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B.A. Part I (English Honours)

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Question: - Did Milton corrupt the English language?

Answer:

Milton exploited to the full the words and syntax of the Latin language to elevate his style. This had led to the common charge that Milton made English a foreign language. Johnson complained that Milton's diction is "far removed from common use, that an unlearned reader when he first opens his book, finds himself surprised by a new language". Addison wrote, "our language sunk under him". Keats remarked, "I shall never become attached to a foreign idiom so as to put into my writings. 'The Paradise Lost' though so fine in itself is a corruption of our language". In the modern times T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis also have attacked Milton on this point. According to T.S. Eliot, "In Milton there is always the maximal, never the minimal alteration of ordinary language".

Every distortion of constructions, the foreign idiom, the use of a word in a foreign way or with the meaning of the foreign word from which it is derived rather than the accepted meaning in English every idiosyncrasy is a particular act of violence which Milton has been first to commit. Milton's poetry is poetry at the furthest remove from prose." And F.R. Leavis has complained that Milton exhibits a feeling for words rather than a capacity for feeling through words. Thus the main charges against Milton are (i) Milton uses foreign idiom, words and syntax (ii) his poetry is at the furthest remove from prose, and (iii) Milton shows a feeling for words rather than a capacity for feeling through words. But at the same time there are critics like Mervel, Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge

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dge, Tennyson, Arnold, Hopkins, houseman and others who have praised Milton's use of language. It is true that there are some obvious artifices and mannerisms in Milton's style, but these are not the substance of his style as Eliot would think. Milton used Latinisms to load his verse with meaning and loftiness of the Latin verse. Otherwise his language is based on common English. He heightens his style not only by Latin, but also by Biblical phrases, archaisms, allusions and exotic names.

"The main peculiarities or heightening of Milton's style in 'Paradise Lost', says Tillyard, "are quite unlatin". "Milton is not lavish of his exotic words and phrases everywhere alike, but employs them much more when the subject is marvellous and strange as in the scene in heaven and hell, than where

it is turned to the natural and agreeable as in the pictures of Paradise." In reality there are two styles in Milton. As mentioned by Kenford in his 'A Milton Handbook', "Milton really has two styles. The one is abundant, high-colored, pictorial, figurative, the other direct, closely woven and relatively plain." Eliot forgot this Doric delicacy, the simplicity and purity of Milton's style.

In the scenes between Adam and Eve after the Fall the language becomes very simple.

"So dear I love him, that
with him all deaths
I could endure, without
him live no life"

and

"Long is the way
And hard, that out of
hell leads up to light"

or

"Thus repulst, our final

hope

or flat despair."

At least Milton can be understood easily in his most obscure lines than is Eliot understood in his simplest lines. As regards F. R. Leavis's charge, he seems to imply that the sound of the verse has no relation to the sense. But this too is not true. Leavis's charge has been refuted by Muir. Having given examples of the perfect union of sound and sense, Muir remarks that Milton obtains effect not by brilliance of phrase nor by striking imagery but by the general movement of the whole passage. "The language is not magnificent and certainly not un-English."

So Milton is not all the time artificial or grandiose. He is also simple and direct according to the situation. As stated by A. E. Houseman, "The dignity, the sanity, the unflattering elev-

ation of style, the just subordination of detail, the due adaptation of means to ends, the high respect of the craftsman for his craft and for himself, which ennoble Virgil and the great Greeks, are all to be found in Milton, and nowhere else in English literature are they all to be found!" He did not corrupt the English language, he only manifested its richness and its flexibility. Keats who called him the corrupter of the English language himself had tried to imitate in 'Hyperion' the style of Milton's 'Paradise Lost' and having failed to do so successfully he might have charged Milton with the charge of corrupting the English language.

The end. //

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