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Propert.

THERE is nothing in nature more irksome than general discourses, especially when they turn chiefly upon words. For this reason I shall wave the discussion of that point which was started some years since, Whether *Milton's Paradise Lost* may be called an Heroic Poem? those who will not give it that title, may call it (if they please) a *Divine Poem*. It will be sufficient to its perfection, if it has in it all the beauties of the highest kind of poetry; and as for those who alledge it is not an Heroic Poem, they advance no more to the diminution of it, than if they should say *Adam* is not *Aeneas*, nor *Eve Helen*.

I shall therefore examine it by the rules of Epic poetry, and see whether it falls short of the *Iliad* or *Aeneid*, in the beauties which are essential to that kind of writing. The first thing to be considered in an Epic poem, is the Fable, which is perfect or imperfect, according as the action which it relates is more or less so. This action should have three qualifications in it. First, it should be but One action. Secondly, it should be an Entire action; and Thirdly, it should be a Great action. To consider the action of the *Iliad*, *Aeneid*, and *Paradise Lost*, in these three several lights. *Homer*, to preserve the Unity of his action, hastens into the midst of things, as *Horace* has observed: had he gone up to *Leda's* egg, or begun much later, even at the rape of *Helen*, or the investing of *Troy*, it is manifest that the story of the poem would have been a series of several actions. He therefore opens his poem with the discord of his Princes, and artfully interweaves, in the several succeeding parts of it, an account of every thing material which relates to them, and had passed before this fatal dissension. After the same manner *Aeneas* makes his first appearance in the *Tyrrhene* seas, and within sight of *Italy*, because the action proposed to be celebrated was that of his settling himself in *Latium*. But because it was necessary for the reader to know what had happened to him in the taking of *Troy*, and in the preceding parts of his

his voyage, *Virgil* makes his Heroe relate it by way of Epifode in the second and third books of the *Æneid*. The contents of both which books come before those of the first book in the thread of the story, though for preserving of this Unity of action, they follow it in the disposition of the poem. *Milton*, in imitation of these two great Poets, opens his *Paradise Lost* with an infernal council plotting the Fall of man, which is the action he proposed to celebrate; and as for those great actions, the battel of the angels, and the creation of the world, (which preceded in point of time, and which, in my opinion, would have entirely destroyed the Unity of his principal action, had he related them in the same order that they happened) he cast them into the fifth, sixth and seventh books, by way of Epifode to this noble poem.

Aristotle himself allows, that *Homer* has nothing to boast of as to the Unity of his Fable, though at the same time that great Critic and Philosopher endeavours to palliate this imperfection in the *Greek* Poet, by imputing it in some measure to the very nature of an Epic poem. Some have been of opinion, that the *Æneid* also labours in this particular, and has Epifodes which may be looked upon as excrescencies rather than as parts of the action. On the contrary, the poem which we have now under our consideration, hath no other Epifodes than such as naturally arise from the subject, and yet is filled with such a multitude of astonishing incidents, that it gives us at the same time a pleasure of the greatest variety, and of the greatest simplicity; uniform in its nature, though diversified in the execution.

I must observe also, that as *Virgil* in the poem which was designed to celebrate the original of the *Roman* empire, has described the birth of its great rival, the *Carthaginian* Commonwealth: *Milton* with the like art in his poem on the Fall of man, has related the Fall of those angels who are his professed enemies. Beside the many other beauties in such an Epifode, its running parallel with the great action of the poem, hinders it from breaking the Unity so much as another Epifode would have done, that had not so great an affinity with the principal subject. In short, this is the same kind of beauty which the Critics admire in the *Spanish Fryar*, or the *Double Discovery*, where the two different plots look like counterparts and copies of one another.

The second qualification required in the action of an Epic poem is, that it should be an *entire* action: an action is entire when it is compleat in all its parts; or as *Aristotle* describes it, when it consists of a beginning, a middle, and an end. Nothing should go before it, be intermix-

ed with it, or follow after it, that is not related to it. As on the contrary, no single step should be omitted in that just and regular process which it must be supposed to take from its original to its consummation. Thus we see the anger of *Achilles* in its birth, its continuance and effects; and *Aeneas's* settlement in *Italy*, carried on through all the oppositions in his way to it both by sea and land. The action in *Milton* excels (I think) both the former in this particular; we see it contrived in hell, executed upon earth, and punished by heaven. The parts of it are told in the most distinct manner, and grow out of one another in the most natural order.

The third qualification of an Epic poem is its *Greatness*. The anger of *Achilles* was of such consequence, that it embroiled the Kings of *Greece*, destroyed the Heroes of *Asia*, and engaged all the Gods in factions. The settlement of *Aeneas* in *Italy* produced the *Cæsars*, and gave birth to the *Roman* empire. *Milton's* subject was still Greater than either of the former; it does not determine the fate of single persons or nations, but of a whole species. The united powers of hell are joined together for the destruction of mankind, which they effected in part, and would have completed, had not Omnipotence itself interposed. The principal actors are man in his greatest perfection, and woman in her highest beauty. Their enemies are the fallen angels: the Messiah their friend, and the Almighty their protector. In short, every thing that is great in the whole circle of Being, whether within the verge of nature, or out of it, has a proper part assigned it in this admirable poem.

In poetry, as in architecture, not only the whole, but the principal members, and every part of them, should be Great. I will not presume to say, that the book of Games in the *Æneid*, or that in the *Iliad*, are not of this nature, nor to reprehend *Virgil's* simile of a Top, and many other of the same kind in the *Iliad*, as liable to any censure in this particular; but I think we may say, without derogating from those wonderful performances, that there is an indisputable and unquestioned magnificence in every part of *Paradise Lost*, and indeed a much greater than could have been formed upon any pagan system.

But *Aristotle*, by the Greatness of the action, does not only mean that it should be great in its Nature, but also in its Duration, or in other words, that it should have a due Length in it, as well as what we properly call Greatness. The just measure of this kind of magnitude, he explains by the following similitude. An animal, no bigger than a Mite, cannot appear perfect to the eye, because the sight takes it in at once, and has only

only a confused idea of the whole, and not a distinct idea of all its parts; if on the contrary you should suppose an animal of ten thousand furlongs in length, the eye would be so filled with a single part of it, that it could not give the mind an idea of the whole. What these animals are to the eye, a very short or a very long action would be to the memory. The first would be, as it were, lost and swallowed up by it, and the other difficult to be contained in it. *Homer* and *Virgil* have shewn their principal art in this particular; the action of the *Iliad*, and that of the *Aeneid*, were in themselves exceeding short, but are so beautifully extended and diversified by the invention of *Episodes*, and the machinery of gods, with the like poetical ornaments, that they make up an agreeable story sufficient to employ the memory without overcharging it. *Milton's* action is enriched with such variety of circumstances, that I have taken as much pleasure in reading the Contents of his books, as in the best invented story I ever met with. It is possible, that the traditions on which the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* were built, had more circumstances in them than the history of *the Fall of Man*, as it is related in Scripture. Besides it was easier for *Homer* and *Virgil* to dash the truth with fiction, as they were in no danger of offending the religion of their country by it. But as for *Milton*, he had not only a very few circumstances upon which to raise his poem, but was also obliged to proceed with the greatest caution in every thing that he added out of his own invention. And, indeed, notwithstanding all the restraints he was under, he has filled his story with so many surprizing incidents, which bear so close an analogy with what is delivered in holy writ, that it is capable of pleasing the most Delicate reader, without giving offence to the most Scrupulous.

The modern Critics have collected, from several hints in the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, the space of time which is taken up by the action of each of those poems; but as a great part of *Milton's* story was transacted in regions that lie out of the reach of the Sun and the sphere of day, it is impossible to gratifie the Reader with such a calculation, which indeed would be more curious than instructive; none of the Critics, either ancient or modern, having laid down rules to circumscribe the action of an Epic poem with any determined number of years, days or hours.

* But of this more particularly hereafter.

* *Vid.*
Spect.
308.

Saturday,