MILTON’S GRAND STYLE

“What has made the poem live is not the story------ but the incomparable elevation of the style, the shaping spirit of imagination and the mere majesty of the music.” Verity

There is no doubt in the fact that it is difficult to define a grand style. However, its outstanding qualities are sublimity of thought as well as expression and compression. Whenever the idea of great style occurs in our minds, John Milton’s name flashes in our minds. Milton created a style of his own which is worthy of his lofty epic theme, and it seems as if it belonged to the ancient heroic themes. It has been compared to “the large utterance of early gods.” After reading Milton’s Paradise Lost, Mathew Arnold says: “He is our great artist in style, our one first-rate master in the grand style.” When Wordsworth wrote: “Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea”, definitely he was talking of Milton’s grand style. Now, let’s discuss the qualities of Milton’s grand style one by one.

First quality of Milton’s grand style is the use of number of allusions and references. They seem obscure along with the arcane and archaic vocabulary. The purpose of using these allusions is to broaden the reader’s understanding through comparison. An allusion from astronomy science is obvious when he elaborates the size of Satan’s shield.

“Like the moon, whose orb
Through Optic Glass the Tuscan artist views
At evening, from the top of Fesole.”

Second major quality of Milton’s grand style is his use of “Epic Similes.” He borrows his similes chiefly from all these branches of knowledge. The similes he has used for the description of Satan and the fallen angels have made his style unique and perfect. He writes:

“Thick as autumnal leaves that strews the brooks In Vallombrosa”
And his haply slumbering on the Norway Foam
The Pilot of some small night foundered skiff deeming some island.”

Similarly, Milton compares the face of Satan with the sun in eclipse while eclipse is the sign of an ill omen.

“Of glory obscured; as when the sun new risen
Look through the horizontal misty air
Shorn of his beams, or, from behind the Moon.”
Johnson says about Miltonic similes: “His (Milton’s) similes are less numerous, but more varied than those of his predecessors.”

Third major quality of Milton’s grand style is the manipulation of rhythm and sounds. Besides Shakespeare, it was only Milton who got great success in manipulating the language. We see continuous flow of long sentences and paragraphs and it is like the dramatic blank verse of Shakespeare’s dialogue.

Raleigh observes: “The name of Milton has become the mark, not of biography, nor of a theme but of a style.”

Fourth major quality of Milton’s grand style is the use of peculiar names which he uses to lend dignity to his style. In Paradise Lost, we see that he is fond of using Italian names. The use of “Vallombrosa” is the best example of it. The use of these names for their sound and sense and their historical and literary association makes his style sublime and lofty.

Fifth quality of Milton’s grand style is perspicuity in style which is an epic tradition. Milton’s Paradise Lost is also clear. Though his conceptions and structure are complex and intricate, he is successful in making it clear and vivid and he does it skillfully by focusing on the purpose of his narration. A critic observes: “Each word is of value. There is no mortar between the stones, each is held in place by the weight of the others, and helps to uphold the building.” Here is the mightiest army one can imagine rendered in less than six lines:

“Ten thousand banners rise into the air
With orient colours waving with them rose
A forest huge of spears, ----immeasurable.”

Sixth major quality of Milton’s grand style is his use of lofty tone. We cannot overlook the rhetorical eloquence with which Satan appreciates and encourages the fallen angels.

“To do ought good never will be our task
But ever to do ill our soul delight
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Our labour must be to pervert that end.”

Seventh major quality of Milton’s grand style is his profound love for beauty. He is deeply sensitive to the beauty of eternal nature. With this sense of beauty, he has combined stateliness of manner which gives a high dignity to his poetry. The poet never stoops down at any stage to satisfy the tastes of the lower public.
The last and major quality of Milton’s grand style is his mastery and use of blank verse. He has great command over words and in versification. And both these aspects become clear when he uses blank verse. The very first lines show the significance of blank verse in Paradise Lost.

“Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe.”

William Hazlitt also comments: “Milton’s blank verse is the only blank verse in the language (except Shakespeare’s) that deserves the name of verse.”

Milton’s grand style has been criticized by many critics. T.S. Eliot criticizes in the following words. “His (Milton’s) style has many defects. It lacks full sensuous experience. It bears dead language. Besides that he has corrupted the English language.” Similarly, Addison criticizes and says: “Our language sank under him.” F.R. Levis also criticizes Milton for his use of Latin idioms and syntax and use of exotic words and phrases.

To sum up, we can say that Milton’s style is certainly his own. Elements of it can be criticized. On the whole, it is a monumental for the writers and the critics. It is difficult to see how such a work could be better written in some other style. We fully agree with a critic who says: “Milton defined the style of English epic and in a real sense, with that style, ended the genre. After Milton and Paradise Lost, the English epic ends.”

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