Blackmore went so far as to set up rules for the number of lines which could be allowed for a simile. The rhyme versus blank verse controversy entered into discussions of the epic, of course, with opinion divided. One unusual attitude was that of Edward Phillips, who

recommended the use of the then much out of favor Spenserian stanza. In his preface to Theatrum Poetarum (1675) he says

...how much more stately and Majestic in Epic Poems, especially of Heroic Argument, Spenser's Stanza...is above the way either of Couplet or Alternation of four Verses only, I am per-swaded (sic), were it revived, would soon be acknowledg'd; 27

Probably a majority of critics, however, preferred blank verse for the epic. 28

Thus we have seen that there was a great new interest in the epic form during England's Augustan period, which manifested itself in both epic writing and epic criticism. This interest was, no doubt, a response to the great respect for classical writers, whose greatest work both in Greece and in Rome had been accomplished in the epic genre. Only if they used the greatest form did the neo-classicists believe they could hope to create work as great.

Not only did the poets find their models in the works of the ancients but also the critics found their theory in the critical works of the ancients, and in the commentaries and enlargements of the ancient writings of Italian and French critics. The English were particularly indebted to


Bossu, whose *Traité du poème épique* became the standard for epic criticism until almost the end of the Eighteenth Century. The English did not follow Bossu completely, however, for in many things they disagreed with him.

With the general critical tenor of the age and with the general theory of the epic in mind, we are ready to examine the criticism of *Paradise Lost* during the period, as it appears in the writing of Dryden, Dennis, and Addison, the three leading critics of Milton before 1725, and to analyze their criticism in the light of critical thought of the period. I shall examine them in chronological order, with Dryden first, since, as we shall see, Milton criticism follows, in many respects, a progression from lesser to greater approbation as neo-classicism goes from its peak to the beginnings of its dissolution.
Chapter III

Dryden's Criticism of Milton

Three poets, in three distant ages born,
Greece, Italy, and England did adorn.
The first in loftiness of thought surpass'd
The next in majesty, in both the last:
The force of Nature could no farther go;
To make the third, she join'd the former two.\(^1\)

These lines, prefaced to a 1688 edition of Paradise Lost are perhaps the most famous comment Dryden made on Milton, and are certainly the most oft quoted, but they are a small part, actually, of his remarks on the older poet. He did not write an essay on Milton, of course,—most of Dryden’s criticism is contained in prefaces to his various plays and poems—but he did discuss Paradise Lost to a greater or lesser extent, while primarily concerned with other matters, in "The Author's Apology for Heroic Poetry and Poetic License" (1677), in the preface to Sylvae (1685), in "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire" (1693), and in his "Dedication of the Aeneis" (1697). It is from these works that his remarks on Milton have been gleaned.

Little need be said on Dryden's theory of the epic. In

\(^1\)F. A. Patterson, The Student's Milton, p. liii.
no important respect does he deviate from the general theory of his age. 2

Despite the great respect for Milton which Dryden indicated in the six line epitaph above and in several other places, there were many things in Paradise Lost, the only poem of Milton that he criticized, which he objected to. Perhaps the most important defect was the unhappy ending. The subject of the poem he felt, was not truly a proper one for an epic since it dealt with the fall of man instead of some glorious triumph. All other epics dealt with the winning of human happiness; Paradise Lost dealt with the losing of human happiness. 3

Much of Dryden's adverse criticism of Milton is concerned with the human characters. All other epics had an abundance of human characters while Milton's had only two and a great over-abundance of supernatural ones. 4 Both Homer and Virgil had far more human characters than supernatural ones in their epics. Two human characters, therefore, were not enough. In addition, the two human characters are inadequate for heroic poetry, since the hero of an epic should be great, illustrious, virtuous, and, most

2See Chapter II, above.

3W. D. Ker, Essays of John Dryden, II, 29.

4Ibid., See also II, 165.
of all, victorious, and victorious Adam certainly was not. Adam, in fact, was so inadequate that Dryden felt compelled to find another hero among the supernatural characters.

Examining the poem, Dryden found that Satan, bringing about Adam's downfall, achieves his aim and is therefore the hero of the poem. Because of his orthodox Christian belief Dryden felt that making Satan the hero could be nothing but a technical defect, unlike Blake and the later Satanist critics who considered Satan the hero because of their own philosophical prejudice.

Dryden did not, however, condemn the supernatural characters, as such, even though he felt they were overabundant. Like most of his age he demanded the use of a Christian God and Angels, and would have strongly objected had Milton used heathen deities in the poem.

Dryden felt that Milton should have used rhyme because rhyme was the accepted neo-classical medium for heroic poetry. Dryden says of this "failure,"

> Neither will I justify Milton for his blank verse, though I may excuse him, by the example of Hannibal Cero, and other Italians, who have used it; for whatever causes he alleges for the abolishing of rhyme, (which I have not now the leisure to examine,) his own particular reason is plainly this, that rhyme was not his.

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5 Ibid., II, 165.
6 Ibid., I, 189-90.
talent; he had neither the ease of doing it, nor the graces of it; which is manifest in his Juvenilia, or verses written in his youth, where his rhyme is always constrained and forced, and comes hardly from him, at an age when the soul is most pliant, and the passion of love makes almost every man a rhymier, though not a poet.  

It is apparent that Dryden was on the side which favoured rhyme in the epic, and was, in this respect, a defender of the moderns. This reference is the only one Dryden made to any of Milton's poetry other than Paradise Lost.

Dryden censured Milton's use of archaic words, although he was not, strictly speaking, of the group who insisted that current usage should be the standard for language. Sometimes, indeed, the language was so poor that it had need for more words, but Milton, Dryden felt, had often used archaic words only because Spenser, his master, had used them.

Also, though the poem had "strength of expression" and fittingly sublime parts, it "crept along sometimes for above a hundred lines together." Dryden did not indicate what lines he objected to, but John Dennis has pointed out one passage which he says Dryden called flat.

On Adam last thus Judgment he pronounce'd;  
Because thou hast hearkned to the Voice of thy Wife,
And eaten of the Tree, concerning which
I charg'd thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat thereof,
Curs'd is the Ground for thy sake, thou in sorrow
Shalt eat thereof all the days of thy Life;
Thorns also, and Thistles it shall bring thee forth
Untill'd and thou shalt eat the Herb of the Field.
In the sweat of thy Face shalt thou eat bread,
Till thou return unto the Ground, for thou
Out of the Ground wast taken; know thy birth,
For Dust thou art, and shalt to Dust return.

Dryden, Dennis tells us, attributed this flat and many others to Milton's "getting into a track of Scripture."

Dennis disagreed with Dryden about the reason for the flat, but that need not concern us at this time.10 Many critics of the period would simply have said that it was necessary that the style be less than sublime when the subject was less than sublime.

Dryden tells us that Milton, though a greater genius even than Cowley, had no "elegant turns either on the word or on the thought," which he was able to find in such a poet as Waller. Milton, however, had "true sublimity, lofty thoughts, which were clothed with admirable Grecisms."11 More than once Dryden said that "Spenser and Milton are the nearest, in English to Virgil and Horace in the Latin."12

Dryden's criticism of Milton, it is apparent, is not a

12 Ibid., II, 223.
complete criticism, although this is not surprising since Dryden's remarks on Milton are all adventitious. What he did say indicates a true admiration for the poet and a respect for epic theory of the day. His objection to the unhappy ending of the poem is easily explained by the critical dictum that the epic must end happily. His objection to Milton's blank verse is part of the larger controversy that was waged far into the Eighteenth Century and was closely related to the quarrel of the ancients and moderns. In defending rhyme Dryden is on the side of the moderns. Even in praising Milton's sublimity Dryden is close to traditional thought, though certainly he is one of the first people to praise Milton as one of the most sublime poets. His remarks on Milton's archaisms, in which he chiefly criticizes their harsh sound, are not, of course, to be equated with the remarks of those who objected to using obsolete words on principle.

It is not to be supposed that because so many of Dryden's remarks on Milton are adverse he did not respect and admire Paradise Lost. He used Milton's poem, in fact, as the basis for his opera, The State of Innocence and Fall of Man, an indication that he admired the epic. In the preface to the opera Dryden says

I should be sorry, for my own sake, that any one should take the pains to compare them together; the original being undoubtedly
one of the greatest, most noble, and most sublime poems which either this age or nation has produced.\textsuperscript{13}

That much of Dryden’s criticism is closely allied with orthodox thought does not lessen its value, since it did lay the groundwork for later, more extended criticism of Paradise Lost, and since it did help to give Milton recognition in critical circles, a recognition that remarks such as Rymer’s contemptuous “that Paradise Lost of Milton’s that some are pleas’d to call a poem”\textsuperscript{14} might have denied it. In our next chapter we shall examine the Milton criticism of John Dennis, a critic who continued and enlarged the beginning Dryden had made.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., I, 179.

\textsuperscript{14}J. E. Spingarn, Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, II, 208.
Chapter IV

Dennis' Criticism of Milton

Like Dryden, John Dennis was more interested in Milton's epic than he was in his other poems. Like Dryden, also, he discusses Milton chiefly as Milton illustrates other problems, rather than as an end in itself. He discusses Paradise Lost to a great extent, and Paradise Regained to a lesser extent in such early works as Remarks on Prince Arthur (1696), The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry (1701), and The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry (1704), and in such later works as Remarks upon Pope's Homer (1717) and "Letters on Milton and Wycherly" (1721-2). His critical doctrine in most respects resembled that of most other critics of the day, finding its basis in Bossu's Traite du poeme epic. It is only in the emphasis Dennis places upon arousing the emotions that his epic theory needs to be considered here.

"Now nothing that is not pathetick\(^1\) in poetry," Dennis says, "can very much delight; for he who is very much pleas'd is at the same time very much Mov'd." The poet must speak to the heart, not to the head. "And the greatest Wit

\(^1\)Pathetic is used here in the older sense of capable of arousing all emotions, not just of arousing the tender emotions.
in the world, when he ceases to do that, is a hirer and not a poet." Because poets speak to the heart, the epic poets have made admiration their chief passion, which, since it is not a violent passion, can be maintained through the length of an epic. Besides this chief emotion, Dennis says, the epic must arouse compassion and terror. Only if the poem is related in a manner which will arouse these emotions can it give us "the last transport." 2

This brings us to Dennis' pet critical theory of the enthusiastic passions, a theory that has much direct bearing on his Milton criticism. "Poetical Enthusiasm," he says,

is a passion guided by judgment, whose cause is not comprehended by us. That it is a passion, is plain, because it moves. That the cause is not comprehended, is self-evident. That it ought to be guided by judgment, is indubitable. For otherwise it would be madness, and not poetical passion. 3

Genius, he tells us, is "nothing but passion." 4 But genius is not ordinary passion. It is enthusiastic passion. Ordinary passions are derived from things. Enthusiastic passions are derived from the thoughts which those things produce. The kind of thoughts which produce these

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3 Ibid., I, 127.
4 Ibid., I, 135.
enthusiastic passions, which are not really different in kind from the ordinary passions, but are much greater in intensity, are the "Kind of Thought, which we call Images." In order to raise the enthusiastic passions in the reader, they must first be raised in the poet. When he is filled with enthusiasm he will find the words and harmonies necessary to convey the spirit of his poem. "Poetical Genius is the Power of expressing such passion worthily." 

Religious subjects, Dennis believed, are the best ones to furnish thoughts capable of exciting these enthusiastic passions.

For all which is great in Religion, is most exalted and amazing; all that is joyful is transporting; all that is sad, is dismal, and all that is terrible, is astonishing.

The ancients were greater than the moderns because their poetry was sacred. However, the Christian religion is better for poetry than paganism, philosophy, or Deism. The Christian poet, by making use of his religion, can excel all other poets. The purpose of Christianity, or as Dennis calls it, the "True Religion", is to give happiness to mankind. It has, therefore, the same purpose which art has.

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5 Ibid., I, 217.
6 Ibid., I, 222.
7 Ibid., I, 218.
"to exalt the Reason, by exalting the Passions, and so make Happy the whole Man, by making Internal Discord cease." Christianity, however, when used in poetry, cannot be mixed with fiction.

The poet must follow certain rules in the use of religion if he is to be successful in using it in his poetry. First, "the religion ought to be one, that the poet may be mov'd by it, and that he may appear to be in earnest." Spenser, failed, Dennis says, because he did not observe this rule when he included the classical virtues and passions in his Christian poem. Second, the religion "ought to be the reigning one, that both the poet and the Readers may be mov'd the more by a Religion in which they were bred." This rule, he says, shows us why the translations of Homer and Virgil "have succeeded so very indifferently." Third, it must "run through and be incorporated with the Action of the Poem, and consequently... always be a part of Action and productive of Action." Unity is destroyed when this rule is ignored. It was partly from neglect of this rule that Spenser and Cowley failed in their epic poems. Fourth, it must "be managed so as to promote the Violence of the Enthusiastic Passions and their Change and Variety." Fifth, it must not "hinder the Violence of the ordinary Passions, nor the Change and Variety of them."

Ibid., I, 251-66.
Failure to follow this rule, Dennis says, is the reason why Homer's *Odyssey* is not as great as his *Iliad*. Sixth, the religion must not "obstruct the Violence of Action, which is always attended by the Violence of ordinary Passion." Seventh, the divine and human characters must "have Inclinations and Affections." Eighth, the supernatural characters must be distinguished from one another by their "Inclinations and Affections." Last, the divine and infernal characters must be distinguished from the human ones.

Dennis began discussing Milton very early in his critical career. In one of his earliest important critical works, a long dissertation on Blackmore's *Prince Arthur*, which Dennis decided could not properly be called an heroic poem since it fulfilled none of the requirements of heroic poetry, he praised Milton and quoted long passages from *Paradise Lost* to show what an epic should be.

Milton, he felt, was the greatest of the English poets, and in some ways, the greatest of the world poets. "If I were to recommend a British Poet to one who has been habituated to Homer and Virgil," he said,

I would for the Honor of my Country, and of my own Judgment advise him to read Milton; who very often equals both the Graecian and the Roman in their extraordinary Qualities and sometimes surpasses them, is more lofty, more

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terrible, more vehement, more astonishing, and has more impetuous and more divine raptures.\textsuperscript{10}

Dennis believed that Milton was not a mere imitator of the ancients, but was a truly original poet. Milton had resolved

for his Country’s Honour and his own, to present the World with an Original Poem; that is to say, a Poem that should have his own Thoughts, his own Images, and his own Spirit.\textsuperscript{11}

Milton, Dennis says, was not ignorant of the rules of Aristotle. In fact, his "Of Education" indicates that he knew them well. He resolved to write a completely original poem because his subject was so "extraordinary." Because of this "extraordinary Subject" Milton’s poem cannot be said to be against the rules, but above them.

In Homer and Virgil the actions were between men, but in Milton the action is between Satan and man. This difference in subject made it necessary that Milton should not follow the ancients, but should have "new Thoughts, new Images, and an Original Spirit." Milton’s thoughts, images, and his original spirit, besides their newness, have the advantage over those of Homer and Virgil to the modern reader.\textsuperscript{12} This, presumably, would be because Milton’s

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., I, 408.  
\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., I, 333.  
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., I, 333-4.
religion is the reigning one. Homer and Virgil would have had this advantage with their own contemporaries.

Because of his religion, Milton often excelled even Virgil, that "Prince of the Roman Poets," both in greatness of thought and in spirit. Dennis attempts to prove this by comparing the account of the creation in Virgil's Sixth Elegy with the account of it in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book VII. Milton says

The Earth was form'd; but in the Tomb, as yet, Of Waters, Embryon immature, involv'd, Apear'd not; over all the Face of Earth Main Ocean flow'd, not idle, but with warm Prolifick Humour, softening all her Globe, Fermented the Great Mother to conceive, Satiate with Moisture, when God said, Be gather'd now, ye Waters, under Heav'n Into one Place, and let dry Land appear Emergent, and their broad bare Backs up heave Into the Clouds, their Tops ascend the sky. So high as Heav'n the tumid Hills, so low Down sunk a hollow Bottom, broad and deep, Capacious Bed of Waters.

...And God said, Let the Earth Put forth the verdant Grass, Herb yielding Seed And Fruit-tree yielding Fruit after her Kind. ...

He scarce had said, when the bare Earth, till then Desert and bare, unsightly undorn'd, Brought forth the tender Grass, whose Verdure aded Her universal Face with pleasant Green. Then Herbs of ev'ry Leaf that sudden flow'r'd, Open'd their various Colours, and made gay Her bosom, smelling sweet, and these scarce blown; Forth flourish'd thick the clustring Vine; forth crept The smelling Gourd; up stood the Corny Reed Embattell'd in her Field; and th' humble Shrub, And Bush with frizled Hair implicit; last Rose, as in Dance, the stately Trees.

None but the Christian religion could have produced as powerful an image of the creation as this, Dennis says. He
then quotes a passage from Dryden's translation of Virgil, along with the original, to see if anything in Virgil's account of the creation "may be compared to these Thoughts of Milton, which, at the same Time that they are wonderful, are simple, and are naturally produc'd by the Subject."

He sung the secret seed of Nature's Frame,
How Sea, and Earth, and Air, and active Flame,
Fell thro' the mighty Void, and in their Fall
Were blindly gather'd in this goodly Ball.
The tender Soil, then stiffning by Degrees,
Shut from the bounded Earth, the bounding Sea.
Then Earth and Ocean various Forms disclose,
And a new Sun, to the new World arose.
And Mists, condens'd to Clouds, obscure the Sky.
And Clouds dissolv'd, the thirsty Ground supply.
The rising Trees, the lofty Mountains grace,
The lofty Mountains feed the Savage Race,
But few, and Strangers, in th' unpeopled Place.

"And now," Dennis says, "any one may see how much Virgil's God is inferior to Milton's Angel." It is Virgil's use, here, of the Epicurean Hypothesis which makes his poetry inferior to Milton's, since "that Hypothesis runs directly counter to those lofty Thoughts, and those noble Images, which Milton has shewn in such wondrous Motion." Presumably Dennis feels that the helter-skelter falling together of Lucretius' atoms to form a world would be less inspiring to a poet that the deliberate and carefully planned creation of a world by an all-knowing God.

Milton's images are "so natural and peculiar to the subject, that they would have been as absurd and extravagant in any other, as they are wonderfully just in this." However,
Dennis feels that only Milton's religion could have supplied him with these images. Because "these Effects" are the work of an "infinite Cause," "the Eye is ravishingly entertain'd, Admiration is rais'd to a Height, and the Reason is supremely satisfied."

Milton is also greater than Ovid. He excels Ovid, however, in his genius, as well as in his religion. Ovid's account of the creation, Dennis says, is a poor thing when compared with Milton's. Milton's, he says, is "most fine, most figurative, and most poetical." 13

In Paradise Lost, Milton follows the rules which Dennis has set up for using religion in poetry, though he has not followed them in Paradise Regained. For this reason Paradise Regained fell far short of Paradise Lost. In the lesser poem religion is handled in such a way that it obstructs the passions, both ordinary and enthusiastic, and, in so doing, obstructs "the Violence of Action."

But in Paradise Lost Milton has succeeded admirably. His religion is one and is the prevailing religion of his age. He has made it a part of the action. His method of handling his religion promotes the passions and does not hinder the action. He has "pretty well distinguish'd his celestial persons from one another, and his infernal ones

13Ibid., I, 271-7.
admireably." His supernatural characters are well distinguished from his human ones, also. The passions of the Greek gods were the same as those of human beings; "the Passions of Milton's Devils have enough of Humanity in them to make them delightful, but then they have a great deal more to make them admirable, and may be said to be the true Passions of Devils."¹⁴ To make his devils admirable Milton says that they did not lose their glory all at once, that at the fall they did not lose all their goodness. Only when they "had a second time provok'd their Creator by succeeding in their attempt upon man," did they lose all their angelic qualities.¹⁶

Dennis did not share Dryden's objection to Milton's blank verse. In a preface to one of his translations he says:

I am not so miserably mistaken, as to think rhiming essential to our English Poetry. I am far better acquainted with Milton than that comes to. Who without the assistance of Rhime, is one of the most sublime of our English Poets. Nay, there is something so transcendently sublime in his first, second, and sixth Books, that were the Language as pure as the Images are vast and daring, I do not believe it could be equal'd, no, not in all Antiquity.¹⁷

¹⁴Ibid., I, 369-70.
¹⁵Ibid., I, 106-8.
¹⁶Ibid., I, 334.
¹⁷Ibid., I, 3-4.
In his preface to *The Monument* Dennis again praises Milton's blank verse and credits him with helping to free poetry from its bondage to rhyme. In the preface to *Britannia Triumphans* he compares the blank verse of *Paradise Lost* to the rhyme of Dryden's adaptation, *The State of Innocence* and *Fell of Man*. Dryden, he says,

has faln (sic) so infinitely short of the Sublimity, the Majesty, the Vehemence, and the other great Qualities of Milton, that they are never to be named together.\(^{18}\)

Dennis follows the same school that Dryden follows regarding the use of archaic words, but he is more generous than Dryden was to Milton, for he says

...a great Poet if he writes in the Language which he was born to speak, may be allow'd the Privilege sometimes to coin new words, and sometimes to revive the old, which last succeeded so well to Milton.\(^{19}\)

In one of his later essays, "The Causes of the Decay and Defects of Dramatick Poetry" he defends Milton's knowledge and use of English, reversing an earlier statement that his language was not pure.\(^{20}\) Virgil, he said, was greater in the "Harmony of his Versification" and in the "Constant Beauty of his Expression," not because he had more skill in the use of language, but because he wrote in a language capable of more beautiful expression and harmony than did Milton.

\(^{18}\)Ibid., I, 377.

\(^{19}\)Ibid., I, 406.

\(^{20}\)Ibid., II, 292.
These things, his language, his blank verse, his skillful handling of religion, are minor contributions to Milton's greatness, however, compared to the sublime ideas which, for Dennis, give true majesty to his poem. His ideas are well chosen to arouse the enthusiastic passions. The ideas Milton uses which promote the most passion, Dennis says, are those of God, of his creations, and of such divine things as justice, temperance, fortitude, nature, law, number, power, and might. Dennis quotes many passages from Milton as examples of these kinds of sublime thoughts.

The greatest ideas are those which are of God, and are worthy of him. Milton's invocation, in Book I of Paradise Lost, is Dennis' first example.

And chiefly Thou, O Spirit! that dost prefer Before all Temples, th' upright Heart and pure, Instruct me, for Thou knowest, Thou from the first West present, and with mighty Wings o'erspread, Dove-like sat' at brooding on the vast Abyss, And m'd at it pregnant; what in me is dark, Illumine, what is low raise and support, That to the Height of this great Argument I may assert Eternal Providence, And justify the Ways of God to Men.

These ideas raised the poet's soul, Dennis says, "and fill'd it with Admiration, and with a noble Greatness." Then he says

For Milton, like a Master, begins with a gentle

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21 Ibid., I, 341.
22 Ibid., I, 342.
Spirit, which he continues for the twelve first Lines; In the thirteenth, where he speaks of the Boldness of his Attempt, he begins to rise; and in the nineteenth, where he talks of the Power of the Holy Ghost, he is quite upon the Wings.23

The dialogue between Adam and God in the Eighth Book has this same elevation of idea. When Adam talks about God, the poetry soars. In the Third Book when the Angels sing their hymn to the Son, the poet achieves the same elevation.

Milton also rises to sublimity when he describes the angels since they are "the most glorious and admirable Beings of the Creation, and ... lead the Soul immediately to its Creator." Again, with natural phenomena, such as "the Heavens and Heavenly Bodies, the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, and the Immensity of the Universe, and the Motions of the Heaven and Earth,"24 Milton reaches a majestic height. All these things, when viewed in contemplation, Dennis says, arouse the enthusiastic passions and lead the reader to his creator.

Milton reaches greater heights again when he writes of divine things, such as courage in Lucifer's speech in Book I.

What tho the Field be lost? All is not lost; th' unconquerable Will, And Study of Revenge, immortal Fate, And Courage never to submit or yield.25

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., I, 348.
25 Ibid., I, 355.
Dennis says that Milton is more sublime than Homer when he describes the power and might of contending armies. Comparing the battle in Heaven in Book VI of *Paradise Lost* with Homer's battle in the 20th *Iliad*, which, he says, is the most sublime passage in Homer, Dennis says that Milton's description of the battle is as much superior to that of Homer as the Angels of the one are more potent than the other's Gods, or as the Empyrean Heaven is more exalted than *Ossa*, *Pallor* or *Olympus*.

Addison, by this time, had noted the sublimity of this passage in Milton, but Dennis believed that he had not comprehended its full power. Addison had said,

> As Homer has introduced into his Battle of the Gods every thing that is great and terrible in Nature, Milton has fill'd his Fight of good and bad Angels with all the like Circumstances of Horror. The Shout of Armies, the Rattling of brazen Chariots, the hurling of Rocks and Mountains, the Earthquake, the Fire, the Thunder, are all of them employ'd to lift up the Reader's Imagination, and give him a suitable Idea of so great an Action. With what Art doth the Poet represent the whole Body of the Earth trembling, even before it was created. 26

Dennis says that Addison stopped just short "of one of the vastest and the sublimest Beauties that ever was inspir'd by the God of Verse, or by Milton's Godlike Genius." The very next line reach a higher peak than the noise of battle, earthquake or thunder could lift it to.

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26 *Ibid.*, II, 224, as quoted from *Spectator* 333.
The arch-angel trumpet; through the vast of Heav'n
It sounded, and the faithful Armies rung
Hosanna to the Highest: nor stood at gaze
The adverse Legions, nor less hideous joyn'd
The horrid shock; now storming furie rose,
And clamour such as heard in Heav'n till now
Was never. Arms on Armour clashing bray'd
Horrible discord, and the madding Wheels
Of brazen Chariots rag'd; dire was the noise
Of fiery Darts in flaming volies flew,
And flying vaulted either Host with fire.
So under fierie Cope together rush'd
Both Battels maine, with ruinous assault
And inextinguishable rage; all Heav'n
Resounded, and had Earth bin then, all Earth
Had to her Center shook. What wonder? when
Millions of fierce encountring Angels fought
On either side, the least of whom could wield
These Elements, and arm him with the force
Of all thir regions. 

What an inconceivable effect does this have on our imaginations, Dennis says, when the very least of these millions
of fighting angels can hurl our world from its axle.

Then Milton describes the battle of the two arch-
angels and says that the wind they created would have
destroyed the angelic throng had not the angels "with speed
retir'd." He compares "Great things by small" when he
compares the two angels to two planets which have broken
loose, because he realizes that even his genius sinks under
so vast a conception. The lines that follow account for
the sinking of mortal genius and for the need "to set forth
Great things by small,"

27 *Paradise Lost*, VI, 203-223.
Together both with next to Almighty Arm
Uplifted imminent, one Stroke aim'd,
That might determine, and not need repeat
As not of Power at once.¹⁸

"I defy anyone," Dennis says, "to name anything so sublime
in Homer."²⁹

Among the greatest and most sublime lines in the poem,
Dennis says, are those which begin "These are thy glorious
Works, Parent of Good," in Book V, where Adam and Eve sing
their morning hymn to God. "What lofty, what glorious
Ideas" are here, he says. There is nothing in all antiquity
that is equal to it. The enthusiasm in these lines "flows
from the Ideas, and bears a just proportion to them," and is
"exactly in Nature."³⁰ Milton is greatest when he makes
man praise the works of God.

Sublimity, then, for Dennis, makes Milton the great
poet he is. He says

I, who have all my Life-time had the highest
Esteem for the great Genius's of the Ancients
and especially for Homer and Virgil, and who
admire them now more than ever, have yet for
these last Thirty Years admir'd Milton above
them all for one thing, and that is for having
carried away the Prize of Sublimity from both
Ancients and Moderns.³¹

²⁸ _Paradise Lost_, VI, 316-19.
³⁰ _Ibid_. I, 351-3.
³¹ _Ibid_. II, 221.
Milton's genius "hides and conceals the assistance of Art" while his lofty figures "at the very time that they raise and transport his exalted soul, are lost in his enthusiasm and his sublimity." Dennis says that Milton's genius animates whatever he describes,

and seems to equal these several mighty objects in their distinguishing qualities, to be lofty as the Heav'n and solid as the Earth, fiery as the Sun, and changing as the Moon, swift as the Wind, and strong and terrible and sonorous as the Arms and Mouths of the great Deep.32

This is indeed high praise. However, Dennis found many faults among Milton's beauties which he severely censured. Not all parts of Paradise Lost were equal to the sublimity of much of the poem. Some parts, Dennis felt, were far below the rest.

Paradise Lost, for one thing, lacks unity, for, he says,

...in that poem there are most apparently two actions, the War of the Angels being an action by itself, and having a just Beginning, a Middle and an End.33

This criticism seems to contradict Dennis' high praise of the sublimity of the battle of the Angels, and perhaps is not to be considered of great importance, since it appears in an attack on Addison, who had praised the unity of Paradise Lost.

32Ibid., II, 39-40.
33Ibid., II, 42.
Dennis also, hesitatingly, suggests that Milton's giving human shape and form and senses to his celestial characters cannot be justified, that this is "inconsistent and contradictory." Milton has called them "incorporeal spirits," yet he has them appear in armour. Angels assuming human form, Dennis says, can be justified when the angels were to appear before man, but cannot be so easily accepted when they are fighting in Heaven or plotting in Hell. In their supernatural characters the Pagan poets had the advantage, for their gods and goddesses were supposed to have many forms and to assume human shape and had "the agreeable Distinction of Sexes." Even though the Christian God and Angels are greater, they are less delightful than the pagan ones, which come closer "to humane nature." 34

These faults, however, are minor, when compared with the more serious ones in the poem. Dennis says that in the last few books Milton "has done the most unartful thing that perhaps ever was done." In the earlier books he "divinely entertain'd us with the wondrous Works of God," but in the later books "he makes an Angel entertain us with the Works of corrupted Man." There is nothing, he says, in the last few books which can create enthusiasm in the reader.

34 Ibid., II, 227-8.
or can lift him to sublimity. The relation of man's acts after the fall are "flat," "low," and "unmusical." Dryden had said, according to Dennis, that many of these lines were flat because Milton had fallen into a "track of Scripture." Dennis agrees that most of them are flat, but he feels that Dryden was wrong about the cause of the flatness. He felt that it was "plainly the poorness and lowness of the Ideas" that made Milton sink. 35

Often Milton fails because there is no passion in his lines.

And God said, Let the earth
Put forth the verdant grass, herb yielding seed,
And fruit-tree yielding fruit after her kind. 36

Here God is talking about his creation, about something that is far below his admiration. He cannot have passion, Dennis says, when he speaks of something so inferior. The poet can raise passion in God only when God contemplates his own infinite majesty, not when he contemplates something below himself.

We see that there are defects even in "the Greatest Poem that ever was written by Man." These defects come from the failure of the poet to use thoughts which would raise the enthusiastic passions and give true sublimity to the entire poem. These failures, as well as the failure in Paradise

35 Ibid., I, 351.
36 Ibid., I, 275.
Regained, lead Dennis to the conclusion that it was more from felicity than from art that Milton achieved such sublimity in parts of *Paradise Lost*. He says

Pray, how is the Fire of Homer and Virgil kept up? for they seem to me to have vastly more of the poetical Art than Milton. Indeed Milton had more Felicity that they, which threw him upon the subject of *Paradise Lost*; a Subject which often furnish'd him with the greatest Ideas, which supply'd him with the greatest Spirit. But to shew that it was rather Felicity than Art or Skill, that determin'd him to that Choice, he was by no means so happy in the Choice of *Paradise Regained*, a Subject that could supply him neither with the Ideas nor with the Spirit. For Pride and Ambition, Rage and Revenge, and Fury furnish'd quite another sort of Spirit, than Patience, Resignation, Humility, Meekness, Long-suffering, and the rest of those quiet divine Virtues that adorn the Christian Schema. Besides, Milton's Fire is so very far from being kept always up by Art, that for near a Sixth Part of the Poem it's set down for want of Art, for this poem is so order'd, that the Subject of the Eleventh and Twelfth Books could by no means supply him with the great Ideas, nor consequently with the great Spirit, which the First, Second, and Sixth had done before; and several Parts of the other books likewise.37

No more than Dryden has Dennis made a complete examination of *Paradise Lost*. His consideration of rhyme, language, and character, though a part of critical thought of the period, still show a leaning toward the more liberal thought of the age. His discussion of unity, perhaps, need not be taken as completely indicative of Dennis' attitude since it was written in the heat of attack upon a man who had taken many of his ideas on Milton without giving credit to

37 Ibid., II, 367-8.
their source. Dennis' objections to incorporeal angels assuming human form is an original contribution to Milton criticism, and anticipates Dr. Johnson's remarks on the same subject. His emphasis on greatness of subject, is, of course, related to the larger discussion of sublimity, since grasping great ideas is one way to achieve literary excellence.

The most important element in Dennis' criticism of Milton is his emphasis on the sublime in *Paradise Lost*. Dennis, as Professor Monk has established, was the first English critic to give serious attention to the sublime. 36 This great interest in sublimity, in addition to his belief that the function of poetry is to repair the results of the fall of man, 39 no doubt led him to consider Milton such a great poet. This interest, in part, perhaps, explains Dennis' failure to appreciate *Paradise Regained*. Nevertheless, he did recognize as beauties many of the passages of *Paradise Lost* which are still acclaimed and did point out the beauty of those passages before any other critic. 40 Addison, indeed, quotes many of the same passages that Dennis had quoted, but it is very likely that Addison

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40 Ibid., Notes, I, 511-14.
had read Dennis' remarks on Milton.

From Dennis to Addison is a logical step. Addison makes the first complete criticism of *Paradise Lost*, considering all the elements of the poem that it was customary to examine according to the commonly accepted epic theory. His criticism was published in 1711 after most of Dennis' criticism was published, but during Dennis' active critical career. Part of Dennis' later remarks on Milton, in fact, were written in answer to Addison's criticism. In the next chapter we will examine Addison's papers on *Paradise Lost*, the most important examen of that poem before 1725, the date with which our inquiry closes.
Chapter V

Addison's Criticism of Milton

Even though in 1694 Addison included Milton in his "An Account of the Greatest English Poets," his important contribution to Milton criticism is contained in the series of eighteen papers which he wrote for The Spectator in 1711-12, when his critical powers had probably reached their maturity. By 1704 John Dennis had published his most important remarks on Milton, laying a groundwork for a thoroughgoing criticism of Paradise Lost. With a complete knowledge of what Dennis had said, Addison was able to make his criticism a comprehensive one.

Unlike Dennis, Addison does not stress the originality of Milton, but, on the contrary, tries to show how closely Paradise Lost is based on the models provided by Homer and Virgil. He says he will "examine it by the rule of epic poetry, and see whether it falls short of the Iliad or Aeneid, in the beauties which are essential to that kind of writing." ¹ Actually he goes much farther and shows parallels between Milton and the two ancient poets. In one of the later papers he says

¹ Spectator 267.
no poet seems to have ever studied Homer more, or to have more resembled him in the greatness of genius, than Milton, I think I should have given but a very imperfect account of his beauties, if I had not observed the most remarkable passages which look like parallels in these two great authors. I might, in the course of these criticisms, have taken notice of many particular lines and expressions which are translated from the Greek poet; but as I thought this would have appeared too minute and over curious, I have purposely omitted them.2

Addison did not, of course, point to these parallels in order to lessen Milton's stature, but to show Milton's detractors that his various devices had the sanction of ancient use. Sir Joshua Reynolds has, perhaps, best expressed the neo-classical tenet justifying this type of comparison. "I suppose it will be easily granted," he said in a letter to The Idler,

that no man can judge whether any animal be beautiful in its kind, or deformed, who has seen only one of that species.3

It is perfectly legitimate, then, to compare one work of art with another of its genre, since only by what we know can we judge something new of the same kind. "By studying these authentic models," Reynolds says,

that idea of excellence which is the result of the accumulated experience of past ages may be at once acquired.4

2Spectator 351.
Addison, examining the fable of the poem which, he says, "is perfect or imperfect, according as the action which it relates is more or less so," finds that the action is unified. Beginning in medias res is the first unifying device. Making episodes of the battle of the rebellious angels and of the creation and relating them later in the poem is another. Had he begun with either of these, he would not have had unity of action. Some critics, Addison says, charge Homer and Virgil with unnecessary parts in their poems; however, this charge cannot be brought against Milton, for all of his episodes "naturally arise from the subject." Since the fall of the angels is parallel to the fall of man it does not spoil the unity but enhances the beauty of the plan. The last two books cannot be considered unequal to the rest of the poem, as Dennis maintained, since they are necessary to complete the action of the poem. Had the action been incomplete, it would, consequently, have been imperfect.

Milton's action has the beginning, middle, and end which Aristotle requires of an entire action. His action is "contrived in Hell, executed upon earth, and punished by Heaven." The infernal spirits plan the action, they execute it in Paradise, and God allots the punishment. The

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5 *Spectator* 267.
6 *Spectator* 363.
parts of the action "are told in the most distinct manner, and grow out of one another in the most natural order."

Milton skillfully prepares the reader for each part of the action. For example, the passage in the catalog of infernal spirits, explaining how the spirits contract and enlarge themselves, makes way for much of the later action when Satan appears on earth. Eve's dream in Book V presages the catastrophe in Book IX. Even though Milton's incidents are surprising, they are probable, not only because they are points of faith, but also because he has prepared the reader for each of them.

Milton's action is greater than those of Homer and Virgil. They dealt with actions which affected only their own nation; the action of Paradise Lost affects an entire species. Its greatness is enhanced by the presence of the "united powers of hell" and by the involvement of God himself. Man, also, is shown in his greatest state, as he was before he sinned and lost his innocence. "In short," Addison says,

*everything that is great in the whole circle of being, whether within the verge of nature, or out of it, has a proper part assigned it in this admirable poem.*

\[\text{Spectator 267.}\]
By his omissions, too, Milton has increased the greatness of the action, particularly by not including a book of games. Addison may seem to be inconsistent here with his idea of comparison, but actually he is not. The theory did not demand exact imitation. Again, Sir Joshua Reynolds seems to express most clearly the neo-classical point of view. In some remarks on Titian he criticized him for copying the defects in one of his models, just as he imitated the brilliant colour of the model. In copying the beauty of the colouring he was a genius; in copying the defects "not much above a copier." Only the excellencies of the model should be copied, never the faults.

The action of *Paradise Lost* has the necessary size to be great also. Addison says that Milton has shown great art in diversifying and enlarging his fable, especially since he could not add fiction to his action, as Homer and Virgil probably did, for in a poem based on scripture the addition of fiction would have offended many readers.

Although Homer excelled all other epic writers in the "multitude and variety of his characters," Milton has included as many characters as he possibly could. At the time of the action of the poem there were only two people

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9Spectator 267.
existing. These two, however, were in the "highest state of innocence and perfection," and "are not only more magnificent, but more near than any characters in Virgil or Homer, or indeed in the whole circle of nature." 10

To enlarge the number of characters, Milton has added his allegorical characters, Sin and Death. These, Addison says, are well conceived and beautiful in themselves, but are not fitted for a poem of this type. Milton has also added variety to his characters by the addition of many heavenly and infernal spirits who play important parts in the action of the poem. According to Addison, these characters are well distinguished in their manners and sentiments, and are as diversified as the gods of Homer and Virgil. Each spirit is handled in such a way at his first appearance that the reader knows what sort of behavior to expect when he returns.

Milton's characters have the advantage over those of Homer and Virgil in that they are the progenitors of all mankind and in that all mankind share their fate. Thus they appeal to all people at all times. The characters of Homer and Virgil, on the other hand, appealing only to the people of their own nations, are not so universal as Adam and Eve. Even though Adam and Eve do not fulfil Aristotle's requirements, Addison says, in that they are perfectly virtuous characters who fall into misfortune, Aristotle's

10 Spectator 273.
rule should not here be applied, for here we are not dealing with probabilities, but with what actually happened. Our terror is aroused by the fate of Adam and Eve even though we do not resemble them in their perfect innocence and virtue, for we unceasingly partake of the fruits of their disobedience. Addison explains his departure from Aristotle by saying that Aristotle's rules for epic poetry (which he had drawn from his reflections upon Homer) cannot be supposed to quadrat exactly with the heroic poems which have been made since that time. If he had lived after Virgil wrote, his rules would have been more perfect, and, presumably, even better had he lived after Milton.

"The sentiments in an epic poem," Addison says, are the thoughts and behavior which the author ascribes to the persons whom he introduces, and are just when they are conformable to the characters of the several persons. These sentiments are related to things as well as to persons and must be adapted to the subject. The poet who wishes to arouse any particular emotion must use sentiments which are capable of arousing those emotions. Although Virgil, according to Addison, excelled all other poets "in the propriety of his sentiments," Milton is still to be highly

11 Ibid.
12 Spectator 279.
praised for his. Indeed, in one respect Milton is more to be praised than Virgil, since Milton's characters, for the most part, are outside the realm of nature, while Virgil's are all men whose manners could be based on the men around him. The love of Lido and Aeneas is like the love between countless people; the love of Adam and Eve was not like other loves, for they were living in a state of innocence. To create that love required a greater imagination in the poet. 13

Not only must the sentiments of an epic be fitting, but also sublime. Sublimity is Milton's particular excellence in which he excels all other modern poets. In fact, he excels all other poets, both ancient and modern, except Homer, in the greatness of his thoughts. "It is impossible," Addison says,

for the imagination of man to distend itself with greater ideas, than those which he has laid together in his first, second, and sixth books. 14

The seventh book is also "wonderfully sublime," but it does not have enough action in it for epic writing. No more than Dennis did Addison see the incongruity of the battle of the angels in the sixth book, nor did he see the inconsistency, which Dennis had at least suggested, in

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
having incorporeal spirits appear in suits of armour.
Both critics would have been shocked to hear Dr. Johnson
saying that this book could hold only the interest of
children.

The language of an heroic poem must be easy to
understand, and yet must be sublime. If the meaning is
clear we can overlook errors of syntax and grammar.
Addison gives two examples of this sort of error in Milton
but says that it would be censuring to make any great objec-
tion to them. Clarity, however, is not the only require­
ment of the language, for if it were, the poet would need
only to seek the most plain and obvious words. The obvious
words, Addison says,

...and those which are used in ordinary
conversation, become too familiar to the
ear, and contract a kind of meanness by
passing through the mouths of the vulgar.15

Therefore, a poet should avoid idiomatic ways of writing.
Milton avoids this fault most of the time; however, some
of these errors may be found in his work.

True sublimity of language may be achieved in several
ways. One of these is the use of metaphors. Milton's
metaphors are not too frequent, Addison says, and never
clash with one another. Besides using metaphors, Milton
uses the idioms of other languages to give his poem the

15Spectator 283.
grand style. He places the adjective after the substantive, transposes words, turns adjective into substantive and uses several other "foreign modes of speech" to give greatness to his language. To make his language even less common, Milton has added or omitted syllables and has either changed names or used names which are less well known for countries and people. In addition, he has used many old words, which, Addison says, "makes his poem appear the more venerable, and gives it a greater air of antiquity." For the same purpose Milton has coined many words of his own, a practise which Addison defends on the grounds that Homer has done the same thing. These devices, Addison feels, have made Milton's style, in general, elevated, even though, in places, they have made it stiff and over-difficult. These devices would be less justifiable if rhyme were used since rhyme will often gloss over a common phrase, but, in blank verse, these methods of achieving a poetic style are necessary so that the style will not "fall into the flatness of prose." Milton has also used unusual elisions, such as "cutting off the letter Y, when it precedes a vowel," in order to make his numbers more varied and interesting. "Milton," Addison says, by the above-mentioned helps, and by the choice of the noblest words and phrases which our tongue would afford him, has carried our language to a greater height than any of the English poets
have ever done before or after him, and made the sublimity of his style equal to that of his sentiments.\textsuperscript{16}

But among these beauties there are many faults which, Addison feels, it is his duty, an unpleasant duty, to point out. The first fault is that the outcome of the action is unhappy. Although Aristotle said that this type of action was best to move the audience in a tragedy, nevertheless, Addison says an unhappy ending is not as good for an heroic poem. Almost everyone else in the period agreed with Addison, of course. Milton has tried to overcome this difficulty, Addison adds, by showing Adam a vision in which his offspring triumph over the forces of evil and reach a greater paradise. Closely related to the unhappy outcome is another objection which many critics had made, and which led Dryden and Dennis to say that Satan is the hero of the poem. This objection would never have arisen, Addison says, if the critics had not looked for what Milton never intended, a hero for the poem. If anyone is the hero, it is the Messiah, "who is the hero, both in the principal action and the chief episodes."\textsuperscript{17}

Besides the defect of an unhappy ending, Milton's poem is weakened by including the allegory of Sin and Death.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17}Spectator 297.
and the Limbo of Vanity. The characters Satan meets in chaos are equally improbable and out of place in the action of an epic poem. 18

In addition Milton has impaired his structure with too many digressions. Aristotle has observed that an heroic poet should speak as much as possible through his characters and not in his own person. Milton stops the action of his poem to reflect on his blindness, on marriage, on Adam and Eve's nakedness, and on several other things. These digressions are unmistakably unnecessary to the action of the poem, but they are so beautiful in themselves that Addison cannot bring himself to wish that Milton had eliminated them.

Addison also occasionally finds defects in the sentiments. They are sometimes "too much pointed," and sometimes even degenerate into puns, as, in the first book, "where, speaking of the pigmies, he calls them,"

...The small infantry
War'd on by cranes...

Another defect of his thoughts is in the frequent allusion to heathen fables, which, Addison feels, are inappropriate for a poem upon a divine subject. A third fault is what Addison calls "an uneasy ostentation of learning." Milton attempts to show us how much he knows, giving us dissertations on free will, predestination, history, astronomy.

18 Spectator 309.
geography, and so forth. Had he included this material more subtly in the poem it would have been more acceptable. Addison follows Dryden and Dennis in condemning certain passages in the poem. Like Dennis he says that "if Milton's majesty forsakes him anywhere, it is in those parts of his poem where the divine persons are introduced as speakers." Milton apparently did not dare to give himself full rein, but confined himself to scripture and to the writings of orthodox divines. Both Dryden and Dennis censured the section in which punishment is pronounced on Adam and Eve, and Addison, too, criticized it. He felt, as Dryden did, that the verse was poor because Milton followed scripture too closely. Addison does not completely condemn the last two books as Dennis did; however, he does say that the poetry lags in the long narration of events to come because, again, Milton has followed scripture almost exactly.

Nor is Milton's language always perfect. It is often stiff and obscure because he has used old words, transposition of words, and foreign idioms, the same devices which sometimes give him sublimity. Sometimes his words

19 Spectator 297.
20 Spectator 315.
21 Spectator 357.
22 Spectator 369.
have a jingling effect, as they have in the following passages:

Beseeching or besieging...
This tempted our attempt...
At one slight bound high overleap'd all bound.

The last language fault which Addison points out is Milton's use of technical words taken from the various arts and sciences. "It is one of the greatest beauties of poetry," Addison says,

to make hard things intelligible, and to deliver what is abstruse of itself in such easy language as may be understood by ordinary readers, beside, that the knowledge of a poet should rather seem born with him, or inspired, than drawn with books and systems.\(^{22}\)

In the last twelve papers of his examination of *Paradise Lost* Addison quotes passage after passage from Milton's poem, calling them beautiful, sublime, or fitting. Analysis of this portion of his criticism would not be particularly rewarding, since his judgments are impressionistic, and are based almost entirely on his own "taste", excellent taste though it may be.

We cannot forget, in examining Addison's criticism of Milton, that Addison, like Dryden and Dennis, wished to add "honor to the English nation" by proving that England had a poet at least equal to the great classic epic writers. Addison's and Dennis' almost blind praise of Book VI can.

\(^{22}\) *Spectator* 297.
perhaps in part, be explained by their patriotism. In this book, with its warring angels, they had found something comparable to Homer's battle of the gods, which Longinus had cited as the most sublime passage in Homer.

We must remember, too, that many of the beauties which Addison reveals, such as the invocation and the morning hymn, are the same beauties that Dennis had praised. Nevertheless, Addison does, in many respects, show a greater insight than Dennis or Dryden. He realized that the last two books of the poem were not the "unartful thing" that Dennis had called them, despite certain defects, chiefly the relating rather than enacting of incidents. Addison also had a greater understanding and appreciation of Milton's language and poetic technique than either Dennis or Dryden, although Addison's praise of Milton's venerable and antiquated language is rather a pre-romantic element in his criticism than a classical one. Addison wrote, of course, for a much more popular audience than did Dryden or Dennis. Thus, while in some respects his criticism seems more conventional and derivative, it reached a far greater reading public and was far more influential in promoting Milton's poetry.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


