

Handford, James Holly, A Milton Handbook Fourth Edition (Appaeton-Century-Crofts, Inc.- New York) ~~1954~~ 1926, 1933, 1939, 1946, 1954, 1961

p. 308 Though little progress has thus far been made in analyzing these characteristics, attention may be directed to an exceptionally suggestive stylistic study by William Empson, entitled Bentley and Milton.⁷ Empson points out in a succession of examples that where Bentley finds fault with Milton he almost invariably does so on a point where eighteenth century demands for logic, explicitness, singleness of meaning are violated in the interest of poetic overtones and suggestions characteristic both of Elizabethan and of modern verse. Bentley is wrong in his criticisms, certainly, but he writes honestly from the point of view of his age; and such defenders of Milton as Pearce are really no nearer to catching the poet's intention than the heavy-handed classicist whom they ridicule.

p. 309 It is a curious fact that similes and figurative language generally are not at all evenly distributed in Milton's blank verse poems or even in Paradise Lost itself. In Books I and II they are scattered thick as stars. Thereafter they fall off in number, and there are long stretches of the poem, as, ~~for~~example, the theological discussion in Book III and the dialogue between Adam and Raphael in Book VII, in which there are none.⁹

This phenomenon may serve to direct our attention to the fact that Milton really has two styles, corresponding to two different kinds of object or two qualities of poetic inspiration. The one is abundant, highly colored, pictorial, figurative; the other direct, closely woven, and relatively plain. The first is the language of Milton's impassioned visual imagination, the second, of his ethical and intellectual intensity. Many passages, to be sure show the two modes in combination, and both have the fundamental Miltonic qualities already analyzed. The contrast between them in their purity is, nevertheless, strongly marked. It may already be discerned in Comus, but it is

p.310 clearest in the later poems. In the sonnets, Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes, the barer style predominates, though there are patches of the other, as in the description of the banquet spread for Christ, or the nightly storm followed by a serene dawn, or the choric description of Samson's descent upon the Philistines like an eagle upon tame villatic fowl. In Paradise Lost they are balanced fairly evenly.