

Peyre, Henri, The Failures of Criticism (Cornell University) 1967. Emended edition of Writers and Their Critics: A Study of Misunderstanding (1944)

p. 37 The seventeenth century in English literature is to most of us the age of Milton. Yet the poems of Milton which today seem to us the most evidently beautiful, the lines which are engraved in our memories and in our hearts, made so little impression upon his contemporaries they they never mentioned them and probably hardly read them.

"L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" did not receive the humble honor of one allusion in any text printed in Milton's lifetime. The Sonnets found admirers (chiefly Wordsworth, who owes them much, and Hazlitt) only in the early nineteenth century. Not a single contemporary apparently praised or even mentioned Lycidas. . . . The few contemporaries who meted out any praise to Milton ranked him below Cowley (the Duke of Buckingham in 1682) and on the same plane as Waller (The Athenian Mercury in 1691). . . .

. . . . Of Paradise Lost itself, only thirteen hundred copies had been sold eighteen months after its publication, and four thousand in all in the first thirteen years (1667-1680).⁵ The great Christian epic was so little appreciated that, twenty-five years after Milton's death, a certain John Hopkins thought he added flavor to the poem by giving a rhymed version of it; Dryden himself, about the time of Milton's death, had turned it into a poor drama, The State of Innocence and Fall of Man. Waller, the most highly acclaimed / ^{p. 38} poet of the age, declared: "If its length be not considered a merit, it hath no other." Much later, Samuel Johnson did not hesitate, after some words of praise, to characterize the greatest epic in the English language as "one of the books which the reader admires and lays down and forgets to take up again. . . The want of human interest is always felt . . . None ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure." A sophomore of the present day might share the opinion of the famous lexicographer, but would not dare express it in the face of a century and a half of critical and professorial tributes to Milton's greatness.⁶

⁵ We have no accurate means of ascertaining how large was then the English reading public, in a country of probably seven million inhabitants.

⁶ The history of Milton's contemporary fame has been thoroughly studied and told by Raymond D. Havens in two articles published in 1909 in Englische Studien, and again by William Riley Parker in Milton's Contemporary Reputation (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1940. I have utilized some of the precise data provided by these two scholars. For Johnson's criticism, see the Lives of the English Poets.