

which men, free from rigid conventions, were enabled to develop marked individuality of character, and to give voice to elemental passions without fear or restraint. Language, too, was at that elementary stage of its development best calculated to give natural and forceful expression to men's thoughts and emotions; for, it was added, 'a polished language is not fit for a great poet'.¹ Apart from this it was noted that Homer's poems were made to be recited to popular audiences, and had in consequence an appeal of a universal kind.² And this appeal was heightened since poets at that time were held in reverence as the inspired religious teachers. Altogether, then, Blackwell's finding is that Homeric conditions had contributed largely to the excellence of his work; and he concludes with an assertion of the need for adopting the historical approach in literary criticism. True appreciation of Homer, he states, can only come when we put ourselves in the place of his audience;³ and this truth in general was more fully recognized as time went on by Thomas Warton, Hurd and others.

While these were then the more important additions to criticism during the opening decades of the 18th Century no account of the critical activities of that period can, however, omit some mention of the work of the famous and redoubtable Richard Bentley (1663-1742), with whom are associated what Porson later called his immortal *Dissertation on the Letters of Phalaris* (1692) and an ill-advised edition of *Paradise Lost* (1732). In the former Bentley deals with an unfortunate reference of Temple's to Phalaris's *Epistles* as the 'oldest' and the 'best' in the world; and by means of unrivalled erudition and acute critical and historical sense he proves conclusively, applying chronological, linguistic, and stylistic tests, that the *Letters*, so far from dating from the 6th Century B.C., were none other than forgeries of a later date. It was a masterly performance, revealing the possibilities of historical criticism; and it is not too much to say that it heralded a new era in critical method. On the other hand his work on *Paradise Lost* was of an inept and wholly misguided kind. Assuming without foundation that Milton's text had been vitiated by errors due to an amanuensis and an imaginary editor, he recklessly introduced capricious and ill-founded emendations, interpolations and the like, which made in his opinion for greater 'correctness'. Following Addison, for instance, he deplores the Miltonic ending of the poem, and suggests as a better reading:

¹ *Inquiry*, p. 71.² *ibid.* p. 103.³ *ibid.* p. 118.

Then hand in hand with social steps their way
Through Eden took, with heav'nly comfort cheer'd.

It was altogether a lamentable business which was subsequently condemned by Johnson and others.

The general advances thus made at this stage are, therefore, of some importance. One thing is clear, and that is that, despite Johnson's later declaration that neo-classical standards were still recognized by some in his day, yet at this earlier date they received no absolute endorsement, and neo-classicism was nowhere passively accepted as the orthodox creed. Amid conflicting cross-currents there was already an awakening to the need for something more than the rules, a realization that the poetic appeal was not to the intellect alone, but to the emotions as well; and methods of appreciation, as distinct from methods of composition, became now the main consideration. Certain general principles, for instance, were either emphasized anew or tentatively set forth for the first time. Fixed rules, it was asserted, were inconsistent with a changing environment; a distinction was drawn between the 'mathematical reason' and the 'poetical reason'; 'good taste' was advocated as the test of literary excellence; and attempts were made to clear up obscurities in the critical terminology. As yet these more enlightened conceptions of art were but imperfectly expounded; but the discussion prepared the way for what was to follow. It indicated the lines along which criticism was to advance; as when, for instance, it was significantly noted that Shakespeare and Spenser had successfully violated many of the established rules.

See over →