

Gilbert, Allan H., On the Composition of Paradise Lost A Study of the Ordering and Insertion of Material (Octagon Books, Inc.: New York) 1966

Preface

p. vii To some readers of the following study it doubtless will appear that the foundation is not enough to carry the superstructure. The evidence is found chiefly in inconsistencies in Paradise Lost; some of them are slight inconsistencies; slight certainly, if the word means that they do not materially injure the poem. Yet they exist, and they are not too slight to support the conclusions drawn from them. Short of statements by an author or his friends or of a series of his manuscripts, there can be little evidence on composition save what is internal. Though some of my inferences from this evidence may be mistaken, I hope they will not be condemned until the poem as a whole and the particular passages in question have been critically re-read. None of my observations is intended to be dogmatic. . . . If I have sometimes found inconsistencies where there are none, so much the better for Milton's workmanship. My attempt has been "to save appearances," to find a way of explaining what stands in the poem. Some readers may feel that my efforts are as much worth laughter as were those of the non-Copernican astronomers; I shall be glad to yield to anyone who has the simple and adequate solution.

p. viii My study rests on and -if acceptable - returns to a view of Milton's character. There is an old tradition of an icily perfect Milton in his singing robes
Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot
Which men call earth.

This as an exclusive interpretation has received some heavy blows in the last thirty-five or forty years, but like many inheritances from eighteenth-and nineteenth-century criticism, is still powerful. Milton was "classical" if the word means that he took great pains to plan his work as a totality before he began to write. But did he allow his inventive powers to rest when he began to compose verses? It seems to me that he was always ready for Urania to return with something fresh, that he was willing to make continual changes of every sort, that he felt no condescension in cutting and patching. . . . To me a Milton who was willing to shift and change is a better artist than one who wrote once and for all with superhuman certainty; at least he would be a pleasanter one to meet.

Introduction

p. 3 What do poets do when they compose? It is known that they revise, but most of the study of their revision has been given to verbal details. Even more important is change of plan, causing transfer or insertion of blocks of material. Yet this has been less observed than smaller variations, partly because the rough manuscripts showing it are less likely to be kept than later ones with merely verbal alterations. Though such major changes are usually hidden, Mrs. Bennett, in The Evolution of the Faerie Queen, has shown that Spenser in his later books used material written earlier than some of that in the first three. After her study it is no longer possible for a critic to assume that any author of a long and labored poem such as Paradise Lost composed in the present sequence of the work. The burden of proof for seriatim composition rests upon him.

Though, as Conington says of studies of the order of composition of the books of the Aeneid, examination of the conformity of part with part concerns "the critical scholar rather than the general reader," the process is not that of a Zoilus, taking pleasure in collecting the defects of Homer. It is the observing of the poet as he works, with the pleasure of seeing how he substituted the better for the good.