THE SIMILES of JOHN MILTON

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Perhaps three words will go further than any long, elaborate definition and discussion in expressing the genius of Milton - and these three are - wholeness, sublimity and simplicity.[1] Milton's is a style fraught with learning and weighted with all the lore accumulated by an eager and intensive reader from his studies - ecclesiastical, historical or mythological.

For his "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained" the poet must, of necessity, use an elevated learned diction - elaborate and unusual constructions, foreign idiom and even archaic words lend their aid to create this style. By inversion of the natural order of words and phrases, by the use of parenthesis and opposition and by the use of series of more or less exotic proper names, Milton creates a style as unique in manner of expression as it is splendid in matters of allusion and suggestion. The language of the poet is a compound of all the varied elements, ancient and modern, which his extraordinarily assimilative mind converted to its own uses and the result is a style almost uniquely literary and intellectual - the despair of the ignorant but the delight of the educated reader.[2]

The language of Milton has been criticised as having little relish of the conversation of men but the poet must lend fit speech to divine beings such as archangels and the Deity Himself.

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1. Gilfillan, George : Milton's Poetical Works Vol. II P X

2. Garnett, Richard : Milton P. 165

Milton is also considered a musical poet, since a rather high proportion of his meaning is conveyed through sound as against statement. Garnett says of the style "It is that of an ancient classic transplanted but the diction is in no respect affected or pedantic.(1)

One of the great contributory causes to this effect of general erudition is the employment of epic or expanded similes and figures of speech drawn from, and in imitation of, many of the writers whose works Milton had known.

By the word "simile" we understand the introduction, for explanatory, illustrative or ornamental purposes, of an object, scene or action with which the one in hand is compared and usually connected by a comparative conjunction. Of the last mentioned use of the simile we find little trace in Milton's poetry, where it is rarely used merely to suspend the narrative or to draw a diverting picture.(2)

In the works of Milton similes are used chiefly in the following ways (a) to clarify relations between two characters;(3) (b) to suggest or arouse emotions;(4) (c) for relief in scenes of strife, pain or crisis, the poet may use for illustration an image that carries the suggestion of tranquillity.(5) This use is virtually ignored by the poet; (d) for the purposes of enobling or embellishing the subject;(6) (e) to define an abstract idea by presenting an analagous concrete thing or experience :(7)

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1. Garnett, Richard : Milton P. 164
2. Hanford, James : A Milton Handbook P. 267
3. Paradise Lost IX 670-676
4. Samson Agonistes : 86-93
5. Paradise Lost IV : 980-985
6. Paradise Regained IV : 55-60
7. Paradise Lost VIII : 606

(f) to anticipate an event in the fable.[1] Milton was the first epic poet to add this function to the simile and he gives it an important part in his story: (g) for illustration of a process, a living being, thing, place or action.[2]

Underlying all these functions is one in addition - they are all meant to please the reader and increase the enjoyment of the story by means of additional pictures and ideas all relevant to the main idea suggested.

These similes form so integral a part of the whole scheme of the poem because of this unique construction. They are of two kinds - simple and complex and both are used to practically the same extent in "Paradise Lost", there being one simple simile to every fifty-one lines, a complex simile to every eighty-five lines.[3]

The simple similes are those in which a person, action or object, is compared simply to another person, action or object in other fields of experience. The comparisons are usually drawn from widely separated provinces of literatures. This is particularly true of Milton's custom, for example - Satan is compared to giants,[4] then to a Leviathan.[5] By this means the poet can pour forth the treasures of his mind and give us the benefit of his wide reading.

This simple relationship is represented by the simile "restless thoughts like a deadly swarm of locusts arm'd ----------rush upon one".[6]

The simile form in which Milton gained his greatest distinction

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1. Paradise Lost X : 306-11

2. Comus : 188-190

3. Whaler, James : Modern Philology Vol. XXVIII P. 314

4. Paradise Lost I : 196-200

5. Ibid 200-208

6. Samson Agonistes 1.19-20

was the complex epic type of figure for which Homer, Virgil, Statius, Lucan, Tasso and a host of others, mediaeval and Spenserian, lend precedent. James Whaler has estimated the number of complex similes of over five lines in length in"Paradise Lost" to be forty-eight in all.(1) On the same basis of classification I would give the number in "Paradise Regained" as eight, as two in Samson Agonistes and as five in Comus.

When the poet is in the vein he does not stop with a single elaborate comparison but proceeds from one to another. In a typically complex Miltonic simile each detail is directed to some application in the fable, i.e. correspondence between the terms is the rule rather than diversity.(2) Such a simile is found in the famous comparison of Satan's shield to the moon and the further development of the idea of Galiloe's Telescope.(3)

In describing the Garden of Eden, Milton omits no reference to any parallel happy garden which has been made memorable in song or story.(4)

The key to this habit lies in Milton's desire for scholarly completeness, and perhaps best illustrates the rigid control he exercised over his artistic imagination.(5)

These simile clusters or groups are typical of the genius of Milton, filled as they are with reminiscences of all that is best and noblest in the literature with which he was familiar. They are the product of an attempt to express something vast and, failing in a single idea to do so, the image is impressed on our minds by a multiplication of similes.(6)

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1. Whaler, James : Journal of English and German Philology Vol. XXX P. 327
2. Hanford, James ; A Milton Handbook P. 270
3. Paradise Lost L : 287-291
4. Hanford, James : A Milton Handbook P. 242
5. Ibid P.268
6. Whaler, James : Modern Philology Vol. XXVIII P. 317

With Lucan the impulse to group becomes an offence against literary taste. Therefore, to avoid this, Milton studied the construction carefully, choosing images from a multitude of sources and using a climactic arrangement frequently. Virgil, rather than Lucan, is his guide and model, Milton having about the same frequency of complex similes as Virgil, although he uses a far larger number of simple similes.(1)

There is some doubt as to the relative superiority of the simile group describing static conditions and those describing action. In the latter class we find the greatest of all simile clusters - that depicting the recovery of the revolted angels.(2) Here we have the supreme example in English literature of how a cluster of similes may mark the succesive stages in an action.(3) "We watch the fallen angels gradually recover from their stupor and rally around their leader - six similes within fifty-eight lines are grouped in seven sections of three members each with Satan's call to arms ringing in between".(4) Other memorable similes are those of Satan confronting death,(5) and of the fiends changed into serpents.(6)

Simile clusters representing static conditions are well worth considering also - e.g. the description of the huge bulk of Satan,(7) of the Garden of Eden,(8) and of Satan's persistency in tempting Christ.(9)

In "Samson Agonistes" (1691-1707) we have a remarkable case of one complex simile growing by natural association out of another. Samson is compared to an evening dragon, then to an eagle and finally to that self-begotten bird-the Phoenix.

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1. Whaler, James : Modern Philology Vol. XXVIII P. 323

2. Paradise Lost L : 331-375

3. Whaler, James : Modern Philology Vol. XXVIII P. 320

4. Ibid P. 320

5. Paradise Lost II : 704-721

6. Ibid X : 507-20

7. Ibid I : 194-207
8. Ibid IV : 132-171
9. paradise Regained I, II, III, IV.

Milton's crowning success in climactic arrangement occurs in "Paradise Regained" (IV 10-24), where the Tempter is successively likened to an over-bold man, to a swarm of flies in summer-time and to surging waves.

A third type of simile classified by P.S. Sherwin is the detached simile which includes both simple and complex.(1) Similes are considered detached when the picture they present is clear and developed, entirely different and separate from the preceding image. A clear example of this is the simile beginning Book XII of "Paradise Lost" - "As one who bates at noon tho' bent on speed". The average length of the detached simile is five lines - similes of three, four, five and six lines being most common and almost equally common. Of this type the author counts fifty-three in "Paradise Lost" and Six in "Paradise Regained".

Milton's similes are organically composed to a higher degree than those of his predecessors. As a general rule the more elaborate members in the simile groups tend to follow rather than precede.(2) As a grammarian, Milton firmly locks the simile in its context, restrains individual similes from running beyond a certain length, and refuses, however apt it may be, to emphasize a simile by letting it fall at the end of a period or subdivision.(3) This is too bold a place of emphasis and once he has mapped out his fable he will allow nothing to attract his reader too far away.

The aim of the poet is to avoid the formula effect so characteristic of Homer and to dispel the feeling prevalent in Statius, that the similes can be

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1. Sherwin, P.S. : Modern Language Notes : Vol. XXXVI P. 341

2. Whaler, James : Modern Philology Vol XXVIII P. 321

3. Whaler, James : Journal of English and German Philology, Vol.XXX P. 327

plucked away without jeopardy to the story.[1] Like Virgil, Milton often permits identical successive openings and also like that poet, he does not permit many negative variants.[2]

However there are many ways in which the similes can be varied and the original simple simile altered to give it an entirely new character. Among these methods are the following - (a) The simile may be introduced by the apodosis connective "so" rather than the usual "like" or "as".[3] (b) The poet may state his comparison in a negative form.[4] (c) For the sake of variation the poet may omit the second connective if it is not required for clearness.[5] (d) When the resumptive "so", "such" and "thus" etc., would encumber the narrative, Milton may omit it.[6] (e) At the end of a paragraph or subdivision the poet may wish to achieve distinction by means of a simile. This is a function rarely used by Milton - in contrast with the exhibitionary technique of Statius.[7]

Miltonic similes, if not absolutely undetachable, always tend to be both structurally and esthetically organic, woven into the warp and woof of the fable.[8]

James Whaler has attributed to these simile groups the characteristics of "baroque" architecture - magnificence and surprise. The irregularity of their appearance gives them all the more accent, turns all the fiercer light on their

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1. Whaler, James : Journal of English and German Philology Vol XXX P. 330
2. Ibid P. 327
3. Paradise Lost IX : 1059-60
4. Ibid I: 717-722
5. Ibid II : 510-515
6. Ibid V : 620-627
7. Whaler, James : Journal of English and German Philology Vol.XXX P. 331
8. Ibid P. 330

masses when they do appear.[1]

It is a curious fact that similes and figures of speech generally are not at all evenly distributed in Milton's blank verse, poems, or even in "Paradise Lost" itself. The frequency of occurrence taken together with the length seems to be a much better indication of the poet's fertility of imagination than the mere consideration of length. Judged by this standard the poet's genius appears to have three or four great levels in the two epics -- (1) The first four books of "Paradise Lost" with an interruption in Book III, (2) Books IX and X and (3) Book IV of "Paradise Regained".[2]

Miss Edith Murphy in an unpublished paper has estimated the approximate number of similes in each book of "Paradise Lost" as follows:[3]

Book I	1-50 lines	Book V	1-300 lines	Book IX	1-230 lines
Book II	1-95 lines	Book VI	1-300 lines	Book X	1-200 lines
Book III	1-370 lines	Book VII	1-320 lines	Book XI	1-900 Lines
Book IV	1-140 lines	Book VIII	1-650 lines	Book XII	1-300 lines

Even this does not illustrate the unevenness of distribution since the similes are often concentrated in comparatively brief passages. The difference in the length of the books and the great difference in beauty make these figures deceptive.

Several reasons have been advanced in answer to this peculiarity and the following are the more important -- (a) The illustrative, aggrandizing functions of simile in Milton explain his massing in the earlier books.

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1. Whaler, James : Modern Philology Vol XXVIII P. 324
2. Sherwin, P.S. : Modern Language Notes Vol. XXXVI P. 341
3. Hanford, James : A Milton Handbook P. 242

"His high theme is set - he must orient his characters in our imagination in terms of our own experience"[1] (b) The comparative absence of simile in Books V to VIII and II is the result of the nature of the fable and of Milton's way of narrating "things unattempted yet in prose and rhyme".

Milton follows quite steadfastly the Homeric convention that detached similes are poetic artifices proper only for the author speaking in his own person. Only three violations of this rule appear in the two poems together -- the first occurs in Raphael's narrative of the war in Heaven,[2] another is in one of Christ's speeches to Satan during the temptation,[3] and the third, the most serious lapse, occurs in Adam's conversation with Eve in "Paradise Lost" (X-1073) Adam is a real dramatic character but the others were mere puppets and the author's matter was given to them merely for purposes of the plot.[4]

(c) Milton could find no range of simile which would illustrate the Heavenly wars, creation and post-Adamic history and at the same time be comprehensible to Adam's limited experience.[5] In relating his battles Milton felt that the necessity to avoid the usual epic convention could be turned into a virtue. "There is no warfare in Western epic told with less retarding imagery than his celestial battles".[6]

W.C.Green advances a generalization that Book I of the Iliad being one of rapid action contains no simile. He accounts for the lack as due to a desire for directness. This same statement may be consonant with Milton's

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1. Whaler, James : Modern Philology Vol. XXVIII P. 318
2. Paradise Lost VI : 195-198
3. Paradise Regained IV : 330
4. Sherwin, P.S. : Modern Language Notes Vol. XXXVI P. 342
5. Whaler, James : Modern Philology Vol. XXVIII P. 321
6. Ibid P. 325

intention in Books V and VI of "Paradise Lost".[1]

(d) Complex simile is particularly inappropriate in conversation, for even an epic poet must strive to preserve some illusion of naturalness. This will explain the scarcity of complex simile in "Comus" and "Samson Agonistes". Almost three-quarters of "Paradise Lost" is conversation and most of it is concentrated in the later books.[2]

A broader view of the whole matter may be taken. God, Christ, Heaven and Heaven's inhabitants proved unworkable material for Milton's genius. They had to be treated with convention and could not be re-created in the poet's imagination. "To what could the Protestant Christian Heaven be compared and thus become material for a Renaissance Poet"?[3]

We find the similes least frequent and least beautiful in the books we least admire and vice versa. In these respects, then, similes may be taken as the touchstone of Milton's poetic vein.[4]

"Milton's choice of imagery is distinguished from that of other important epic poets of Western Europe by an iron control over and virtual renunciation of animal simile".[5] The poet felt that animal similes had had their day. The Iliad being a book of feuds and combats favours simile and particularly animal simile. This practice won the enthusiastic support of Tasso and Spenser. "Under no conditions could Milton have illustrated the exploits of his heavenly armies by means of the conventional epic symbols of ferocity - the lion, tiger, eagle etc., without diminishing his combatants".[6]

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1. Whaler, James : Modern Philology Vol. XXVIII P. 322
2. Ibid P. 326
3. Sherwin, P.S. : Modern Language Notes Vol. XXXVI P. 343
4. Ibid P. 343
5. Whaler, James : Publications of the Modern Language Association Vol.XLVII P.547
6. Whaler, James : Modern Philology Vol. XXVIII P. 317

The image of bulls fighting for a heifer had been used by practically all epic poets. Milton felt that it had been fought to a farce considering that it occurs in Statius, Valerius, Flaccus, Quintus of Smyrna, Ovid and a host of others.[1]

Nevertheless, when the poet does use an animal simile it is superbly thought out and made as fresh as if it had never been touched upon by countless others.

The single wolf simile carries twice as much associative force as any wolf simile in Virgil.[2] Milton succeeds again with his locust simile which possesses far greater suggestive power than Homer's simile of the Trojans likened to locusts.[3] The perfect opportunity for Milton to display his fresh conception occurs in his comparison of Satan's host crowding into Pandaemonium to a swarm of bees.[4] The pedigree of the bee simile was noble but Milton introduced it into his epic at the risk of perpetrating a cliche'.[5]

The story of Creation gave the poet an excellent opportunity of enumerating the kinds and properties of birds, beasts, fishes, reptiles, plants, and trees after the manner of Chaucer and Spenser. This opportunity he refuses or at any rate turns to small account. His general descriptions are highly picturesque but he spends little time on enumeration or detail. Natural knowledge was not one of his dearer studies and it was enough for him that Adam knew the natures of the beasts and gave them appropriate names.[6]

The truth is not surprising that Milton practically excludes all animal similes - in "Paradise Lost" extended similes from animal life are scarcely more frequent than similes from plant life, even those over two lines.[7]

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1. Whaler, James : Modern Philology Vol. XXVIII p. 326

2. Paradise Lost IV : 183-187

3. Ibid I : 338-343

4. Ibid I : 768-775

5. Whaler, James : Publications of the Modern Language Association Vol. XLVII P. 537
6. Raleigh, Sir Walter : Milton P. 236
7. Whaler, James : Publications of the Modern Language Association Vol. XLVII P. 542

Notwithstanding epic convention Milton realized that he could not afford to deal largely in this class of figure. Rather he prefers to maintain dignity and distance by choosing comparisons from ancient history, mythology and from the great things strange of nature - sun, moon, stars, shooting stars, planets in opposition etc.[1]

Because of the nature of the fable we notice the poet's frequent use of classic myth and legend, of encyclopedic reference to scientific research, the technical arts, geography, history, the Bible and contemporary essays. The mere mention of historical or geographical names rouses all the poet in him and the result is the splendid roll-call of the devils,[2] and the representations by Satan of all the kingdoms on earth.[3] Everything of Milton's experience had a chance to go into his verse by way of simile, illustration or both.

Professor Whaler has classified the various types of similes in "Paradise Lost" according to their source and on the same basis I have estimated the similes in the other poems under consideration.

	Paradise Lost	Paradise Regained	Samson Agonistes	Comus
Inanimate Life	143	22	6	5
Human Life	109	17	11	9
Encyclopedic	89	11	6	2
Folklore, Bible	28	19	2	10
Lower Animals	20	7	8	3
Plant Life	21	2	3	3

In these figures mythological references have been classified under

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1. Raleigh, Sir Walter : Milton P. 245

2. Paradise Lost I

3. Paradise Regained III

the heading Folk-lore.[1]

The nature and material of the similes themselves is, of course, closely allied to the matter of the probable sources in Milton's reading, observation and reflection. The main categories of similes are those having to do with matter which Milton probably drew from his reading and those made up of material taken from his observation of the world around him.[2]

The first class drawn from reading and oral tradition comprises about twenty-five similes in "Paradise Lost". The second class derived from observation includes approximately forty-six similes.[3]

Sub-categories included in the first main division are:-

(a) The Greek and Roman Classics.

(b) Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

(c) The folk-lore of England coming to the poet through oral tradition.

(d) A large fund of geographical material, the common property of the "Age of Exploration and Discovery".

The number of similes drawn from the second class seems surprisingly small when one considers the theological aims of the two epics. Doubtless the poet found material drawn from the classics to be more intimate and pliant.

The sub-categories of the second main division are:-

(a) Human Material.

(b) Natural as distinct from human material.

These sub-categories overlap one another and, to a certain extent, the first class also. The choice of similes shows the poet's interest in the observation of

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1. Whaler, James : Publications of the Modern Language Association Vol. XLVII P.550

2. Sherwin, P.S. : Modern Language Notes Vol. XXXVI P.347

3. Ibid P. 347

nature. The materials in this class deal chiefly with the sky, mountains, trees, animals and the sea. The kinds of material oftenest used are those calculated to produce large effects in harmony with the vastness of the poet's subject. The sky and the mountains proved exceedingly suitable material, as the evidence of the similes indicates. The similes dealing with the sea and sailing ships are another proof of the strong hold on Milton's imagination taken by the national experiences of England in the days of Elizabeth, the Stuarts and the Lord Protector.(1)

Of all Milton's similes, only one seemed to me to strike an alien and incongrous note. This particular simile occurs in "Paradise Lost" IV 189-191. Amidst all the company of mythological and biblical characters this figure alone comes to us from the mundane world, taking us with a definite shock from celestial wars and a journey over Earth to an actuality on the Earth. This "rich burgher" belonging exclusively to Earth seems strangely out of his element among the host of vague, theological beings.

It has been said of "Paradise Lost" and it is correspondingly true of all his other works, that original as they are in subject and conception, yet they are "full of flakes from all that is greatest in antecedent literature, ancient or modern".(2) These flakes all melt and are absorbed in the rich enamel of the English epic. The borrowings are so transformed that they pass from the original to Milton like an angel the former has entertained unawares.(3) Richard Garnett has compared the poet to his own country - fertile originally in little but enterprise, she has made the riches of the world her own.(4)

John Milton quoted very little for a man of much reading but here and there he has consciously imitated. Mere resemblances cannot be taken, however, as indications of plagiarism or reference. Much must be attributed to the general

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1. Sherwin, P.S. : Modern Language Notes Vol. XXXVI P. 349
2. Kuhns, Oscar : Modern Language Notes Vol. XIII P. 9
3. Garnett, Richard : Milton P.201
4. Ibid P.257

stock of ideas - the "materia poetica" of the time. This fact will account for such a general similiarity as there is between the Earthly Paradise of Dante and the Garden of Eden of "Paradise Lost". The "Divina Commedia" was probably also in Milton's mind when he wrote his description of Hell. Some similes are almost directly the same as in Dante's poem.(1)

For the change of the fallen angels to snakes Milton found suggestions in Ovid and Opollonius of Rhodes.(2) Tasso had portrayed an infernal council and had given the hint to Milton of ascribing the origin of pagan worship to the revolted spirits.(3) But Tasso's conclave of fiends is a den of ugly monsters - the powers of Milton's Hell are godlike shapes and forms with intellects as superior as their appearance.

The comparison of Satan's shield to the moon is borrowed from a similiar comparison of the shield of Achilles in the Iliad but "what goes in Homer comes out Milton".(4)

The mythological groundwork of"Comus" is the Circe episode in the tenth Book of the"Odyssey". In "Faerie Queene" II, Canto XII, Spenser has made use of the Circe story in a scene which has been regarded as an important source of Milton's treatment of Chastity in "Comus".(5)

But this list could be expanded indefinitely. We can see that these borrowings and reminiscences in no wise impair the impression of Milton's native genius but he used them, sure that he could recoin them with his own image and superscription.

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1. Kuhns, Oscar : Modern Language Notes Vol. XIII P. 7
2. Ibid P. 11
3. Campbell, Thomas : Edinburgh Review Vol. XXXI P.465
4. Garnett, Richard : Milton P. 189
5. Bush, Douglas : Studies in Philology Vol. XXVIII P. 265

No praise is too high for Milton's skill in this matter of selection and revision. His fable gave him the opportunity to go his own way and reject the worn currency of his predecessors, even while polishing up the gems they had perhaps unconsciously used. Even the great events of ancient history seem to him at times too familiar, too little elevated and remote to furnish a tale. He transforms his proper names, both to make them more melodious and more unfamiliar to the ear.(1) For instance, Pharoah and his Egyptian squadrons become "Busiris" and his 'Memphian chivalry".(2) Italy and Vulcan having associations too familiar and misleading become "Ansonian land" and 'Mulciber" respectively.(3)

Milton is painstakingly careful over every smallest detail of his poems and often let pass through his mind a quantity of cumbrous lore for the sake of a hint here and there. For instance, the cosmology of all European epic poetry hitherto had been the Ptolemaic system. Milton himself firmly believed in and advanced the views of the Copernican system but for the sake of his art he read all that mediaeval doctors, church fathers, and modern scholars had to say on the subject of the pre-Copernican system.(4)

Milton recognized the opportunity of simile as it had not been recognized since the days of Apollonius and became the first epic poet to add the function of prolepsis to this figure. Despite the effect of luxuriance these similes give, nevertheless they give also the effect of necessity. Milton the logician is always beside Milton the inspired poet to check any tendency towards extravagance or hyperbole.(5) As he uses them, the similes are an indispensable part of that effect of massed but controlled splendour, which is, in very truth, the heart of his epic style.

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1. Raleigh, Sir Walter : Milton P. 245

2. Ibid P.246

3. Ibid P.246

4. Masson, David : Life of John Milton P.535

5. Whaler, James : Publication of the Modern Language Association Vol. XLVI P.1042

Such a wealth of simile as we find in his epics would have entirely quenched the native fire of a less gifted poet, but Milton using simile rarely for mere love of illustration, does not oppress us with any surplusage or deluge of sound-figure.

Perhaps Richard Garnett has estimated, in the finest manner possible, Milton's contribution to literature. "He has enriched his native literature with an imperishable monument of magestic diction. He reconciled as no other poet has ever done, the Hellenic spirit with the Hebraic, the Bible with the Renaissance. His poem is a mighty bridge across which the spirit of ancient poetry has travelled to modern times".(1)

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1. Garnett, Richard : Milton P. 301

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