

# The Exchanges

The *De Paul Minerval* for October is interesting and well put together. The articles and the solitary short-story in the issue are well written, and are neither too short nor too long. The poetry, judged as the work of college undergraduates, is of passing merit, although it lacks inspiration and is careless in its technique.

Whatever of mediocrity lies in the poetry is more than compensated for by the brilliant and conclusive manner in which the author of "The Humor of 'Paradise Lost'" shatters age-old traditions and destroys at a blow literary beliefs which have become almost axiomatic. This criticism of Milton's masterpiece is splendidly written, and is entirely just in its claim to a critic's innate right to criticize a great work from his own point of view. Very few poets or novelists write simply for the sake of writing; they wrote to an audience, and they wish to be judged by the effect which their work has on that audience. It is fitting, then, and more than fitting, that "Paradise Lost" should be judged, not as a great piece of poetry, emanating from a great mind, but as a jumble of inconsistencies and absurdities, for, to the untutored mind, "Paradise Lost" is nothing else.

We were so pleased by the reasoning displayed in this article, and by the apt quotations and comments upon those quotations which liven it up, that we read "Paradise Lost" over again, this time for the first and fortieth time. We found ourselves agreeing with the article in almost every detail. There were one or two misstatements made however, which we feel it our duty to correct. In the first place, Joseph Addison did not praise "Paradise Lost" fulsomely. His praise was like everything else associated with the man and

his age, dignified, sedate, and restrained. Nor are we relying upon our memory alone, when we write this. We have studied Milton under great scholars and we know whereof we write. In the second place, Addison did not bring fame to Milton. Milton's fame did not come to him after his death. He was a prophet honored in his own country. Any reliable history of literature will prove this.

Thirdly, the devils did not flock into Pandemonium by hundreds of thousands, but rather by hundreds *and* thousands. Fourthly, it is nothing extraordinary that Satan should attempt the use of force against Sin. Milton is so careless in his description of the war between the Angels of Light and the Angels of Darkness, that he portrays them also as employing force against one another. If Milton could have nodded once, there is nothing to prevent his nodding again. It was by force that the fallen angels were driven into Hell; it is by force that Satan, mindful, perhaps, of the instrument employed in his own destruction, now seeks a passage through the gates of Hell.

Fifthly, Gabriel guards the gates of Heaven nightly because there would have been little need of his guarding them by day. Satan is no fool. He knows exactly what he can do and what he can not. He would never have attempted an onslaught on Paradise when he knew that his armies, in their advance, might easily be seen. We agree with much that the author of this article says concerning Satan's attributes, but we can not agree with her in taking from Satan all of his abilities as a general.

Sixthly, compasses have feet, as well as mortals or immortals. The slip which the author made in this instance, at the close of her criticism, is, we think, deliberate. "One foot he centred," refers, of course, to the foot of the compass. We are sure that this absurdity was included in the list simply because, if it were really an absurdity, it would be superlatively funny. But it is not an absurdity at all. This, we are



sure, the very conscientious and clear-seeing author of "The Humor of 'Paradise Lost'" will gladly admit.

Since we agree with the author in her novel point of view and in her expression of that point of view, we can not with justice find fault with the examples which she furnishes us in her attempt to prove her contention that Milton is a blundering idiot. Nor do we. We do not think ourselves that Milton is an idiot, or that he blunders. We are not, however, judging Milton now by his intentions in writing his epic; we are judging him by the effects of that epic upon us. We agree, then, because of the effects of the poem upon us, that Milton as a poet is full of absurdities, and that consequently he is a trifle absurd himself. Scholars (and we do not claim to be such, neither the author of the article nor we who now criticize it) will look at the matter in a different light. They will think, in their stupidity, that Milton is great, and that we, if we are unable to appreciate his greatness, must be lacking in intelligence. We may be so, but that is neither here nor there.

We should like to have the author of this article read the other great classics of the world, and criticize them from the same point of view. It may take her much time to grasp their significance so completely as she has grasped the significance of "Paradise Lost," but whatever time she devotes to them will be well spent. She might, if she so desired, seek out the humor of the "Iliad," of the "Aeneid," of the "Divine Comedy," and of the Bible. We should be very happy to read her criticisms of each of these works. Perhaps she would be willing to accept the following suggestions which we modestly proffer, prompted to our action solely by a desire to help her in her task.

First, in her criticism of the "Iliad", she might take any one of the ten or twelve dozen incidents wherein Homer nods, and bring out their subtle humor. She might also comment on the supreme poetry which Homer could, at one

spot, when Achilles is dragging the body of Hector about the walls of Troy, devote to some dirty washing which had been hung out to dry, and to the wash-tubs standing near at hand.

Secondly, in her criticism of the "Aeneid" she might count the moans which Aeneas heaves from the bottom of his bosom. When she has done that, she might draw a picture of the waves and the height to which they reached, in that terrible storm of the first book. She might also get great enjoyment from Vergil's description of the funeral games in the fifth book. And when she has finished with these, she might turn to Dido, and describe her glorious death. Absurd? Nothing more so! Then, turning to the Gods themselves, she might comment on Mercury, descending from heaven by the oarage of his wings. Venus, with her rosy neck, might be a fit subject for destructive criticism. And Neptune, lifting his peaceful pate above the topmost wave, and calming them with a nod, might conceivably be a good source of merriment.

Thirdly, in her criticism of the "Divine Comedy", she might follow Dante on his trip through Hell and be chased with him by the demons. She might compare Raphael's explanation of the cause of the sun-spots with the explanation which the glorified Beatrice advances to the inquiring Dante. Or she might compare Milton's idea of the sun with Dante's, and find out for herself which of the two she prefers.

Finally, she might take the Bible, and prove as conclusively as it is possible to prove anything, that God, who is the source of that Bible, was himself a trifle absurd. Job's idea of the sidereal universe might be worth looking into. Perhaps Judith, spending hours on her own adornments before her visit to Holophernes, might furnish more humor, at that. There is no limit to the things which she might discover in the Bible, and which, judged solely by their effect upon us,

that is, judged from our point of view alone, might convulse us with laughter, if we were thus disposed.

“The Humor of ‘Paradise Lost’” is very cleverly written. The trouble with its ideas and with its expression of those ideas is this: we are not allowed to judge a work from our own point of view. If such were the case, a teamster to whom opera does not appeal might utterly condemn Verdi, a bank-clerk who knows nothing about tragedy might send to oblivion all of the plays of Euripedes, and a witty college undergraduate whose poetic senses are undeveloped might heap ridicule upon one of the greatest poets of all time. Such is not the case, and each one of the three, the teamster, the bank-clerk, and the college undergraduate, would do better to keep his astonishing opinions to himself. People who possess intelligence are very likely to think monstrous things about teamsters who set up as musical critics, about bank-clerks who would decide tastes in literature, and about undergraduates who assume the role of prophet or of arbiter elegantiarum. It can't be done.

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