

THE MILTONIC STYLE OF PARADISE LOST

* Dr. Amar Singh

Milton took over blank verse as developed in the drama, mechanized it, ¹ reduced the number of monosyllables and substituted feet, reduced more drastically the number of feminine endings ² and secured his characteristic effects by mounting his rhythmical emphases upon the grammatical emphases of his paragraph. ³ To this description one could add Latinisms, inversions, periphrases, appositional clauses and the other paraphernalia beloved of Miltonic editors. ⁴ For what they seem to imply is that Milton began to write his epic in blank verse by examining and modifying the available specimens of blank verse. On the contrary, I think it far more likely that he began by examining and modifying the available specimens of epic. Accordingly the poetry he devised for this purpose was stiff, "homogeneous" and architectural, in keeping with the insight it was endeavouring to assert. "THE measure", says Milton of *Paradise Lost*, "is English Heroic Verse without Rime, as that Homer in Greek and of Virgil in Latin: Rime being no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse." As we thumb the pages of English poetry before him we find to our surprise that he was justified in making it. *Paradise Lost* is the first English Heroic poem to be written in blank verse.

The style of *Paradise Lost* then, is anything but dramatic and one cannot demand from it the qualities which one often demands of poetic drama. The poem is written in blank verse not because what it says cannot be said in prose but because it can be said more aptly and memorably in poetry. Milton's epic style constitutes a unity and that no elements in that unity is developed excessively at the expense of the rest. Reading Milton for the sound they are also reading him for the sense. The long leisurely sentences, the unorthodox syntax, the ablative absolutes, and the inversions are there for a purpose and that purpose is simplicity. The deviations from the grammatical norm are made only to create a steadier, more unremitting current of suggestion, to make more insistent that interplay of sound and evocation on which the impact and clarity of Milton's writing depends. There are of course many passages which fall away from this standard. But there are many more also which satisfy

* Govt. Auto. P.G. College Chhindwara (M.P.)

them and I think that less than justice is done to their lucidity. Consider, for instance, these words of Michael to Adam which I have already had occasion to quote in an earlier chapter :

*Since thy original lapse, true Libertie
Is lost, which always with right Reason dwells
Twinn'd, and from her hath no dividual being:
Reason in man obscur'd, or not obeyd,
Immediately inordinate desires
And upstart Passions catch the Government
From Reason, and to servitude reduce
Man till then free.*

The diction, the prosody, and syntax, the subtle co-operation of the meaning and music, are all of them tokens of an underlying permanence, the sweep of the grand style towards its destiny, "the enormous on ward pressure" as Mr. C.S. Lewis puts it "of the great stream on which we are embarked". ⁵ This characteristic momentum is nowhere better displayed than in the stately progress of Milton's more memorable similes. They are inventions peculiarly his own, owing much no doubt to classical practice, but in many ways departing remarkably from it. ⁶ Moreover, they are so completely unlike the similes of Shakespeare that a contrast between the two is perhaps the best method of discussing the differences between epic and dramatic poetry. The thing said is not changed by the way of saying it though when Milton has said what he intends to say it is difficult to think of its being said better. In addition Milton's similes are sometimes digressive; they allow you to loiter in a backwater before being caught up again in the current of the stream. But this device, characteristically Homeric, and described by J. W. Mackail as an invention of the first importance, is used very sparingly by Milton. Moreover, when he introduces such similes, they usually serve to accentuate by contrast the superhuman grandeur of the events which they relieve. Thus, the "careful ploughman" of IV, 977 ff. (kidnapped characteristically by Bentley) isolates all the more forcibly the great figure unremoved like "Teneriff or Atlas". The simile of the angels "thick as autumnal leaves" follows an epic description of Satan's spear and shield. When

the audience at the Infernal Council are compared to elves we are better convinced of the stature of “*The great seraphic lords and Cherubim*”, huge “*in their own dimensions like themselves*”. This tendency to heroic aggrandizement is further strengthened by Milton’s sparing use of “*homely*” imagery⁷ and by the comparative form of many of his similes; they are continually maintaining that A is bigger, better, of more beautiful than B. Milton’s similes not only look backwards through allusion. They also look forward through prolepsis. When Eve is compared to Proserpine we know that she will be gathered by Satan as Proserpine was gathered by Dis. When she is compared to Circe the implication is that she will reduce Adam from God’s image to “*the inglorious likeness of a beast*”. Again when she is compared to Pandora we are compelled to think of Pandora’s triviality and of all the woes which her trivial action lets loose. Lastly when to compare “*great things with small*” the Causeway built by Sin and Death is likened to the bridge which Xerxes built over the Hellespont, we know that the doom awaiting the infernal pair is the same Nemesis, though in proportion greater, as the disaster which befell the Persian expedition. This anticipatory usage is characteristic of *Paradise Lost* and indeed Mr. Whaler, who knows all there is to be known about epic similes, even maintains that Milton was its inventor.⁸ But whatever the origins the effect is unmistakable.

It is clear therefore that every element which can be separated for inspection from the style of *Paradise Lost* contributes to what Professor Bowra calls its “*more than Latin solidity*”⁹ there are those who find themselves dismayed by such solidity, but the defence of Milton’s method cannot be undertaken by men thus hostile to its presiding logic. When Mr. Empson searches diligently for ambiguities in *Paradise Lost*,¹⁰ when critics as perceptive as Mr. Empson inform us that the epic is not lacking in Elizabethan richness, and when Professor Cleanth Brooks goes so far as to maintain that “*perhaps it is not too whimsical to call Milton’s Lucifer an example of metaphysical wit*”,¹¹ I am deeply impressed but also deeply uneasy. Such discoveries are all very well and often very exiting.

But the tendency behind them is to value Milton’s style for its accidents rather than its essence and to overlook the order it asserts by concentrating too exclusively on its more notable by-products. Sublimity is the virtue perpetuated in Milton’s style. In Dante’s on the other hand it is probably *bel canto*, a music which is all the more reassuring because it is won from the terrors and ignominies of Hell. The contrast we stipulate between heaven and hell is one submerged in this growth towards reality, so completely true to the spiritual progress it celebrates. Milton’s epic unfortunately lacks this ultimate unity for though he may tell us that he prefers “*heroic martyrdom*” to “*tedious havoc*” he can only speak, not sing, of “*the victorious agonies of Saints*”. Milton may prefer, and passionately prefer, his Protestant heaven to his Classical hell. He may scorn the riches of Babylon and Alcairo for the “*undetermin’d*” circuit of his new Jerusalem.¹²

In concluding, one ought to reiterate that Milton’s writing has its lapses, though even those may be less serious than we think, and may be magnified because we are compelled to see them behind the debris of their eighteenth century debasements. It is perhaps more damaging to allege that the style of *Paradise Lost* is not always one with its subject, that its qualities and texture are occasionally untrue to the emotions it is intended to evoke. The balance of poetic achievement is thus disturbed and it may be that it is disturbed so gravely as to affect the overall harmony of the epic. But for those in every generation who do not find this disturbance fatal it becomes necessary to put first things first, to insist again on Milton’s positive attributes, on his “*plain heroic magnitude*” of achievement. To suggest this perspective I cannot do better than quote from someone who was certainly no willing admirer of Milton, who disliked his prosody and detested his politics. *Paradise Lost*, says Dr. Johnson, is “*a poem which, considered with respect to design, may claim the first place, and with respect to performance, the second, among the productions of the human mind*”. It is on a conclusion very much more than Dr. Johnson’s on this side idolatry that I should like to let the eternal argument rest.

REFERANCE

1. J.W. Mackail (*The Springs of Helicon*, London, 1909, pp. 182-83)
2. J.C. Smith (“Feminine Endings in Milton’s Blank Verse”, T.L.S., Dec. 5th, 1916, p. 1016)
3. T.H. Banks (“Miltonic Rhythm : A Study of the Relation of the Full Stops to the Rhythm of *Paradise Lost*”, P.M.L.A., XLII, 1927, pp. 140-45)
4. J.H. Hanford, *A Milton Handbook* (New York, 1939), pp. 293-323
5. C.S. Lewis, op. cit. p. 45
6. Mr. J. Whaler (“Grammatical Nexus of the Miltonic Simile”) J.E.G.P. , XXXIII (1931), pp. 327-334.
7. James Whaler (“Animal Simile in *Paradise Lost*”, p. 542)
8. James Whaler, “The Miltonic Simile”, p. 1034