

THE  
GROUNDS  
OF  
Criticism  
IN  
POETRY,

CONTAIN'D

In some New Discoveries never  
made before, requisite for the Writing  
and Judging of Poems surely.

BEING

A Preliminary to a larger Work design'd  
to be publish'd in *Folio*, and Entituled,  
*A Criticism upon our most Celebrated English  
Poets Deceas'd.*

By Mr. DENNIS.

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*In che picciolo cerchio, e fra che nude  
Solitudini e stretto il uostro fasto.  
Lei come Isola, il mare intorno chiude,  
E lui, c'hor Ocean chiamat'e, hor uasto  
Nulla eguale a tai nomi ha in se di magno,  
Ma e bassa palude, e breue stagno.*

## Stan. XI.

*Così l' un disse e l' altro in giuso i lumi  
Volse, quasi sdegnoso, e ne sorrise ;  
Che uide un punto sol, mar, terre, e fiumi,  
Che qui paion distinti in tante guise,  
Et ammiro, che pur a l' ombre, a i fiumi,  
La nostra folle humanità s' affise,  
Seruo Imperio cercando, e muta fama,  
Ne miri il ciel, ch' a se n' inuita, e chiama.*

The following Verses of Milton,  
in the Eighth of Paradise Lost,  
concerning the Magnitude and the  
Motions of the Heavens and Earth,

derive a Lofty Spirit from their Subject for there says *Adam*.

When I behold this goodly Frame, this World,  
Of Heaven and Earth consisting, and compute  
Their magnitudes, this Earth a Spot, a Grain,  
An Atom with the Firmament compar'd,  
And all her numbred Stars, that seem to roll  
Spaces incomprehensible (for such  
Their distance argues, and their swift return  
Diurnal)

I could here bring Examples of the same kind of Spirit, derived in due Proportion from Ideas of Sublunary Things, as of the Four Elements Water, Earth, Air, Fire, Winds and Meteors of all sorts, Seas, Rivers, Mountains, but I am afraid of running into Length, and heaping too many Citations one upon another. Besides it will be very convenient to make two or three Remarks here.

*First,*

*First*, That the Wonders of the Universe, afford the more admirable Ideas and a more admirable Spirit, the more they shew the attributes of the Creator or relate to his Worship. *Secondly*, That Natural Philosophy is absolutely necessary to a Poet, not only that he may adorn his Poem, with the useful knowledge it affords, but because the more he knows the immense Phænomena of the Universe, the more he will be sure to admire them. For the more we know of Things that are never to be comprehended by us, the more that knowledge must make them appear wonderful. The *Third Remark* that I shall make is this, That they to whom Nature has given that happy Elevation of Thought, which alone can make a great Poet, will often be directed by that tendency to greatness, which they have within them to Ideas, from which they may derive a lofty Spirit, yet I shall shew by the Example of *Milton*,

that they may often very grossly fail, for want of a certain knowledge of the Objects from which they are to draw their Idea's, for 'tis for want of that knowledge that *Milton* has done the most unartful thing that perhaps ever was done, in the two or three last Books of the greatest Poem that ever was written by Man. For whereas in the First Eight Books, he had by the Mouth of God or Angels, or of Man the Companion of Angels, divinely entertain'd us with the wondrous Works of God, in the latter end of his Poem, and more particularly in the last Book, he makes an Angel entertain us with the Works of corrupted Man, from which it is very plain by what has been deliver'd above, concerning the Nature of Enthusiastick Passion; that that Angel could draw no sort of Enthusiasm, and least of all that of Admiration and Terror, which give the principal Greatness and Elevation to Poetry. For how flat, how low and unmusical is the Relation of the Actions of fall'n Man, in  
the

the 10th. *Lib.* tho' deliver'd by the  
voice of Divinity.

On *Adam*, Last thus judgment He pronounc'd,  
Because thou hast hearkned to the Voice of thy  
(Wife,

And eaten of the Tree, concerning which  
I charg'd thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat thereof,  
Curs'd is the Ground for thy sake, thou in sorrow  
Shalt eat thereof all the days of thy Life :

Thorns also, and Thistles it shall bring thee forth  
Untill'd, and thou shalt eat the Herb of the Field :  
In the sweat of thy Face shalt thou eat Bread,  
Till thou return unto the Ground, for thou  
Out of the Ground wast taken ; know thy Birth  
For Dust, thou art, and shalt to Dust return.

The Late Mr. *Dryden*, with a  
great deal of Injustice, us'd to at-  
tribute the flatness of *Milton*, in this  
and some other Passages, to his  
getting into a tract of Scripture, as  
he was pleas'd to express himself ;  
Whereas the thing that made him

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sink, was plainly the poorness and  
 lowness of the Ideas. For how  
 could the Works of corrupted Man,  
 afford any other to God or Angels?  
 But what lofty what glorious Ideas  
 does a religious mention of the  
 Works of God, afford to Man in  
 his primitive State in that in-  
 comparable Hymn in the Fifth  
 Book of the same Paradise Lost:  
 A Hymn, which tho' it is intirely  
 taken from Scripture, for it is ap-  
 parently the 148 *Psalms*, yet will al-  
 ways stand alone, the Phoenix of  
 Lofty Hymns, and nothing equal to  
 it, no nor Second to it can ever be  
 produced from the Grecian Writers  
 of Hymns. It is impossible I can  
 do a greater Pleasure to the Rea-  
 der, who either has not read or  
 do's not remember *Milton*, than to  
 insert it here.

These are thy glorious Works, Parent of good  
 Almighty, Thine this Universal Frame,  
 Thus wondrous fair, Thy Self how wondrous then,  
 Unspeakable, who sitst above these Heavens,

To us invisible, or dimly seen  
 In these thy lowest Works ; yet these declare  
 Thy goodness beyond Thought, and power Divine :  
 Speak ye who best can tell, ye Sons of Light,  
 Angels, for ye behold Him, and with Songs  
 And Chorall Symphonies, Day without Night  
 Circle His Throne rejoicing, ye in Heaven  
 On Earth join all the Creatures, to extol  
 Him first, Him last, Him midst, and without end :  
 Fairest of Stars, last in the Train of Night,  
 If better thou belong not to the Dawn,  
 Sure Pledge of Day, that Crown'st the smiling Morn  
 With thy bright Circlet, praise Him in thy Sphere,  
 While Day arises that Sweet Hour of Prime :  
 Thou Sun of this great World, both Eye and Soule  
 Acknowledge Him thy Greater, sound His Praise  
 In thy eternal Course, both when thou climb'st  
 And when high-Noon hast gained, and when thou  
 ( fall'st :  
 Moon, that now meets the Orient Sun, now fliest  
 With



With the fixt Stars, fixt in their Orb that flies :  
 And ye Five other wand'ring Fires, that move  
 In mistick Dance not without Song, resound  
 His Praise who out of Darknes call'd up Light :  
 Air and ye Elements, the eldest Birth  
 Of Natures Womb, that in Quaternion run  
 Perpetual Circle multiform, and mix  
 And nourish all things, let your ceaseles Change  
 Vary to our great Maker still new Praise :  
 Ye Mists and Exhalations that now rise  
 From Hill or Steaming Lake, dusky or gray,  
 Till the Sun paint your Fleecy Skirts with Gold,  
 In honour to the World's great Author rise,  
 Whether to deck with Clouds th' uncolour'd Skie,  
 Or wet the thirsty Earth with falling Showers ;  
 Rising or falling still advance his Praise :  
 His Praise ye Winds that from Four Quarters blow,  
 Breath soft or loud, and wave your tops ye Pines  
 With every Plant, in sign of Worship wave :  
 Fountains, and ye that warble as ye flow

Melodious murmurs, warbling tune His Praise :  
 Join Voices all ye living Souls, ye Birds  
 That Singing up to Heaven Gates ascend ;  
 Bear on your Wings, and in your Notes His Praise ;  
 Ye that in Waters glide, and ye that walk  
 The Earth and stately tread, or lowly creep,  
 Witness if I be silent Morn or Even,  
 To Hill or Valley, Fountain or fresh Shades ;  
 Made Vocal by my Song, and taught His Praise ;  
 Hail Universal Lord, be bounteous still,  
 To give us only Good, and if the Night  
 Have gather'd ought of Evil or conceal'd,  
 Disperse it, as now Light dispels the Dark.

'Tis easie to discern here, with  
 how much more Divinity *Milton*  
 makes a Man speak concerning the  
 Works of God, than he makes even  
 the Creator Himself speak concern-  
 ing the Works of Man. But here  
 if the Reader will pardon a Digres-  
 sion, I shall make an Observation  
 which may not be disagreeable to  
 him,

him. The Observation is this, That all the Passages in Paradise Lost, where God is introduc'd Speaking, are flat to the reserve of those in which he speaks of himself. Upon enquiring into the Reason of it, I found, That according to the Account which I have given of Poetical Enthusiasm, or of the Spirit of Poetry, it is nothing but that Admiration and Terrour, and the rest of those Enthusiastical Passions which are produced by their proper Ideas, and which are to hold Proportion with their Ideas, as their Ideas must with their Objects. Now nothing is more impossible than that God should either Fear or Admire His own Creatures. But where *Milton* makes him speak concerning Himself, or His Infinite Power, there he makes him speak with a great Spirit, as in that Passage of the Sixth Book where He speaks to His Son.

Go then thou mightiest in thy Father's Might,  
Ascend My Chariot, guide the rapid Wheels,

Tha

That shake Heaven's Basis, bring forth all my War,  
My Bow and Thunder, My Almighty Arms.

'Tis plain that here the Poet is guilty of a Mistake, but indeed a Mistake that is almost unavoidable, for 'tis the Admiration and Terrour that make the Spirit in the preceding Verses; and it is impossible to conceive the Ideas without feeling the Passions; so that *Milton* while he was rapt with Admiration and moved with Terrour by the Ideas which he had conceiv'd, shifts Persons insensibly, and forgetting who speaks, expresses himself with those Passions which indeed are proper enough in the Poet, but never can be so in the Deity. For neither His Bow, nor His Almighty Arms, His Thunder, nor the rapid Wheels that Shake Heavens basis, can be in the least Admirable or Terrible to the Divinity, so that *Mr. Cowley* is certainly in the right in his Notes upon his *Davidis*, where he tells us, that  
God

God is to be introduc'd speaking simply. And this puts me in mind of an extraordinary Argument of Monsieur *Paschal*, proving the Divinity of our Saviour by the simplicity of his Stile ; for says he, our Saviour speaks of the sublimest Subjects, even the glories of the Kingdom of Heaven without being moved at all, which shews that he was really God ; for suppose a Peasant, says he, or an ordinary Man shou'd be carried to the Court of some Prince, as for Example the great Mogul, and there be shewn all his Riches, his Pomp and his Power ; this Peasant at his return would certainly speak of these Things in extravagant terms, in terms that would sufficiently declare his transport. But if the Mogul himself was to speak of them, he who had been always us'd to them, would speak without any emotion. So says Monsieur *Paschal*, if any one else had deliver'd any Thing concerning the glories of the Kingdom of Heaven, he would certainly have done it with transport,

nay

may tho' he had been a Fanatick or an Impostor; For let those Divine Ideas come how they will, 'tis Impossible for Man to think of them without being Ravish'd by them. But our Saviour who was God, and who consequently had been us'd to them from all Eternity, spoke of them unconcern'd.

But let us come to the *Third* sort of Thoughts, which *Hermogenes* says, are proper to give Elevation and Gravity to a Discourse, and those are Things which indeed are Divine, says, but are often beheld in Men. These Emanations of Divinity are the Virtues such as Temperance, Justice, Fortitude, Magnanimity; or Nature, Law, Power and the like. And we shou'd never make an end, if we shou'd give Examples of all the Passages, whose greatness of Spirit, is deriv'd from these Ideas. But for the Readers Entertainment we shall mention a few.

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