

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

p. 4 Yet critics have generally not taken saltatory composition into account. It has been conventional to say that the first book of Paradise Lost is the work of John Milton fresh at his task and Book XII his product when he was worn down by much writing. But before believing this we must know that he composed the poem in its present sequence. Style is not to be called early or late merely because it occurs near the beginning or the end of the epic.

Moreover, continuing and repeated change, in passages both long and short, executed over a number of years and involving addition, excision, and shifting of material - all by a blind man dependent on the eyes and brain of an amanuensis - could not but leave on the finished work marks that can be called defects. Though it is proper for interpreters to fix their attention chiefly on the merits of Paradise Lost, they can hardly give a just estimate if they so insist on flawless workmanship as to overlook human inconsistencies and slips of memory inevitable in the course of years of labor. An example may be found in the story of Abdiel.

p. 5 When the story of Abdiel is looked on as a late insertion, the matter is clear.

p. 8 It is likely that some of Milton's composition was saltatory rather than steady and consecutive.<sup>5</sup>

Footnote 5. Professor McColley writes: "Should the five years of actual composition have fallen ~~have fallen~~ largely within the three eras of 1652-53, 1655-58, and 1660-63, we may expect evidence of disjunctive composition within the poem. As all writers know too well, disjoined composition invites inconsistencies which the greatest care does not always locate. Handicapped by blindness, Milton would have found their detecting unusually difficult . . .

"Our inquiry is not confronted with a problem untouched by Miltonic scholarship: Did the poet compose the books and sections of Paradise Lost in the order in which they appeared in his published version? . . . Evidence . . . suggests that the order of publication was not the order of composition . . .

"Necessarily conjectural are my conclusions regarding the order in which Milton composed the first three-fifths of the epic. Evidence chiefly internal, but supported by Adam unparadiz'd and the abandoned tragedy, suggests strongly that Books I-III, the third quarter of Book IV, and the first two-thirds of Book V were written later than the remaining parts of Books IV-V, Book VI, and apparently sections of Book VIII. . . . As a probability which merits careful consideration, and only such, I suggest that Milton began composition with sections of Book IV." -Paradise Lost, An Account of Its Growth and Major Origins, with a Discussion of Milton's Use of Sources and Literary Patterns (Chicago, 1940), pp. 309, 310, 325.

I do not accept these details as proved, but give them as showing their author's belief in disjunctive composition.

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