



A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF DR. JOHNSON'S VIEWS ON *PARADISE LOST*

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Abstract

The purpose of the present research paper is to look into depth of Dr. Johnson's critical learning, shown in his greatest work of criticism *The Lives of The Poets*. In it he expresses his views on 52 poets. The *Lives* maintains a happy balance between biography and criticism. This paper also studies Dr. Johnson's noticeable views on *Paradise Lost*.

Key – word: Johnson, Milton, Paradise Lost, criticism.



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Dr. Johnson (1709-84), the most prominent figure in the literature of the 18th century, occupies the place of a great critic, an eminent poet and a prose writer too. He has also been regarded as the literary dictator in English Language. *The Lives of the Poets, 1783* is his greatest critical work. His other literary works are – *The vanity of Human wishes* (1749), a poem the History of *Rasselas* (1759), fictional work and the Rambler, the Adventure and the Idler. Dr. Johnson enjoyed a historical perspective and was an Augustan to believe that certain basic qualities are essential in literature, and that the job of the critic is to assess the extent to which they are present in any particular piece. *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem in blank verse by the 17th century English poet John Milton. The first version, Published in 1667, consisted of books with over ten thousand lines of verse. A second edition followed in 1674, arranged into twelve books (in the manner of Vergil's *Aeneid*) with minor revisions throughout and a note on the versification. It is considered by critics to be Milton's major work, and it helped solidify his reputation as one of the greatest English poets of his time.

In The Lives of The Poets, Dr. Johnson mentions 52 poets beginning with Cowley. On the whole he writes his *Lives* as if the three parts – biography, character and works – have no necessary connection with each other but coming to the *Life of Milton* we see that he seems to deviate somewhat from this principle and allow his antipathy to Milton's political and religious ideas to colour his estimate of man's works:

His political notions were those of an acrimonious and surly republication..... founded in an envious hatred of greatness, and a sullenire of independence: in petulance impatient of control and pride disdainful of superiority. (Life of Milton 1953 48)

Life of Milton remains perhaps the most controversial of the *Lives* and has provoked a lot of hostile criticism against Dr. Johnson. George Watson observes that the *Life of Milton* “shows Johnson uncomfortably poised upon a double contradiction: he respects Milton’s Poetry more than he does Milton himself, and he respects it without loving it” (Watson 1965 101). Johnson’ portraits of Milton the man are far from being just and sympathetic. He wrote about Milton’s domestic and religious character with scorn and believed that Milton had no religion at all: “ He has not associated himself with any denomination of protestants; we know rather what he was not than what he was. He was not of the church of rome; he was not of the church of England “(Life of Milton 47).

Besides the criticism of *Paradise Lost*, Milton also criticized *Lycidas*, which has become one of the scandals of English criticism. J.H. Hangstrum describes it “as his greatest critical *faux pas*” (*Hangstrum 1952 45*), but we should not forget that dr. Johnson was true to his norms and T.S. Eliot in his essay On Milton, rightly observes that when Johnson held an opinion which seems to us wrong, we are never saves in dismissing it without inquiring why “he was wrong” (T.S. Eilot 1956 312). We may recall the basis on which Dr. Johnson criticize the poem and only then, we will be in a position to evaluate the merits of the case. Dr. Johnson’s primary objection to the poem is that its “diction is harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the number unpleasing” (Life of Milton).

Milton’s two longer poems, *L’Allegro and Il Penseroso* have been praised with subtle discrimination and been referred to as as “ two noble efforts of imagination have “ (Life of Milton 54). He calls *Comus* “the greatest of his juvenile performances and discovers in it “the dawn or twilight of *Paradise Lost* “ (56) . In his typical Johnsonian manner he calls it “a drama in the style, inelegantly splendid, and tediously instructive “(56),” A work truly poetical “, he says, “ is rarely found; allusions, images and descriptive epithets, embellish almost every period with lavish decoration. As a series of lines, therefore, it may be considered as worthy of all the admiration with which the votaries have received it “(54-55)”, He finds if deficient as drama saying that “the action is not probable”, the characterization unnatural lengthy and tedious and songs unmelodious (55).

Dr. Johnson ranked *Paradise Lost* in the first place “with respect to design “and in the second place “with respect to performance among the productions of the human mind “ (Life of Milton 56-57) and goes on to say that the epic was the best form of poetry:

By the general consent of critics, the first praise of genius is due to the writer of an epic K poem, as it requires an assemblage of all the poets which are singly sufficient for other compositions. Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason. Epic Poetry undertakes to teach the most important truths by the most pleasing precepts, and therefore relates some great event in the most affecting manner (57).

In his appreciation of *Paradise Lost* Johnson strictly follows in the footsteps of the ancients who, as rule, always divided a tragedy or an epic into six parts and viewed each part separately. These parts were plot, characters design, machinery, episode and sentiments and Johnson studied *Paradise Lost* under these six heads. He begins with congratulating Milton on the fine choice of his subject for writing his immortal epic. Milton’s subject, he says,”is not the destruction of a city, the conduct of a colony, the foundation of an empire. His subject is the fate of worlds, the revolutions of heaven and of earth; rebellion against the Supreme King, raised by the highest order of created beings; the overthrow of their host, and the punishment of their crime; the creation of a new race of reasonable creatures; their original happiness and innocence, their forfeiture of immortality, and their restoration to hope and peace “(58).

He further says that there are no “funeral games” or any long description of a shield in *Paradise Lost*, but refers to the alleged digressions at the beginning of the third, seventh and ninth books. He does not object to these digressions, for “superfluities so beautiful who would take away? and since the end of poetry is pleasure, that can not be unpoetical with which all are pleased.”

Johnson becomes most eloquent when he comes to deal with the sentiments or the moral tone of *Paradise Lost*. The motive of Milton behind his narrative is “the most useful and the most arduous; to vindicate the ways of God to man; to shew the reasonableness of religion, and the necessity of; obedience to the “ Divine Law” (57). Milton displays the power and mercy of the ‘Supreme Being’ the substance of the narrative, says Johnson, is truth and praises Milton for this quality: “Of his moral his moral sentiments it is hardly praise to affirm that they excel those of other poets “ 64 He further says:

In Milton every line breathes sanctity of thought and purity of manners, except when the train of the narration requires the introduction of the rebellious spirits; and even they are compelled to acknowledge their subjection to God, in such a manner as excites reverence, and confirms piety.

As for characterization Johnson says that all the characters are exalted, even the depraved ones. Milton has suitably portrayed the four good angels. The devils may be sinful and vicious but even in their sins and vices there is sublime, grandeur and majesty. Satan has been vanquished but not defeated to the end Johnson does not agree with those who do not find any heroism in Adam. Most of the characters are super human beings; a fact inseparable from the theme of the epic and yet they have something human about them. Dr. Johnson further justifies in *Paradise Lost* “because everything is done under the immediate and visible direction of Heaven; but the rule is so far observed, that no part of the action could have been accomplished by any other means “(60-61). Nor is the fable diverted by unnecessary episodes. There are only two episodes, which can be discovered: “Raphael’s relation of the war in heaven, and Michael’s prophetic account of the changes to happen in this world “(61). Johnson say that “both are closely connected with the great action; one was necessary to Adam as a warning, the other as a consolation.”

Dr. Johnson then refers to the defects and faults of *Paradise Lost*,” for faults and defects every work of man must have, it is the business of impartial criticism to discover “(65). His plan ignores verbal inaccuracies but his primary objection is that the epic “comprises neither human actions nor human manner” (66). The truths taught in the poem lack novelty and are neither new nor unexpected, and therefore, “what we know before, we can not learn; what is not expected, can not surprise”. The solemnity of the subject, according to Johnson, obstructs rather than arouses imagination and Milton has succeeded in supplying “want of human interest “ (67). He says:

Paradise Lost is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again. None ever wished it longer than it was. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure. We read Milton for instruction, retire harassed and over burdened, and look else wherefore recreation; we desert our master, and seek for companions.

He further observes that the ‘unskillful allegory’ is one of the greatest faults and the personification of Sin and Death is faulty (69). He also notices a few errors in the narrative, and in the descriptions of man and animals before the fall. He finally refers to Milton’s

frequently play upon words; equivocations and improper use of terms of art which he considers as unimportant faults not deserving any attention of the critic. Dr. Johnson is all praise for *paradise Regained* saying that "the general Judgment seems now to be right, that it is in many parts elegant, and everywhere instructive..... Had this poem been written not by Milton, but by some imitator, it would have claimed and received universal praise "(71). It, however, suffers in the general opinion by comparison with *Paradise Lost*.

Finally, we come to the general remarks made by Dr. Johnson towards the close of *life of Milton*. He praises his diction as being uniform throughout his greater works and peculiarly his own. He attributes this to Milton's love of "foreign idiom"(72). About Milton's language his verdict is: "of him, at last, may be said that Johnson says of Spenser, that he wrote no language, but has formed what Butler calls a Babylonish Dialect, in itself harsh and barbarous ,but made by exalted genius and extensive learning.

Dr. Johnson believes that "it is however by the music of meter that poetry has been discriminated in all languages" and blank verse, which seems to be verse only to the eye" was deplorable both in theory and practice (73). Regarding *Paradise Lost*, he commented about rhyme as a necessary adjunct of true poetry. Blank verse, on the other hand, has neither the easiness of prose, nor the melody of numbers" and soon tries the reader. He says:

But, whatever be the advantage of rhyme, I can not prevail on myself to wish that Milton had been a rhymer, for I can not wish his work to be other than it is; yet, like other heroes, he is to be admired rather than imitated. He that thinks himself capable of astonishing, may write blank verse; but those that hope only to please, must condescend to rhyme.

It is gratifying to note that Johnson despite his abhorrence to blank verse, does not wish that Milton had been a rhymer. Finally, Dr. Johnson says that Milton copied Homer, who contrived the first epic poem, but" of all the borrowers from Homer, Milton, the writer of *Paradise Lost*, is perhaps the least indebted". Milton's writings are entirely his own work performed "under discountenance, and is blindness", and "his work is not the greatest of heroic poems, only because it is not the first".

Dr. Johnson has in later times been the most influential of all critics of Milton. His *Lives* may be said to have established literary biography as the most popular medium of criticism in England but not a model form, which others were to follow. The biographical approach can really prove vulnerable in judging writers who died young like Marlowe, Keats, Byron. Still Dr. Johnson's remarks – especially his critical ones – have stimulated criticism

for the critics who have belittled or magnified Milton. The value of Dr. Johnsons criticism of *Paradise Lost* is such that “ we may freely disagree with his judgments, but we can never justly disable his judgment; and this is the real criterion of a great critic “(Saintsbury 229)

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