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MILTONIC CRITICISM : HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF A HUMANIST

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ABSTRACT

IN order to know what a book on Milton in trying to do, it is useful to know what previous books have done. This is all the more important, not only because of the volume of Miltonic scholarship during the last thirty years, but because the trends and method of such scholarship differ considerably from those which have prevailed in the past. I am therefore presenting a summary (which at times will degenerate into a catalogue) of those aspects of Miltonic scholarship which are specially valuable.

Greenlaw's essay on Spenser and Milton (1917) and his later, more elaborate study of Spenser's influence on *Paradise Lost*¹ initiated a new phase. What remains permanently valuable is that Milton was a thinker as well as a poet. His thought had much in common with the Renaissance. Milton's humanism² far from moving away from the Renaissance, in fact moved closer to its central truths. *Paradise Lost*, which the nineteenth century called "a monument of dead ideas", turned out to be a mine of occult speculation, materialist heresies and Kantian absolutes. Professor Bredvold established the fact that Milton possessed a copy of Bodin's rare and dangerous *Heptaplomeres*.⁴ An article was written on Milton's debt to Servetus, a theologian brought to the stake by Calvin for his heresies.³ The tendency was summed up in Professor Denis Saurat's *Milton, Man and Thinker* (1925).⁴

Milton as a man of the Renaissance, an eclectic, an independent thinker perhaps something of an opportunist in his politics, was certainly daring and original in his poetry Milton as essentially Puritan.⁷ Presents a valuable enumeration of commonplace ideas in *Paradise Lost* which has since proved to be something of a landmark. Milton's essential Puritanism is firmly agreed on by these scholars; but the agreement rests on a more adequate and charitable understand-

ing than hitherto, of Puritan thought in mid seventeenth century England. Milton's epic was following precedents which, by continual repetition, had acquired the status of conventions.

We have lost the dashing diabolist of the twenties, the "thinker of terrible thoughts", the man who, according to Saurat "*drank deeply of the Kabbalah*". We are likely to be palmed off instead with a staid inglorious Milton, a hanger on to platitudes, a man who says nothing unless seventeen people have said it. Milton, a man whose imagination redeemed magnificent and moving despite the barriers of an obsolete mythology. Milton's life became the clue to his mind. His convictions, far from being the result of uncritical acceptance, or dispassionate meditation, were molded and confirmed by the pressure of events. They took on accordingly the colouring of his character. The man was proud and iconoclastic and the thinker therefore was bizarre or original. The man converted his grievances into doctrines and the poet expressed these doctrines as mythology. Hence, in order to know what the poem was about, you had to read it as a form of autobiography, a record of what its author believed and suffered more satisfactory than prose because you could see in it more clearly the feelings which Milton attached to his convictions. The

thinker had been forgotten too long in the preoccupation of readers with the poet; he could not live again in the imagination of critics if his ideas were not made as colourful as his poetry. It is right to insist that ideas have a function in poetry and that to ignore them, or even casually to accept them, is to destroy your perception of the poem's proportions. The difficulty lies in determining the function of these ideas, the way in which they are supposed to manipulate your emotions and the quality of assent which you are expected to bring to them.

In such circumstances, criticism and scholarship are best employed not so much in telling us how Milton's epic was written as in suggesting how it ought to be read. The ideal critic should be also the ideal reader, and his discussion of *Paradise Lost* should be related everywhere to the effect of the poem on the audience for whom it was intended. Milton's epic was written to be read, and read by an audience with definite predilections. Some may protest that this conception is misleading, that poets write solely for the joy of writing, or in order to make themselves clearer to themselves, or to make themselves clearer to an undefined posterity. This may be true of some poets though one hopes it is not true of many. But it is not true of the poets of the Renaissance, who thought of poetry as a profession and not a therapy, and were therefore keenly and continually aware of the poet's position and responsibilities. It is certainly not true of Milton, who thought of writing a poem "*doctrinal and exemplary to a nation*", who wished so ardently to celebrate his country's history for his countryman, and who even looked upon poetry as a pulpit from which truth and righteousness could be preached to his generation.

Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* for his time even if, in the process, he wrote it for posterity. What remains to be determined is how far that concession affects our reading of the epic. An epic poem is seldom thus self supporting. It is not the experience itself but a setting for demanding a background of co-operation and assent. So, in order to see what an epic poem is, you must see it confirming the values it assumes, and try to relate it to the background which it focuses and against which its peculiar brilliance endures. That background, let me insist, is not a per-

sonal background. An epic poem is too comprehensive and massive, too deeply concerned with its time and with its tradition, and with seeing all knowledge proportioned by its order, to be harassed, limited or drawn aside by the private implications of its author's philosophy. It may include that philosophy, or part of it, in its programme. But it cannot depart from its programme to explore it. Its public meaning is not always its private significance, and though the two may coincide in practice, in critical procedure they should be kept severely distinct.

Milton's epic requires to be read against a background, and that that background is public rather than personal. It follows that, for our purposes, interest in Milton's milieu would be misdirected if its end were a more intimate acquaintance with the man. A poem cannot be defined genetically through its evolution in the mind of the poet. It can only be approached, as it was meant to be approached, through its effect on the audience for whom it was intended. Milton's audience were intimately familiar with the Bible, conversant with a system of divinity, and literary enough to have read a poem or pamphlet on some phase of the action of *Paradise Lost*. What we need to insist on at this stage is the extent to which Milton's epic was accessible to the unlearned reader of his time. Erudition would have affected their feeling for the poem's nuances, for the play of light and colour on its landscapes; but it would have left unaltered their perception of its geography. Given the right preoccupations and sympathies, the outlines of Milton's epic are easily accessible and that exploration fills in rather than alters these outlines. If people read the book of nature more often, they read it as a commentary on the book of God.

It belongs to a century when poetry could still be the noblest of professions and the noblest of its products. Dryden could speak of the epic as "*undoubtedly the greatest work which the soul of man is capable to perform*",⁵ An estimate as high as this carries its obligations. Those who brought to the reading of epic poetry this settled and serious conception of its stature would naturally have demanded from it the utmost which the feelings and intelligence of its time could give. "*It is not sufficient*", says Gabriel

Harvey, “for poets to be superficial humanists: but they must be exquisite artists, & curious universal schollres.”⁶ So when Harvey chides Spenser for not knowing his astronomy,¹⁰ something more is involved than a pedantic reproof. What stands committed is Ben Jonson’s belief that the poet can feign a commonwealth of learning and Milton’s more fervent conviction that the poet “teaching over the whole book of sanctity and vertu” must bring to that high enterprise “industrious and select reading, steady observation, insight into all seemly and generous arts and affaires”⁷ such claims could only have been entered in an age when poetry was still the Divine Science and the Mistress Knowledge, when reality had not yet lost its poetic qualities, and when one’s understanding of facts was confirmed and even completed by their appropriation in a poetic order. Few poems satisfy these ideals more amply than *Paradise Lost*. There is hardly a question which the seventeenth century could ask which it does not directly or indirectly answer. And those answers are all the more convincing because you are compelled to feel behind them the accumulated weight of the values they exemplify. There

is no better justification of the Renaissance tradition that the poet should be learned, the tradition insisted on by French and Italian critics, by poets like Ben Jonson, and by scientific virtuosos like Sir Kenelm Digby.⁸ Here it is in the words of an educationalist, Jan Comenius:

*Can any man be good Naturalist, that is not seen in Meta-physics or a good Moralist, who is not a Naturalist? Or a Logician, who is ignorant of real Sciences? Or a Divine, a Lawyer, or a Physician that is no Philosopher? Or an Orator or Poet, who is not accomplished with them all.*⁹

Milton is “accomplished with them all”. What is essential in his poem would have been accessible to his unlearned contemporaries but its details and nuances would have invited them into learning. And such erudition would have been ordered and given significance by its incorporation in a poetic synthesis so ample that every field of learning seemed to imply it. So, if we must think of Milton in connection with his poetry, it is perhaps best to think of him thus, within the impersonal requirements of his office, and as possibly the last person in history to hold all human knowledge for his province.

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