

## INTRODUCTION

FRANCIS BACON, in one of his prose fragments, draws a memorable distinction between “arts mechanical” and “sciences of conceit.” “In arts mechanical,” he says, “the first device comes shortest, and time addeth and perfecteth. But in sciences of conceit the first author goeth farthest, and time leeseth and corrupteth. . . . In the former, many wits and industries contributed in one. In the latter, many men’s wits spent to deprave the wit of one.”

I fear that literary criticism of the kind that I propose to myself in these chapters on Milton must be classified with the “sciences of conceit.” Indeed, Bacon puts it out of question that he himself would so have regarded it, for he goes on to explain how, after the deliverances of a master, “then begin men to aspire to the second prizes, to be a profound interpreter and commentor, to be a sharp champion and defender, to be a methodical compounder and abridger. And this is the

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unfortunate succession of wits which the world hath yet had, whereby the patrimony of all knowledge goeth not on husbanded and improved, but wasted and decayed.”

The blow is aimed at the scholastic philosophers, but it falls heavy on the critics of literature, on all who “aspire to the second prizes,” or who think “that a borrowed light can increase the original light from whom it is taken.” It is a searching arraignment of all who set themselves to expound in words the meaning and purpose of a master of verbal expression. Yet the very breadth of the indictment brings comfort and a means of escape. For the chief difficulties of an attempt to understand and judge Milton are difficulties inherent in the nature, not only of all criticism in the large sense, but also of all reading. In this association with great spirits which we call reading we receive but what we give, and take away only what we are fit to carry. Milton himself has stated the doctrine in its most absolute form, and has sought an enhanced authority for it by attributing it to the Christ—

Who reads

Incessantly, and to his reading brings not  
 A spirit and judgment equal or superior  
 (And what he brings what needs he elsewhere seek ?)  
 Uncertain and unsettled still remains,  
 Deep versed in books and shallow in himself,  
 Crude or intoxicate, collecting toys

## INTRODUCTION

3

And trifles for choice matters, worth a sponge,  
As children gathering pebbles on the shore.

Literally taken, this is the negation of all the higher functions of criticism, and the paralysis of all learning. Only his peers, it is argued, can read Shakespeare intelligently; and, as if that did not give him few enough readers, they are further told that they will be wasting their time! But love, unlike this proud Stoicism, is humble, and contented with a little. I would put my apology in the language of love rather than of philosophy. I know that in Shakespeare, or in Milton, or in any rare nature, as in *Faire Virtue*, the mistress of *Philarete*—

There is some concealèd thing  
So each gazer limiting,  
He can see no more of merit  
Than beseems his worth and spirit.

The appreciation of a great author asks knowledge and industry before it may be attempted, but in the end it is the critic, not the author, who is judged by it, and, where his sympathies have been too narrow, or his sight too dim, condemned without reprieve, and buried without a tombstone.

Imperfect sympathy, that eternal vice of criticism, is sometimes irremediable, sometimes caused by imperfect knowledge. It takes forms as various as the authors whom it misjudges. In the case of Shakespeare, when we attempt to estimate him, to

gauge him, to see him from all sides, we become almost painfully conscious of his immensity. We can build no watch-tower high enough to give us a bird's-eye view of that "globe of miraculous continents." We are out of breath when we attempt to accompany him on his excursions, where he,

through strait, rough, dense, or rare,  
With head, hands, wings, or feet pursues his way,  
And swims, or sinks, or wades, or creeps, or flies.

He moves so easily and so familiarly among human passions and human emotions, is so completely at home in all societies and all companies, that he makes us feel hide-bound, prejudiced and ill-bred, by the side of him. We have to widen our conception of human nature in order to think of him as a man. How hard a thing it is to conceive of Shakespeare as of a human spirit, embodied and conditioned, whose affections, though higher mounted than ours, yet, when they stooped, stooped with the like wing, is witnessed by all biographies of Shakespeare, and by many thousands of the volumes of criticism and commentary that have been written on his works. One writer is content to botanise with him—to study plant-lore, that is, with a theatrical manager, in his hard-earned leisure, for teacher. Another must needs read the Bible with him, although, when all is said, Shakespeare's study was but little on the Bible. Others elect to

## INTRODUCTION

5

keep him to music, astronomy, law, hunting, hawking, fishing. He is a good companion out of doors, and some would fain keep him there, to make a country gentleman of him. His incorrigible pre-occupation with humanity, the ruling passion and employment of his life, is beyond the range of their complete sympathy ; they like to catch him out of hours, to draw him aside and bespeak his interest, for a few careless minutes, in the trades and pastimes that bulk so largely and so seriously in their own perspective of life. They hardly know what to make of his “unvalued book” ; but they know that he was a great man, and to have bought a wool-fell or a quarter of mutton from him, that would have been something ! Only the poet-critics attempt to see life, however brokenly, through Shakespeare’s eyes, to let their enjoyment keep attendance upon his. And from their grasp, too, he escapes by sheer excess.

In the case of Milton the imperfection of our sympathy is due to other causes. In the first place, we know him as we do not know Shakespeare. The history of his life can be, and has been, minutely written. The affairs of his time, political and religious, have been recorded with enormous wealth of detail ; and this wealth, falling into fit hands, has given us those learned modern historians to whom the seventeenth century means a period of five thousand two hundred and

eighteen weeks. Milton's own attitude towards these affairs is in no way obscure; he has explained it with great fulness and candour in numerous publications, so that it would be easy to draw up a declaration of his chief tenets in politics and religion. The slanders of his adversaries he met again and again with lofty passages of self-revelation. "With me it fares now," he remarks in one of these, "as with him whose outward garment hath been injured and ill-bedighted; for having no other shift, what help but to turn the inside outwards, especially if the lining be of the same, or, as it is sometimes, much better." In his poetry, too, he delights to reveal himself, to take the knowing reader into his confidence, to honour the fit audience with a confession.

But the difficulty is there none the less. Few critics have found Milton too wide or too large for them; many have found him too narrow, which is another form of imperfect sympathy. His lack of humour has alienated the interest of thousands. His ardent advocacy of toleration in the noblest of his prose treatises has been belittled by a generation which prides itself on that flaccid form of benevolence, and finds the mere repeal of the Licensing Act the smallest part of it. His pamphlets on divorce and on government have earned him the reputation of a theorist and

## INTRODUCTION

7

dreamer. The shrewd practical man finds it easy to despise him. The genial tolerant man, whose geniality of demeanour towards others is a kind of quit-rent paid for his own moral laxity, regards him as a Pharisee. The ready humourist devises a pleasant and cheap entertainment by dressing Adam and Eve in modern garments and discussing their relations in the jargon of modish frivolity. Even the personal history of the poet has been made to contribute to the gaiety of nations, and the flight of Mary Powell, the first Mrs. Milton, from the house in Aldersgate Street, has become something of a stock comic episode in the history of English literature. So heavy is the tax paid, even by a poet, for deficiency in breadth and humour. Almost all men are less humorous than Shakespeare; but most men are more humorous than Milton, and these, it is to be feared, having suffered themselves to be dragooned by the critics into professing a distant admiration for *Paradise Lost*, have paid their last and utmost tribute to the genius of its author.

It may be admitted without hesitation that his lonely greatness rather forces admiration on us than attracts us. That unrelenting intensity; that lucidity, as clear as air and as hard as agate; that passion which burns with a consuming heat or with a blinding light in all his writings, have endeared him to none. It is impossible to take

one's ease with Milton, to induce him to forget his principles for a moment in the name of social pleasure. The most genial of his personal sonnets is addressed to Henry Lawrence, the son of the President of Cromwell's Council, and is an invitation to dinner. The repast promised is "light and choice"; the guest is apostrophised, somewhat formidably, as "Lawrence, of virtuous father, virtuous son," and is reminded, before he has dined, that

He who of these delights can judge, and spare  
To interpose them oft, is not unwise.

But the qualities that make Milton a poor boon-companion are precisely those which combine to raise his style to an unexampled loftiness, a dignity that bears itself easily in society greater than human. To attain to this height it was needful that there should be no aimless expatiation of the intellect, no facile diffusion of the sympathies over the wide field of human activity and human character. All the strength of mind and heart and will that was in Milton went into the process of raising himself. He is like some giant palm-tree; the foliage that sprang from it as it grew has long since withered, the stem rises gaunt and bare; but high up above, outlined against the sky, is a crown of perennial verdure.

It is essential for the understanding of Milton

## INTRODUCTION

9

that we should take account of the rare simplicity of his character. No subtleties ; no tricks of the dramatic intellect, which dresses itself in a hundred masquerading costumes and peeps out of a thousand spy-holes ; no development, one might almost say, only training, and that self-imposed. There is but one Milton, and he is throughout one and the same, in his life, in his prose, and in his verse ; from those early days, when we find him, an uncouth swain,

With eager thought warbling his Doric lay,

to the last days when, amid a swarm of disasters, he approved himself like Samson, and earned for himself the loftiest epitaph in the language, his own—

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail  
Or knock the breast ; no weakness, no contempt,  
Dispraise, or blame ; nothing but well and fair,  
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.

The world has not wholly misunderstood or failed to appreciate this extraordinary character, as one curious piece of evidence will serve to show. Milton is one of the most egotistic of poets. He makes no secret of the high value he sets upon his gifts—"gifts of God's imparting," as he calls them, "which I boast not, but thankfully acknowledge, and fear also lest at my certain account they be reckoned to me many

rather than few.” Before he has so much as begun his great poem he covenants with his reader “that for some few years yet I may go on trust with him toward the payment of what I am now indebted, as being a work not to be raised from the heat of youth or the vapours of wine ; . . . nor to be obtained by the invocation of dame Memory and her siren daughters, but by devout prayer to that eternal Spirit, who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim, with the hallowed fire of his altar, to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases ; to this must be added industrious and select reading, steady observation, insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs ; till which in some measure be compassed, at mine own peril and cost, I refuse not to sustain this expectation from as many as are not loth to hazard so much credulity upon the best pledges that I can give them.” And when he came to redeem his pledge, in the very opening lines of his epic, trusting to the same inspiration, he challenges the supremacy of the ancients by his

adventurous song

That with no middle flight intends to soar  
Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues  
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

“This man cuts us all out, and the Ancients too,” Dryden is reported to have said. But this