

Milton, by E. M. W. Tillyard late master of Jesus College, Cambridge. Revised ed., Barnes and Noble, Inc:New York) 1967

p. 205 Here, for instance, is Saurat's brief account of the way Paradise Lost is constructed:

Paradise Lost is built round two great themes which are harmoniously balanced: the fall of the angels and the fall of man. The first books describe the state of the fallen angels; in contrast to this, after an interval in Heaven, the following books picture man before his fall, in Paradise; then comes the fall of the angles, and the creation of the world which compensates it; and finally, the fall of man and the history of the world which will make up for it. The dramatic interest in the first half is in Satan's efforts, in the second, in the human drama between Adam and Eve. The two parts are linked, Satan's efforts being the cause of the human drama. The scheme is simple, clear and grand, and bears the imprint of Milton's mind.²

This is a very different account from Raleigh's. Instead of everything being subordinated to the single theme of the Fall of man, whose climax is the eating of the apple by Eve, there are two themes, ^{neither} ~~neight~~ of which is the theme which Raleigh considers of chief importance. I happen to agree with Raleigh; but when a critic like Saurat holds entirely different views with firm conviction, one cannot treat Raleigh's proposition as too obvious to need any proof.

How astonishingly the construction of Paradise Lost has been misunderstood in the past is made clear by the comments that have been passed on the four great personal passages, the preludes to the First, Third, Seventh, and Ninth Books. For a long time they were considered blemishes, perhaps excusable for their beauty, but faulty because they are accretions.³ Johnson is often thought to have ^{p.206} justified them for good in the following very characteristic passage:

The short digressions at the beginning of the third, seventh, and ninth books might doubtless be spared; but superfluties so beautiful who would take away? or who does not wish that the author of the Iliad had gratified succeeding ages with a little knowledge of himself? Perhaps no passages are more frequently or more attentively read than those extrinsick paragraphs; and, since the end of poetry is pleasure, that cannot be unpoetical with which all are pleased.

Footnote 3. Landor provides a notorious example of this misunderstanding. In his Southey and Landor (first conversation) he writes: 'Beautiful as are many parts of the Invocation at the commencement of the Seventh Book, I should more gladly have seen it without the first forty lines', and, 'We are come to the Ninth Book, from which I would cast away the first forty-seven verses.'