

A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST

*Being the Ballard Matthews Lectures
Delivered at University College, North Wales, 1941
Revised and Enlarged*

by C. S. LEWIS, M.A.
Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON : NEW YORK : TORONTO

A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST

*Being the Ballard Matthews Lectures
Delivered at University College, North Wales, 1941
Revised and Enlarged*

by C. S. LEWIS, M.A.
Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON : NEW YORK : TORONTO

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
AMEN HOUSE, E.C.4
London Edinburgh Glasgow New York
Toronto Melbourne Capetown Bombay
Calcutta Madras
HUMPHREY MILFORD
Publisher to the University

First impression 1942
Second impression 1942
Third impression 1943
Fourth impression 1944
Fifth impression 1946

Printed in Great Britain

DEDICATION

To CHARLES WILLIAMS

DEAR WILLIAMS,

When I remember what kindness I received and what pleasure I had in delivering these lectures in the strange and beautiful hillside College at Bangor, I feel almost ungrateful to my Welsh hosts in offering this book not to them, but to you. Yet I cannot do otherwise. To think of my own lecture is to think of those other lectures at Oxford in which you partly anticipated, partly confirmed, and most of all clarified and matured, what I had long been thinking about Milton. The scene was, in a way, medieval, and may prove to have been historic. You were a *vagus* thrown among us by the chance of war. The appropriate beauties of the Divinity School provided your background. There we elders heard (among other things) what we had long despaired of hearing—a lecture on *Comus* which placed its importance where the poet placed it—and watched “the yonge fresshe folkes, he or she,” who filled the benches listening first with incredulity, then with toleration, and finally with delight, to something so strange and new in their experience as the praise of chastity. Reviewers, who have not had time to re-read Milton, have failed for the most part to digest your criticism of him; but it is a reasonable hope that of those who heard you in Oxford many will understand henceforward that when the old poets made some virtue their theme they were not teaching but adoring, and that what we take for the didactic is often the enchanted. It gives me a sense of security to remember that, far from loving your work because you are my friend, I first sought your friendship because I loved your books. But for that, I should find it difficult to believe that your short *Preface** to Milton is what it seems to me to be—the recovery of a true critical tradition after more than a hundred years of laborious misunderstanding. The ease with which the thing was done would have seemed inconsistent with the weight that had to be lifted. As things are, I feel entitled to trust my own

* *The Poetical Works of Milton*. The World's Classics, 1940.

eyes. Apparently, the door of the prison was really unlocked all the time; but it was only you who thought of trying the handle. Now we can all come out.

Yours,
C. S. LEWIS

CONTENTS

	Dedication.	p. v
I	Epic Poetry.	1
II	Is Criticism Possible?	9
III	Primary Epic.	12
IV	The Technique of Primary Epic.	19
V	The Subject of Primary Epic.	26
VI	Virgil and the Subject of Secondary Epic.	32
VII	The Style of Secondary Epic.	39
VIII	Defence of this Style.	51
IX	The Doctrine of the Unchanging Human Heart.	61
X	Milton and St Augustine.	65
XI	Hierarchy.	72
XII	The Theology of <i>Paradise Lost</i> .	81
XIII	Satan.	92
XIV	Satan's Followers.	101
XV	The Mistake about Milton's Angels.	105
XVI	Adam and Eve.	112
XVII	Unfallen Sexuality.	118
XVIII	The Fall.	121
XIX	Conclusion.	125
	Appendix.	134
	Index.	137

Innumerabili immortal
Disegualmente in lor letizia eguali:
Tasso, *Gier. Lib*, ix, 57.

How so many learned heads should so far
forget their Metaphysicks, and destroy
the ladder and scale of creatures.

BROWNE, *Rel. Med.* 1, xxx.

I
EPIC POETRY

*A perfect judge will read each work of wit
With the same spirit that its author writ.*

POPE.

The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know *what* it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used. After that has been discovered the temperance reformer may decide that the corkscrew was made for a bad purpose, and the communist may think the same about the cathedral. But such questions come later. The first thing is to understand the object before you: as long as you think the corkscrew was meant for opening tins or the cathedral for entertaining tourists you can say nothing to the purpose about them. The first thing the reader needs to know about *Paradise Lost* is what Milton meant it to be.

This need is specially urgent in the present age because the kind of poem Milton meant to write is unfamiliar to many readers. He is writing epic poetry which is a species of narrative poetry, and neither the species nor the genus is very well understood at present. The misunderstanding of the genus (narrative poetry) I have learned from looking into used copies of our great narrative poems. In them you find often enough a number of not very remarkable lines underscored with pencil in the first two pages, and all the rest of the book virgin. It is easy to see what has happened. The unfortunate reader has set out expecting “good lines”—little ebullient patches of delight—such as he is accustomed to find in lyrics, and has thought he was finding them in things that took his fancy for accidental reasons during the first five minutes; after that, finding that the poem cannot really be read in this way, he has given it up. Of the continuity of a long narrative poem, the subordination of the line to the paragraph and the paragraph to the Book and even of the Book to the whole, of the grand sweeping effects that take a quarter of an hour to develop themselves, he has had no conception. The misunderstanding of the species (epic narrative) I have learned from the errors of

A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST

critics, including myself, who sometimes regard as faults in *Paradise Lost* those very properties which the poet laboured hardest to attain and which, rightly enjoyed, are essential to its specific delightfulness (*οἰκεία ἡδονή*). Our study of Milton's epic must therefore begin with a study of epic in general.

I anticipate two incidental advantages from this procedure. In the first place, as we shall see, this approach was Milton's own. The first question he asked himself was not "What do I want to say?" but "What *kind* of poem do I want to make?"—to which of the great pre-existing *kinds*, so different in the expectations they excite and fulfil, so diverse in their powers, so recognizably distinguished in the minds of all cultured readers, do I intend to contribute? The parallel is not to be found in a modern author considering what his unique message is and what unique idiom will best convey it, but rather in a gardener asking whether he will make a rockery *or* a tennis court, an architect asking whether he is to make a church *or* a house, a boy debating whether to play hockey *or* football, a man hesitating between marriage and celibacy. The things between which choice is to be made already exist in their own right, each with a character of its own well established in the public world and governed by its own laws. If you choose one, you lose the specific beauties and delights of the other: for your aim is not mere excellence, but the excellence proper to the thing chosen—the goodness of a rockery or a celibate being different from that of a tennis court or a husband. In the second place, this approach will force us to attend to that aspect of poetry which is now most neglected. Every poem can be considered in two ways—as what the poet has to say, and as a *thing* which he *makes*. From the one point of view it is an expression of opinions and emotions; from the other, it is an organization of words which exists to produce a particular kind of patterned experience in the readers. Another way of stating this duality would be to say that every poem has two parents—its mother being the mass of experience, thought, and the like, inside the poet, and its father the pre-existing Form (epic, tragedy, the novel, or what not) which he meets in the public world. By studying only the mother,

EPIC POETRY

criticism becomes one-sided. It is easy to forget that the man who writes a good love sonnet needs not only to be enamoured of a woman, but also to be enamoured of the Sonnet. It would, in my opinion, be the greatest error to suppose that this fertilization of the poet's internal matter by the pre-existing Form impairs his originality, in any sense in which originality is a high literary excellence. (It is the smaller poets who invent forms, in so far as forms are invented.) *Materia appetit formam ut virum femina*. The matter inside the poet *wants* the Form: in submitting to the Form it becomes really original, really the origin of great work. The attempt to be oneself often brings out only the more conscious and superficial parts of a man's mind; working to produce a given kind of poem which will present a given theme as justly, delightfully, and lucidly as possible, he is more likely to bring out all that was really in him, and much of which he himself had no suspicion. That concentration on the male parent of *Paradise Lost*, the Epic Form, which I intend to practise is the more desirable because excellent helps to the study of the raw material inside the poet—the experiences, character, and opinions of the man Milton—already exist in the work of Miss Darbishire and Dr Tillyard.

Milton's own approach is to be learned from a passage in the Preface to the *Reason of Church Government*, Book II (Bohn's Edn., Vol. II, p. 478). The question before him is whether to write (A) an Epic; (B) a Tragedy; (C) a Lyric. The discussion of (A) begins with the words "whether that epic form": the discussion of (B) with "or whether those dramatic constitutions"; that of (C) with "or if occasion shall lead". The whole scheme may be set out as follows:

(A) Epic.

I. (a) The diffuse Epic [Homer, Virgil, and Tasso].

(b) The brief Epic [the Book of Job].

II. (a) Epic keeping the rules of Aristotle.

(b) Epic following Nature.

III. Choice of subject ["what king or knight before the conquest"].

(B) Tragedy.

(a) On the model of Sophocles and Euripides.

(b) On the model of *Canticles* or the *Apocalypse*.

(C) Lyric:

- (a) On the Greek model ["Pindarus and Callimachus"].
- (b) On Hebrew models ["Those frequent songs throughout the Law and the Prophets"].

(A), the Epic, is our primary concern, but before we consider it in detail one feature which runs through the whole scheme demands our attention. It will be noticed that Classical and Scriptural models are mentioned under each of the three heads, and under one head, that of tragedy, the Biblical model seems to be dragged in, as they say, "by the heels". This is less true of the Biblical model for epic. Milton's classification of *Job* as a sub-species of epic (with the *differentia* "brief") may be novel, but it is reasonable, and I have no doubt at all that this is the form he believed himself to be practising in *Paradise Regained*, which has affinities to *Job* in its theme as well as in its lay-out. Under the third heading (Lyric) the Hebrew models come in with perfect propriety, and here Milton has added an interesting note. Almost as if he had foreseen an age in which 'Puritanism' should be the bear seen in every bush, he has given his opinion that Hebrew lyrics are better than Greek "not in their divine argument alone, but in the very critical art of composition." That is, he has told us that his preference for the Hebrew is not only moral and religious, but aesthetic also.* I once had a pupil, innocent alike of the Greek and of the Hebrew tongue, who did not think himself thereby disqualified from pronouncing this judgement a proof of Milton's bad taste; the rest of us, whose Greek is amateurish and who have no Hebrew, must leave Milton to discuss the question with his peers. But if any man will read aloud on alternate mornings for a single month a page of Pindar and a page of the Psalms in any translation he chooses, I think I can guess which he will first grow tired of.

Warned by what Milton has said under the heading of Lyric, I would not hastily conclude that the Biblical models throughout the scheme represent the victory of his 'Puri-

* The unpopular passage in *P.R.* iv, 347 ("Sion's songs to all true tastes excelling") is better understood if we remember that it reflects a literary opinion which Milton had, in some form or other, held all his life.

tanism' over his 'Classicism'. Indeed it would be almost equally plausible to put the matter the other way round. If a strict Classicist might resent the intrusion of the Biblical models, a strict 'Puritan' might equally resent the degradation of the Word of God to the status of a source of precedents for literary composition—as if it were *on a level* with the work of uninspired and even heathen poets. The truth probably is that there is no struggle, and therefore no victory on either side. There is *fusion*, or integration. The Christian and the classical elements are not being kept in watertight compartments, but being organized together to produce a whole.

Let us now consider Milton's (A), the Epic. His distinction between "Diffuse" and "Brief" has already been referred to. More difficult is his contrast between following Aristotle and following Nature. The "rules" of Aristotle for Epic, in so far as they are relevant here, amount to the precept of *unity*. The epic poet must deal with a single action, like Homer (*Poetics*, cap. 23): those who thought that all the adventures of Theseus would make one poem because Theseus was one man were mistaken. In Milton's mind there is apparently some other kind of epic contrasted with that which Aristotle recommended, and this other kind is oddly regarded as following "nature"; oddly, because later classicists tended to identify nature with the "rules." Now there was only one thing known to Milton which bore the name of epic and also differed in kind from the work of Homer and Virgil—the romantic or chivalrous epic of Boiardo, Ariosto, and Spenser. This differs from the ancient works, firstly by its lavish use of the marvellous, secondly by the place given to love, and thirdly by the multiple action of interwoven stories. The third characteristic is the most immediately noticeable of the three, and I believe that it is what Milton is mainly referring to. It is not at first apparent why he should call it a following of nature. I am pretty sure that the complete answer to the question is to be found somewhere in the Italian critics; but in the meantime something like an answer I have found in Tasso. In his *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* Tasso raises the whole problem of multiplicity or unity in an epic plot, and says that the

A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST

claims of unity are supported by Aristotle, the ancients, and Reason, but those of multiplicity by usage, the actual taste of all knights and ladies, and Experience (*op. cit.*, III). By "experience" he doubtless means such unhappy experiences as that of his father who wrote an *Amadis* in strict conformity to the rules of Aristotle, but found that the recitation of it emptied the auditorium, from which "he concluded that unity of action was a thing affording little pleasure." Now usage and experience, especially when contrasted with precedent and reason, are concepts not very far from "Nature." I believe, therefore, with very little doubt, that Milton's hesitation between "the rules of Aristotle" and "following Nature" means, in simpler language, "shall I write an epic in twelve books with a simple plot, or shall I write something in stanzas and cantos about knights and ladies and enchantments?" The importance of this explanation, if true, is threefold.

1. Connecting it with his ideas of a possible theme ("what king or knight before the conquest"), we may surmise that the romantic subject was rejected at about the same time as the romantic *form*, the Spenserian or Italian type of epic. We tend perhaps to assume that if Milton's *Arthuriad* had been written it would have been the same *sort* of poem as *Paradise Lost*, but surely this is very rash? A much more Spenserian Milton—the Milton of *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, and *Comus*—had to be partially repressed before *Paradise Lost* could be written: if you choose the rockery you must abandon the tennis court. It is very likely that if Arthur had had been chosen the Spenserian Milton would have grown to full development and the actual Milton, the 'Miltonic' Milton, would have been repressed. There is evidence that Milton's ideas for an *Arthuriad* were very 'romantic' indeed. He was going to paint Arthur *etiam sub terris bella moventem* (*Mansus* 81), Arthur's wars "beneath the earth." I do not know whether this means strange adventures experienced by Arthur in some other world between his disappearance in the barge and his predicted return to help the Britons at their need, or adventures in fairyland before he became king, or some even wilder Welsh tale about the caldron of Hades. But it certainly does not suggest the

EPIC POETRY

purely heroic and military epic which we are apt to think of when Milton's Arthurian projects are mentioned.

2. Milton's hesitation between the classical and the romantic types of epic is one more instance of something which runs through all his work; I mean the co-existence, in a live and sensitive tension, of apparent opposites. We have already noted the fusion of Pagan and Biblical interests in his very map of poetry. We shall have occasion, in a later section, to notice, side by side with his rebelliousness, his individualism, and his love of liberty, his equal love of discipline, of hierarchy, of what Shakespeare calls "degree". From the account of his early reading in *Smectymnuus* we gather a third tension. His first literary loves, both for their style and their matter, were the erotic (indeed the almost pornographic) elegiac poets of Rome: from them he graduated to the idealized love poetry of Dante and Petrarch and of "those lofty fables which recount in solemn cantos the deeds of knight-hood": from these to the philosophical sublimation of sexual passion in "Plato and his equal (i.e. his contemporary) Xenophon." An original voluptuousness greater, perhaps, than that of any English poet, is pruned, formed, organized, and made human by progressive purifications, themselves the responses to a quite equally intense aspiration—an equally imaginative and emotional aspiration—towards chastity. The modern idea of a Great Man is one who stands at the lonely extremity of some single line of development—one either as pacific as Tolstoi or as military as Napoleon, either as clotted as Wagner or as angelic as Mozart. Milton is certainly not that kind of great man. He is a great *Man*. "*On ne montre pas sa grandeur*," says Pascal, "*pour être à une extrémité, mais bien en touchant les deux à la fois et remplissant tout l'entre-deux*."

3. By observing how Milton subdivides the Epic into its sub-species, we are again brought face to face with the problem of Forms—with the virginal *materia* inside the poet hesitating, as it were, between different suitors. When he wrote the *Reason of Church Government* the different types of poem were all present to Milton's mind, all different, all attractive, each offering its own unique opportunities, but each also demanding peculiar sacrifices. His sentence about

A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST

epic is really a short history of epic poetry. To know what he was talking about, to feel as he felt, and so, in the end, to know what he was really choosing when he finally chose and what kind of thing he was making when he acted on that final choice, we also must attend to epic. The biography of the literary kind will help our reading of *Paradise Lost* at least as much as the biography of the poet.

II

IS CRITICISM POSSIBLE?

Amicus Plato, *my father would say, construing the words to my uncle Toby as he went along*, Amicus Plato; *that is, Dinah was my aunt*—sed magis amica veritas—but truth is my sister.

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 1, cap. 21.

But, first, a necessary digression. A recent remark of Mr Eliot's poses for us at the outset the fundamental question whether we (mere critics) have any right to talk about Milton at all. Mr Eliot says bluntly and frankly that the best contemporary practising poets are the only "jury of judgment"* whose verdict on his own views of *Paradise Lost* he will accept. And Mr Eliot is here simply rendering explicit a notion that has become increasingly prevalent for about a hundred years—the notion that poets are the only judges of poetry. If I make Mr Eliot's words the peg on which to hang a discussion of this notion it must not, therefore, be assumed that this is, for me, more than a convenience, still less that I wish to attack him *quâ* Mr Eliot. Why should I? I agree with him about matters of such moment that all literary questions are, in comparison, trivial.

Let us consider what would follow if we took Mr Eliot's view seriously. The first result is that I, not being one of the best contemporary poets, cannot judge Mr Eliot's criticism at all. What then shall I do? Shall I go to the best contemporary poets, who can, and ask them whether Mr Eliot is right? But in order to go to them I must first know who they are. And this, by hypothesis, I cannot find out; the same lack of poethood which renders my critical opinions on Milton worthless renders my opinions on Mr Pound or Mr Auden equally worthless. Shall I then go to Mr Eliot and ask him to tell me who the best contemporary poets are? But this, again, will be useless. I personally may think Mr Eliot a poet—in fact, I do—but then, as he has explained to me, my thoughts on such a point are worthless. I cannot find out whether Mr Eliot is a poet or not; and until I have found out I cannot know whether his testimony to the poethood of Mr Pound and Mr Auden is valid. And for the same

* *A Note on the Verse of John Milton. Essays and Studies*, Vol. XXI, 1936.

reason I cannot find out whether *their* testimony to *his* poethood is valid. Poets become on this view an unrecognizable society (an Invisible Church), and their mutual criticism goes on within a closed circle which no outsider can possibly break into at any point.

But even within the circle it is no better. Mr Eliot is ready to accept the verdict of the best contemporary poets on his criticism. But how does *he* recognize them as poets? Clearly, because he is a poet himself; for if he is not, his opinion is worthless. At the basis of his whole critical edifice, then, lies the judgement "I am a poet." But this is a critical judgement. It therefore follows that when Mr Eliot asks himself, "Am I a poet?" he has to *assume* the answer "I am" before he can *find* the answer "I am"; for the answer, being a piece of criticism, is valuable only *if* he is a poet. He is thus compelled to beg the question before he can get started at all. Similarly Mr Auden and Mr Pound must beg the question before *they* get started. But since no man of high intellectual honour can base his thought on an exposed *petitio* the real result is that no such man can criticize poetry at all, neither his own poetry nor that of his neighbour. The republic of letters resolves itself into an aggregate of uncommunicating and unwindowed monads; each has unawares crowned and mitred himself Pope and King of Pointland.

In answer to this Mr Eliot may properly plead that the same apparently vicious circle meets us in other maxims which I should find it less easy to reject: as when we say that only a good man can judge goodness, or only a rational man can judge reasonings, or only a doctor can judge medical skill. But we must beware of false parallels. (1) In the *moral* sphere, though insight and performance are not strictly equal (which would make both guilt and aspiration impossible), yet it is true that continued disobedience to conscience makes conscience blind. But disobedience to conscience is voluntary; bad poetry, on the other hand, is usually not made on purpose. The writer was trying to make good poetry. He was endeavouring to follow such lights as he had—a procedure which in the moral sphere is the pledge of progress, but not in poetry. Again, a man may fall outside the class of "good poets" not by being a bad poet, but

by writing no poetry at all, whereas at every waking life he is either obeying or breaking the moral law. The moral blindness consequent on being a bad man ~~must~~ therefore fall on every one who is not a good man, whereas the critical blindness (if any) due to being a bad poet need by no means fall on every one who is not a good poet. (2) *Reasoning* is never, like poetry, judged *from the outside* at all. The critique of a chain of reasoning is itself a chain of reasoning: the critique of a tragedy is not itself a tragedy. To say that only the rational man can judge reasonings is, therefore, to make the merely analytical proposition "Only the rational man can reason," parallel to "only the poet can make poetry," or "only the critic can criticize," and not at all parallel to the synthetic proposition "only the poet can criticize." (3) As regards a *skill*, such as medicine or engineering, we must distinguish. Only the skilled can judge the skilfulness, but that is not the same as judging the value of the result. It is for cooks to say whether a given dish proves skill in the cook; but whether the product on which this skill has been lavished is worth eating or no is a question on which a cook's opinion is of no particular value. We may therefore allow poets to tell us (at least if they are experienced in the same *kind* of composition) whether it is easy or difficult to write like Milton, but not whether the reading of Milton is a valuable experience. For who can endure a doctrine which would allow only dentists to say whether our teeth were aching, only cobblers to say whether our shoes hurt us, and only governments to tell us whether we were being well governed?

Such are the results if we take the position in its full rigour. But of course if it is only meant that a good poet, other things being equal (which they often are not), is reasonably likely, in talking about the kinds of poetry he has himself written well and read with delight, to say something more worth hearing than another, then we need not deny it.

III

PRIMARY EPIC

*Then the first cors come with crakkyng of trumpes,
With mony baner ful bryght that therbi hinged;
Newe nakryn noyse with the noble pipes,
Wylde werbles and wyght wakned lote,
That mony hert ful highe hef at her towches.*

Sir Gawayn and the Grene Knyght, 116.

The older critics divided Epic into Primitive and Artificial, which is unsatisfactory, because no surviving ancient poetry is really primitive and all poetry is in some sense artificial. I prefer to divide it into Primary Epic and Secondary Epic—the adjectives being purely chronological and implying no judgements of value. The *secondary* here means not ‘the second rate’, but what comes after, and grows out of, the *primary*.

The Primary Epic will be illustrated from the Homeric poems and from the English *Beowulf*, and our effort here, as throughout the present discussion, will be to discover what sort of thing the Primary Epics were, how they were meant to be used, what expectations they hoped to satisfy. But at the very outset a distinction must be made. Both *Beowulf* and the Homeric poems, besides being poetry themselves, describe poetical performances, at feasts and the like, proceeding in the world which they show us. From these descriptions we can gather what the epic was in a heroic age; but it does not follow that *Beowulf* and the Homeric poems are themselves the same kind of thing. They may or may not *be* what they *describe*. We must therefore distinguish the literary conditions attributed to the heroic age within the surviving poems, which, since they are described, can be studied, from the literary conditions in which the surviving poems were themselves produced, which can only be conjectured. I proceed, then, to some account of the literary conditions which Homer *describes*.

All poetry is oral, delivered by the voice, not read, and, so far as we are told, not written either. And all poetry is musical. The poet delivers it to the accompaniment of some instrument (*phorminx* and *kithara* are the names given to it—

PRIMARY EPIC

or them). But I think we detect within this oral poetry two kinds—a popular poetry, and a court poetry. We read in one place how “merry boys and girls (at a vintage) carried the sweet fruit in baskets, and amidst them a youth played on the stringed instrument that moves desire and sang the sweet song called *Linos*” (*Il. xviii*, 569). Or again, we read of a dancing floor where “boys and girls danced hand in hand and amidst them sang the minstrel while two tumblers whirled in the centre” (*Il. ibid.*, 593 *et seq.*). There is no suggestion of the court in either passage. If we now turn to scenes at court we find two things going on, of which the first may or may not be different from the popular poetry, but which are certainly quite different from each other. In the first, the court poet gets up, steps into a central position in the midst of a troupe of expert dancers and sings a short lay which has the three characteristics of being about gods not men, of being comic, and of being indecent. That is the light court poetry. (*Od. viii*, 256-265.) The serious court poetry is another matter. The poet has a chair placed for him and an instrument put into his hands. A table is set beside him with wine, that he may drink “when his heart desires.” Presently, without orders from the king, he begins his lay when the Muse prompts him; its three characteristics are that it is about men, it is historically true, and it is tragic. (*Od. viii*, 62-75.)

The important point to notice is that of the three kinds of performance mentioned only the last is epic. Primary Epic is not to be identified with “oral poetry of the heroic age,” or even with “oral court poetry.” It is *one* of the different kinds of poetry heard in a heroic court. Its sharp distinction from lighter kinds makes less impression on us than it should because we merely read about it. If we had *seen* the poet, first ordered to get up and take his place in a comic and indecent ballet, and then, seated and honoured with wine and spontaneously beginning his tragic lay at the inner prompting of a goddess, we should never again forget the distinction.

Turning to *Beowulf*, we find a slightly different situation. We hear nothing at all in this poem about poetry outside the court. But we can supplement *Beowulf* from

other sources. In Bede's account of Caedmon (*Eccl. His. iv, 24*) we get the glimpse of a feast among men apparently of peasant's rank, where each sang in turn as the harp came to him. It is just conceivable that what each sang was a very short heroic lay, but there is no reason to suppose this. Certainly the Anglo-Saxons had songs of a very different type. Alcuin's letter to Hygebold in 797 is always quoted because, in deploring the use of heathen poetry in religious houses, he mentions *Hinielddus* who is probably Hrothgar's son-in-law Ingeld. But it should also be remembered that he asks for "the voice of the reader in the house rather than the laughter of the mob in the streets" (*voces legentium in domibus tuis non ridentium turvam in plateis*). This "laughter" would not be connected with heroic lays. No doubt, Alcuin may be referring to ribald conversation and not to poetry at all. But it seems to me very likely that he means comic poetry, and that comic, or at least light, poems were sung at the feast which Caedmon attended. This is admittedly conjecture; but it would be very odd if the ancestors of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, and Mr Jacobs produced no funny stories.

When we turn to *Beowulf's* picture of the court we are on surer ground. In lines 2105 and following we have a performance given by Hrothgar himself. We learn that he sometimes (*hwilum*) produced a *gidd* or lay which was *sop* and *sarlic* (true and tragic), sometimes a tale of wonders (*sellic spell*), and sometimes, with the fetters of age heavy upon him, he began to recall his youth, the strength that once was his in battle; his heart swelled within him as he remembered the vanished winters. Professor Tolkien has suggested to me that this is an account of the complete range of court poetry, in which three kinds of poem can be distinguished—the lament for mutability (*hu seo prag gewat*) now represented by the *Wanderer* and the *Seafarer*, the tale of strange adventures, and the "true and tragic" lay such as the *Finnsburg* poem, which alone is true epic. *Beowulf* itself contains elements of the *sellic spell*, but it is certainly *sarlic* and probably much of it was regarded as *sop*. Without pressing these distinctions too far, we can certainly conclude from this passage that the author of *Beowulf* is aware

of different kinds of court poetry. Here, as in Homer, Epic does not mean simply whatever was sung in hall. It is one of the possible entertainments, marked off from the others, in Homer by the spontaneity and quasi-oracular character of the poet's performance, and in both Homer and *Beowulf* by tragic quality, by supposed historical truth, and by the gravity that goes with "true tragedy."

Such, then, is epic as we first hear of it; the loftiest and gravest among the kinds of court poetry in the oral period, a poetry *about* nobles, made *for* nobles, and performed on occasion, *by* nobles (cf. *Il. ix, 189*). We shall go endlessly astray if we do not get well fixed in our minds at the outset the picture of a venerable figure, a king, a great warrior, or a poet inspired by the Muse, seated and chanting to the harp a poem on high matters before an assembly of nobles in a court, at a time when the court was the common centre of many interests which have since been separated; when it was not only the Windsor Castle, but also the Somerset House, the Horseguards, the Covent Garden, and perhaps even, in certain respects, the Westminster Abbey, of the tribe. But also, it was the place of festivity, the place of brightest hearths and strongest drink, of courtesy, merriment, news, and friendship. All this is a long way from Mr John Milton printing a book to be sold in seventeenth-century London, but it is not irrelevant. From its early association with the heroic court there comes into Epic Poetry a quality which survives, with strange transformations and enrichments, down to Milton's own time, and it is a quality which moderns find difficult to understand. It has been split up, or dissociated, by recent developments, so that we now have to represent it by piecing together what seem to us quite unconnected ideas, but are really fragments of that old unity.

This quality will be understood by any one who really understands the meaning of the Middle English word *solempne*. This means something different, but not quite different, from modern English *solemn*. Like *solemn* it implies the opposite of what is familiar, free and easy, or ordinary. But unlike *solemn* it does not suggest gloom, oppression, or austerity. The ball in the first act of *Romeo and Juliet* was a

"solemnity." The feast at the beginning of *Gawain and the Green Knight* is very much of a solemnity. A great mass by Mozart or Beethoven is as much a solemnity in its hilarious *gloria* as in its poignant *crucifixus est*. Feasts are, in this sense, *more* solemn than fasts. Easter is *solempne*, Good Friday is not. The *solempne* is the festal which is also the stately and the ceremonial, the proper occasion for *pomp*—and the very fact that *pompous* is now used only in a bad sense measures the degree to which we have lost the old idea of "solemnity." To recover it you must think of a court ball, or a coronation, or a victory march, as these things appear to people who *enjoy* them; in an age when every one puts on his oldest clothes to be happy in, you must re-awake the simpler state of mind in which people put on gold and scarlet to be happy in. Above all, you must be rid of the hideous idea, fruit of a widespread inferiority complex, that pomp, on the proper occasions, has any connexion with vanity or self-conceit. A celebrant approaching the altar, a princess led out by a king to dance a minuet, a general officer on a ceremonial parade, a major-domo preceding the boar's head at a Christmas feast—all these wear unusual clothes and move with calculated dignity. This does not mean that they are vain, but that they are obedient; they are obeying the *hoc age* which presides over every solemnity. The modern habit of doing ceremonial things unceremoniously is no proof of humility; rather it proves the offender's inability to forget himself in the rite, and his readiness to spoil for every one else the proper pleasure of ritual.

This is the first fence we must get over. Epic, from the beginning, is *solempne*. You are to expect pomp. You are to 'assist', as the French say, at a great festal action. I have stressed the point at this early stage because misunderstandings must be eradicated from the very first. But our history of Epic has so far brought us only to the germ of epic *solemnity*. The Epic does not decline from the lay in the heroic court to the Miltonic level, but rises; it accumulates and enriches *solemnity* as the centuries proceed.

So much for the poems mentioned in *Homer and Beowulf*, but what of *Homer* and *Beowulf* themselves? Are they also oral court poetry of the kind described?

Whether "Homer" is oral poetry or not is a question that can be answered with great probability. It must not, of course, be confused by identifying "oral" or recited poetry with anonymous poetry, still less with folk poetry. Mr Nilsen tells us of a modern poet in Sumatra who spent five years on the composition of a single poem, though he could neither read nor write (*Homer and Mycenae*, cap. v). The question whether the *Iliad* is oral poetry is quite separate from the question of authorship. It is even separate from the question whether the author was literate. By oral poetry I mean poetry that reaches its audience through the medium of recitation; a manuscript in the background would not alter its oral character so long as this manuscript was prompt-copy for a reciter and not a book to be sold to the public or given to the patron. The real question is whether the Homeric poems were composed for recitation. Both of them are admittedly too long to be recited as wholes. But we see from the *Odyssey* how that could be got over; a poet, asked for the story of the Trojan Horse, begins "at the point when the Greeks sailed away" (viii, 500); in other words, he seems to be familiar with the practice of serial or selective recitation from a poem (or body of poetry) too long to recite in its entirety. And we know that Homer was in fact thus serially recited by relays of rhapsodists at the festival of the Panathenaea, in the historical period. There is therefore no evidence that it is *not* oral, and strong probability that it is. About *Beowulf* there is no external evidence either way. It is easily recitable, and would take perhaps three hours; this, with a break in the middle, would not be too long. But about *Beowulf*, and about the Homeric poems, there is internal evidence. They both have the oral *technique*, the repetitions, and stylized diction of oral poetry. If not oral themselves, they are at least closely modelled on work that was. And this is what mainly concerns us.

It remains to ask if they are court poetry. *Beowulf* clearly is. Its preoccupation with honour, its exclusive attention to the life of courts, its interest in etiquette (*duguþe þeaw*) and in genealogy, put the matter beyond doubt. *Homer* is more doubtful. We have seen that in historical times it was recited not in courts, but at great national festivals, and it is possible

A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST

that it was also composed for these. In other words, it is either court-poetry or festival poetry. If it is the latter, then epic, since the time of the earliest lays, has moved up, not down. The original *solemnity* of the hall has been replaced by the greater *solemnity* of the temple or the forum. Our first picture of the epic poet needs to be modified by the associations of incense, sacrifice, civic pride, and public holiday; and since this change certainly occurred sooner or later we may as well make the adjustment now. We move a stage *further away* from the solitary, private, and armchair associations which the word 'poetry' has for a modern.

Homer and *Beowulf*, then, however or whenever they were actually produced, are in the tradition of Primary epic, and inherit both its oral technique and its festal, aristocratic, public, ceremonial tone. The aesthetic consequences of this now claim our attention.

IV

THE TECHNIQUE OF PRIMARY EPIC

*And the words of his mouth were as slaves spreading carpets of glory
Embroidered with names of the Djinns—a miraculous weaving—
But the cool and perspicuous eye overbore unbelieving.*

KIPLING.

The most obvious characteristic of an oral technique is its continual use of stock words, phrases, or even whole lines. It is important to realize at the outset that these are not a second-best on which the poets fall back when inspiration fails them: they are as frequent in the great passages as in the low ones. In 103 lines of the parting between Hector and Andromache (justly regarded as one of the peaks of European poetry) phrases, or whole lines, which occur again and again in Homer are twenty-eight times employed (*Il.* vi, 390-493). Roughly speaking, a *quarter* of the whole passage is 'stock'. In *Beowulf*'s last speech to Wiglaf (*Beow.* 2794-2820) 'stock' expressions occur six times in twenty-eight lines—again, they are about a quarter of the whole.

This phenomenon has been explained often enough from the poet's side. "These repetitions," says Mr Nilsson, "are a great aid for the singer for whilst reciting them mechanically he is subconsciously forming the next verse" (*Homer and Mycenae*, p. 203). But all art is made to *face* the audience. Nothing can be left exposed, however useful to the performer, which is not delightful or at least tolerable to *them*. A stage set must be judged from in front. If the poet's ease were the sole consideration, why have a recitation at all? Is he not very well already, with his wine at his elbow and his share in the roast pork? We must therefore consider what these repetitions do for the hearers, not what they do for the poet. And we may observe that this is the only *aesthetic* or critical question. Music means not the noises it is nice to make, but the noises it is nice to hear. Good poetry means not the poetry men like composing, but the poetry men like to listen to or to read.

If any one will make the experiment for a week or two of reading no poetry and hearing a good deal, he will soon find the explanation of the stock phrases. It is a prime necessity

A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST

of oral poetry that the hearers should not be surprised too often, or too much. The unexpected tires us: it also takes us longer to understand and enjoy than the expected. A line which gives the listener pause is a disaster in oral poetry because it makes him lose the next line. And even if he does not lose the next, the rare and ebullient line is not worth making. In the sweep of recitation *no* individual line is going to count for very much. The pleasure which moderns chiefly desire from printed poetry is ruled out anyway. You cannot ponder over single lines and let them dissolve on the mind like lozenges. That is the wrong way of using this sort of poetry. It is not built up of isolated effects; the poetry is in the paragraph, or the whole episode. To look for single, 'good' lines is like looking for single 'good' stones in a cathedral.

The language, therefore, must be *familiar* in the sense of being expected. But in Epic which is the highest species of oral court poetry, it must not be *familiar* in the sense of being colloquial or commonplace. The desire for simplicity is a late and sophisticated one. We moderns may like dances which are hardly distinguishable from walking and poetry which sounds as if it might be uttered *ex tempore*. Our ancestors did not. They liked a dance which *was* a dance, and fine clothes which no one could mistake for working clothes, and feasts that no one could mistake for ordinary dinners, and poetry that unblushingly proclaimed itself to be poetry. What is the point of having a poet, inspired by the Muse, if he tells the stories just as you or I would have told them? It will be seen that these two demands, taken together, absolutely necessitate a Poetic Diction; that is, a language which is familiar because it is used in every part of every poem, but unfamiliar because it is not used outside poetry. A parallel, from a different sphere, would be turkey and plum pudding on Christmas day; no one is surprised at the menu, but every one recognizes that it is not *ordinary* fare. Another parallel would be the language of a liturgy. Regular church-goers are not surprised by the service—indeed, they know a good deal of it by rote; but it is a language apart. Epic diction, Christmas fare, and the liturgy, are all examples of ritual—that is, of something set deliberately apart

THE TECHNIQUE OF PRIMARY EPIC

from daily usage, but wholly familiar within its own sphere. The element of ritual which some dislike in Milton's poetry thus comes into epic at the very beginning. Its propriety in Milton will be considered later; but those who dislike ritual in general—ritual in any and every department of life—may be asked most earnestly to reconsider the question. It is a pattern imposed on the mere flux of our feelings by reason and will, which renders pleasures less fugitive and griefs more endurable, which hands over to the power of wise custom the task (to which the individual and his moods are so inadequate) of being festive or sober, gay or reverent, when we choose to be, and not at the bidding of chance.

This is the common ground of all oral poetry. Against it we can now discern differences between one poem and another. The epic diction of Homer is not the same as that of *Beowulf*. It seems to me almost certain, from the language and metre, that the Greek epic was recited more quickly. It therefore needs more, and more complete, repetition.

The actual operation of the Homeric diction is remarkable. The unchanging recurrence of his *wine-dark sea*, his *rosy-fingered dawn*, his ships launched *into the holy brine*, his *Poseidon shaker of earth*, produce an effect which modern poetry, except where it has learned from Homer himself, cannot attain. They emphasize the unchanging human environment. They express a feeling very profound and very frequent in real life, but elsewhere ill represented in literature. What is really in our minds when we first catch sight of the sea after a long absence, or look up, as watchers in a sickroom or as sentries, to see yet another daybreak? Many things, no doubt—all manner of hopes and fears, pain or pleasure, and the beauty or grimness of that particular sea and that particular dawn. Yes; but under all these, like a base so deep as to be scarcely audible, there is something which we might very lamely express by muttering "same old sea" or "same old morning." The permanence, the indifference, the heartrending or consoling fact that whether we laugh or weep the world is what it is, always enters into our experience and plays no small part in that pressure of reality which is one of the differences between life and imagined life. But in Homer the pressure is there.

The sonorous syllables in which he has stereotyped the sea, the gods, the morning, or the mountains, make it appear that we are dealing not with poetry about the things, but almost with the things themselves. It is this that produces what Kinglake (*Eothen*, cap. iv) called "the strong vertical light of Homer's poetry" and made Mr Barfield say that in it "not man was creating, but the gods" (*Poetic Diction*, p. 96).

The general result of this is that Homer's poetry is, in an unusual degree, believable. There is no use in disputing whether any episode could really have happened. We have seen it happen—and there seemed to be no poet mediating between us and the event. A girl walks on the shore and an unknown lover embraces her, and a darkly shining wave arched over them like a coverlet while they lay; and when he had ended his deeds of love, he told his name, "Lo, I am Poseidon, shaker of earth" (*Od.* xi, 242-252). Because we have had "shaker of earth" time and again in these poems where no miracle was involved, because those syllables have come to affect us almost as the presence of the unchanging sea in the real world, we are compelled to accept this. Call it nonsense, if you will; we have seen it. The real salt sea itself, and not any pantomime or Ovidian personage living in the sea, has got a mortal woman with child. Scientists and theologians must explain it as best they can. The fact is not disputable.

The diction also produces the unwearying splendour and ruthless poignancy of the Homeric poems. Miserable or even sordid events may happen; but the brightness of the sun, the "leaf-shaking" largeness of the mountains, the steady strength of rivers, is there all the time, not with any suggestion (as it might be in a romantic poet) of the 'consolations of nature' but simply as a fact. Homeric splendour is the splendour of reality. Homeric pathos strikes hard precisely because it seems unintended and inevitable like the pathos of real life. It comes from the clash between human emotions and the large, indifferent background which the conventional epithets represent. "Ὡς φάτο, τοὺς δ' ἦδη κάτεχεν φύσιζοος αἶα." (*Il.* iii, 243). Thus Helen spoke about her brothers, thinking them alive, but in fact the life-giving earth already covered them, in Lacedaemon, their dear

fatherland. Ruskin's comment cannot be improved upon: "Note here the high poetical truth carried to the extreme. The poet has to speak of the earth in sadness, but he will not let that sadness affect or change his thoughts of it. No; though Castor and Pollux be dead, yet the earth is our mother still, fruitful, life-giving. These are the facts of the thing. I see nothing else than these. Make what you will of them" (*Modern Painters*, iv, xiii, *Of the Pathetic Fallacy*). And yet even this does not quite exhaust the passage. In translating we have had to say "their dear fatherland." But *dear* is misleading. The word that Homer uses does not really describe any one's emotions at any particular moment. It is used whenever he mentions anything which is a man's *own*, so that a dull critic might say it was simply the Homeric Greek for *own* the adjective. But it is rather more than that. It is the word for *dear*, but by being always used comes to suggest that unalterable relation, far deeper than fondness and compatible with all changes of mood, which unites a normal man to his wife, his home, or his own body—the tie of a mutual 'belonging' which is there even when he dislikes them.

We must avoid an error which Ruskin's words might suggest. We must not think of Homer calculating these effects, line by line, as a modern poet might do. Once the diction has been established it works of itself. Almost anything the poet wants to say, has only to be turned into this orthodox and ready-made diction and it becomes poetry. "Whatever Miss T. eats turns into Miss T." The epic diction, as Goethe said, is "a language which does your thinking and your poetizing for you" (*Eine Sprache die für dich dichtet und denkt*). The conscious artistry of the poet is thus set free to devote itself wholly to the large-scale problems—construction, character drawing, invention; his *verbal* poetics have become a habit, like grammar or articulation. I have avoided using such words as *automatic* or *mechanical* which carry a false suggestion. A machine is made out of inorganic materials and exploits some non-human power, such as gravitation, or the force of steam. But every single Homeric phrase was originally invented by a man and is, like all language, a human thing. It is like a machine in so

A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST

far as the individual poet liberates, by using it, power other than his own; but it is stored human life and human experience which he is liberating—not *his own* life and experience, but none the less human and spiritual. The picture of a Muse—a superpersonal figure, yet anthropomorphically conceived—is therefore really more *accurate* than that of some kind of engine. No doubt all this is very unlike the recipe for poetry which finds favour to-day. But there is no fighting against facts. Make what you can of it, the result of this wholly artificial diction is a degree of objectivity which no other poetry has ever surpassed. Homer accepts artificiality from the outset: but in the result he is something for which 'natural' is too weak an epithet. He has no more need to bother about being 'natural' than Nature herself.

To a limited extent the technique of *Beowulf* is the same as that of Homer. It, too, has its reiterated expressions, *under wolcnum*, *in geardum*, and the like, and its 'poetical' names for most of the things the author wants to mention. One of its differences from Homer, indeed, is the number of synonymous words which the poet can use for the same thing: Homer has no list of alternatives to compare to the *Beowulfian* words for man—*beorn*, *freca*, *guma*, *hæleþ*, *secg*, *wer*. In the same way, *Beowulf* is fonder than Homer of partial repetition, of using slightly varied forms of a poetic phrase or compound. Thus, from the passage already mentioned, *Wuldorcyninge* does not, I think, occur elsewhere in the poem, but *wuldres wealdend* and *wuldres hyrde* do. *Wordum secge* is similarly a partial repetition of *wordum bædon*, *wordum wrixlan*, and *wordum nægde*; *wyrd forsweop*, of *wyrd fornam*, *deap fornam*, and *gubdeap fornam*. In part, this difference of technique goes with a shorter line, a language more full of consonants, and doubtless a slower and more emphatic delivery. It goes with the difference between a quantitative metre and one which uses both quantity and stress accent, demanding their union for that characteristic of alliterative verse which is called weight. One of Homer's great passages is like a cavalry charge; one of *Beowulf's*, like blows from a hammer or the repeated thunder of breakers on the beach. The words flow in Homer; in *Beowulf* they fall apart into

THE TECHNIQUE OF PRIMARY EPIC

massive lumps. The audience has more time to chew on them. Less help is needed from pure reiteration.

All this is not unconnected with a deeper difference of temper. The objectivity of the unchanging background which is the glory of Homer's poetry, is not equally a characteristic of *Beowulf*. Compared with the *Iliad*, *Beowulf* is already, in one sense, 'romantic'. Its landscapes have a spiritual quality. The country which Grendel haunts expresses the same things as Grendel himself: the "visionary dreariness" of Wordsworth is foreshadowed. Poetry has lost by the change, but it has gained, too. The Homeric Cyclops is a mere puppet beside the sad, excluded *ellorgast*, or the jealous and joyless dragon, of the English poem. There is certainly not more suffering behind *Beowulf* than there is behind the *Iliad*; but there is a consciousness of good and evil which Homer lacks.

The 'proper' oral technique of the later poem, that which distinguishes it most sharply from Homer, is the variation or parallelism which most of us have first met in the Psalms. "He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh them to scorn; the Lord shall have them in derision." The rule is that nearly everything must be said more than once. The cold prose about the ship in which Scyld's dead body was sent away (*Beow.* 50) is that nobody knew what became of it. The poetical rendering is that "Men knew not to say for a truth, the talkers in the hall knew not, warriors under the sky knew not, who received that cargo."