



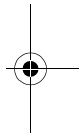
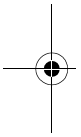
## TABLE-TALK

First published in *Instructor*, X, 1853, pp. 513–15. There is no known manuscript.

Dryden's poem, 'Under Mr Milton's Picture, before his *Paradise Lost*', discussed in the first part of this article, was first printed under the portrait of Milton prefixed to Tonson's illustrated folio edition of *Paradise Lost* (1688):

Three poets, in three distant ages born,  
Greece, Italy, and England did adorn.  
The first, in loftiness of thought surpassed;  
The next, in majesty; in both, the last.  
The force of nature could no farther go;  
To make a third, she joined the former two.

In the second part of this article, De Quincey reiterates points he first raised in his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry on Pope (see Vol. 13), copyright in which Hogg was unable to secure for inclusion in *SGG*.




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### DRYDEN'S HEXASTICH

IT is a remarkable fact, that the very finest epigram in the English language happens also to be the worst. *Epigram* I call it in the austere Greek sense; which thus far resembled our modern idea of an epigram, that something pointed and allied to wit was demanded in the management of the leading thought at its close, but otherwise nothing tending towards the comic or the ludicrous. The epigram I speak of is the well-known one of Dryden dedicated to the glorification of Milton.<sup>1</sup> It is irreproachable as regards its severe brevity. Not one word is there that could be spared; nor could the wit of man have cast the movement of the thought into a better mould. There are three couplets. In the first couplet we are reminded of the fact that this earth had, in three different stages of its development, given birth to a trinity of transcendent poets; meaning narrative poets, or, even more narrowly, epic poets. The duty thrown upon the second couplet is to characterise these three poets, and to value them against each other, but in such terms as that, whilst nothing





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less than the very highest praise should be assigned to the two elder poets in this trinity – the Greek and the Roman – nevertheless, by some dexterous artifice, a higher praise than the highest should suddenly unmask itself, and drop, as it were, like a diadem from the clouds upon the brows of their English competitor. In the kind of expectation raised, and in the extreme difficulty of adequately meeting this expectation, there was pretty much the same challenge offered to Dryden as was offered, somewhere about the same time, to a British ambassador when dining with his political antagonists. One of these – the ambassador of France – had proposed to drink his master, Louis XIV.,<sup>2</sup> under the character of the sun, who dispensed life and light to the whole political system. To this there was no objection; and immediately, by way of intercepting any further draughts upon the rest of the solar system, the Dutch ambassador rose, and proposed the health of their high mightinesses the Seven United States, as the moon and six\* planets, who gave light in the absence of the sun. The two foreign ambassadors, Monsieur and Mynheer, secretly enjoyed the mortification of their English brother, who seemed to be thus left in a state of bankruptcy, ‘no funds’ being available for retaliation, or so they fancied. But suddenly our British representative toasted *his* master as Joshua,<sup>3</sup> the son of Nun, that made the sun and moon stand still. All had seemed lost for England, when in an instant of time both her antagonists were checkmated. Dryden assumed something of the same position. He gave away the supreme jewels in his exchequer; apparently nothing remained behind; all was exhausted. To Homer<sup>4</sup> he gave A; to Virgil<sup>5</sup> he gave B; and, behold! after these were given away, there remained nothing at all that would not have been a secondary praise. But, in a moment of time, by giving A *and* B to Milton, at one sling of his victorious arm he raised him above Homer by the whole extent of B, and above Virgil by the whole extent of A. This felicitous evasion of the embarrassment is accomplished in the second couplet; and, finally, the third couplet winds up with graceful effect, by making a *resumé*, or recapitulation of the logic concerned in the distribution of prizes just announced. Nature, he says, had it not in her power to provide a third prize separate from the first and second; her resource was, to join the first and second in combination: ‘To make a third, she joined the former two.’

Such is the abstract of this famous epigram; and, judged simply by the outline and tendency of the thought, it merits all the vast popularity which it has earned. But in the meantime, it is radically vicious as regards the filling in of this outline; for the particular quality in which Homer is accredited with the pre-eminence, viz., *loftiness of thought*, happens to be a mere variety of expression for that quality, viz., *majesty*, in which pre-eminence is awarded to Virgil. Homer excels Virgil in the very point in which lies Virgil’s superiority to Homer; and that synthesis, by means of which a great triumph is reserved

\* ‘Six planets’ :— No more had then been discovered.





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to Milton, becomes obviously impossible, when it is perceived that the supposed analytic elements of this synthesis are blank reiterations of each other.

Exceedingly striking it is, that a thought should have prospered for 170 years, which, on the slightest steadiness of examination, turns out to be no thought at all, but mere blank vacuity. There is, however, this justification of the case, that the mould, the set of channels, into which the metal of the thought is meant to run, really *has* the felicity which it appears to have: the form is perfect; and it is merely in the *matter*, in the accidental filling up of the mould, that a fault has been committed. Had the Virgilian point of excellence been *loveliness* instead of *majesty*, or any word whatever suggesting the common antithesis of sublimity and beauty; or had it been power on the one side, matched against grace on the other, the true lurking tendency of the thought would have been developed, and the sub-conscious purpose of the epigram would have fulfilled itself to the letter.

*N.B.*— It is not meant that *loftiness of thought* and *majesty* are expressions so entirely interchangeable, as that no shades of difference could be suggested; it is enough that these ‘shades’ are not substantial enough, or broad enough, to support the weight of opposition which the epigram assigns to them. *Grace* and *elegance*, for instance, are far from being in all relations synonymous; but they are so to the full extent of any purposes concerned in this epigram. Nevertheless, it is probable enough that Dryden had moving in his thoughts a relation of the word *majesty*, which, if developed, would have done justice to his meaning. It was, perhaps, the decorum and sustained dignity of the *composition* — the workmanship apart from the native grandeur of the materials — the majestic style of the artistic treatment as distinguished from the original creative power — which Dryden, the translator of the Roman poet, familiar therefore with his weakness and with his strength, meant in this place to predicate as characteristically observable in Virgil.

## POPE’S RETORT UPON ADDISON

There is nothing extraordinary, or that could merit a special notice, in a simple case of oversight, or in a blunder, though emanating from the greatest of poets. But such a case challenges and forces our attention, when we know that the particular passage in which it occurs was wrought and burnished with excessive pains; or (which in this case is also known) when that particular passage is pushed into singular prominence as having obtained a singular success. In no part of his poetic mission did Pope<sup>6</sup> so fascinate the gaze of his contemporaries as in his functions of satirist; which functions, in his latter years, absorbed all other functions. And one reason, I believe, why it was that the interest about Pope decayed so rapidly after his death (an accident somewhere noticed by Wordsworth),<sup>7</sup> must be sought in the fact, that the most stinging of his personal allusions, by which he had given salt to his later writings, were continually losing their edge, and sometimes their intelligibility, as Pope’s own contemporary generation was dying off. Pope alleges it as





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a palliation of his satiric malice, that it had been forced from him in the way of retaliation; forgetting that such a plea wilfully abjures the grandest justification of a satirist, viz., the deliberate assumption of the character as something corresponding to the prophet's mission amongst the Hebrews. It is no longer the *facit indignatio versum*.<sup>8</sup> Pope's satire, where even it was most effective, was personal and vindictive, and upon that argument alone could not be philosophic. Foremost in the order of his fulminations stood, and yet stands, the bloody castigation by which, according to his own pretence, he warned and menaced (but by which, in simple truth, he executed judgment upon) his false friend, Addison.<sup>9</sup>

To say that this drew vast rounds of applause upon its author, and frightened its object into deep silence for the rest of his life, like the *Quos ego* of angry Neptune,<sup>10</sup> sufficiently argues that the verses must have ploughed as deeply as the Russian knout. Vitriol could not scorch more fiercely. And yet the whole passage rests upon a blunder; and the blunder is so broad and palpable, that it implies instant forgetfulness both in the writer and the reader. The idea which furnishes the basis of the passage is this: that the conduct ascribed to Addison is in its own nature so despicable, as to extort laughter by its primary impulse; but that this laughter changes into weeping, when we come to understand that the person concerned in this delinquency is Addison. The change, the transfiguration, in our mood of contemplating the offence, is charged upon the discovery which we are supposed to make as to the person of the offender; that which by its baseness had been simply comic when imputed to some corresponding author, passes into a tragic *coup-de-théâtre*, when it is suddenly traced back to a man of original genius. The whole, therefore, of this effect is made to depend upon the sudden scenical transition from a supposed petty criminal to one of high distinction. And, meantime, no such stage effect had been possible, since the knowledge that a man of genius was the offender had been what we started with from the beginning. 'Our laughter is changed to tears,' says Pope, 'as soon as we discover that the base act had a noble author.' And, behold! the initial feature in the whole description of the case is, that the libeller was one whom 'true genius fired:'

'Peace to all such! But were there one whose mind  
True genius fires,' &c.<sup>11</sup>

Before the offence is described, the perpetrator is already characterised as a man of genius: and, *in spite of that knowledge*, we laugh. But suddenly our mood changes, and we weep, but why? I beseech you. Simply because we have ascertained the author to be a man of genius.

'Who would not laugh, if such a man there be?  
Who would not weep, if Atticus were he?'<sup>12</sup>

The sole reason for weeping is something that we knew already before we began to laugh.





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It would not be right in logic, in fact, it would be a mis-classification, if I should cite as at all belonging to the same group several passages in Milton that come very near to Irish bulls, by virtue of distorted language. One reason against such a classification would lie precisely in that fact – viz., that the assimilation to the category of bulls lurks in the verbal expression, and not (as in Pope's case) amongst the conditions of the thought. And a second reason would lie in the strange circumstance, that Milton had not fallen into this snare of diction through any carelessness or oversight, but with his eyes wide open, deliberately avowing his error as a special elegance; repeating it; and well aware of splendid Grecian authority for his error, if anybody should be bold enough to call it an error. Every reader must be aware of the case –

'Adam the goodliest man of men since born  
His sons; the fairest of her daughters Eve'<sup>13</sup> –

which makes Adam one of his own sons, Eve one of her own daughters. This, however, is authorised by Grecian usage in the severest writers. Neither can it be alleged that these might be bold poetic expressions, harmonising with the Grecian idiom; for Poppo<sup>14</sup> has illustrated this singular form of expression in a prose-writer, as philosophic and austere as Thucydides;<sup>15</sup> a form which (as it offends against logic) must offend equally in all languages. Some beauty must have been descried in the idiom, such as atoned for its solecism: for Milton recurs to the same idiom, and under the same entire freedom of choice, elsewhere; particularly in this instance, which has not been pointed out: 'And never,' says Satan to the abhorred phantoms of Sin and Death, when crossing his path,

'And never saw till now  
Sight more detestable than him and thee.'<sup>16</sup>

Now, therefore, it seems, he *had* seen a sight more detestable than this very sight. He now looked upon something more hateful than X Y Z. What was it? It was X Y Z.<sup>17</sup>

But the authority of Milton, backed by that of insolent Greece, would prove an overmatch for the logic of centuries. And I withdraw, therefore, from the rash attempt to quarrel with this sort of bull, involving itself in the verbal expression. But the following, which lies rooted in the mere facts and incidents, is certainly the most extraordinary *practical bull*\* that all literature can

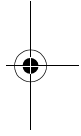
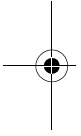
\* It is strange, or rather it is *not* strange, considering the feebleness of that lady in such a field, that Miss Edgeworth<sup>18</sup> always fancied herself to have caught Milton in a bull, under circumstances which, whilst leaving the shadow of a bull, effectually disown the substance. 'And in the lowest deep a lower deep still opens to devour me.'<sup>19</sup> This is the passage denounced by Miss Edgeworth. 'If it was already the lowest deep,' said the fair lady, 'how the deuce (no, perhaps it might be *I* that said, '*how the deuce*') could it open into a lower deep?' Yes, how could it? In carpentry, it is clear to my mind that it could *not*. But, in cases of deep imaginative feeling, no phenomenon is more natural than precisely this never-ending growth of one colossal gran-





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furnish. And a stranger thing, perhaps, than the oversight itself lies in this – that not any critic throughout Europe, two only excepted, but has failed to detect a blunder so memorable. All the rampant audacity of Bentley – ‘slashing Bentley’<sup>21</sup> – all the jealous malignity of Dr Johnson<sup>22</sup> – who hated Milton without disguise as a republican, but secretly and under a mask *would* at any rate have hated him from jealousy of his scholarship – had not availed to sharpen these practised and these interested eyes into the detection of an oversight which argues a sudden Lethean forgetfulness<sup>23</sup> on the part of Milton; and in many generations of readers, however alive and awake with malice, a corresponding forgetfulness not less astonishing. Two readers only I have ever heard of that escaped this lethargic inattention; one of which two is myself; and I ascribe my success partly to good luck, but partly to some merit on my own part in having cultivated a habit of systematically accurate reading. If I read at all, I make it a duty to read truly and faithfully. I profess allegiance for the time to the man whom I undertake to study; and I am as loyal to all the engagements involved in such a contract, as if I had come under a *sacramentum militare*.<sup>24</sup> So it was that, whilst yet a boy, I came to perceive, with a wonder not yet exhausted, that unaccountable blunder which Milton has committed in the main narrative on which the epic fable of the ‘Paradise Lost’ turns as its hinges. And many a year afterwards I found that Paul Richter,<sup>25</sup> whose vigilance nothing escaped, who carried with him through life ‘the eye of the hawk, and the fire therein,’<sup>26</sup> had not failed to make the same discovery. It is this: The archangel Satan has designs upon man; he meditates his ruin; and it is known that he does. Specially to counteract these designs, and for no other purpose whatever, a choir of angelic police is stationed at the gates of Paradise, having (I repeat) one sole commission, viz., to keep watch and ward over the threatened safety of the newly created human pair. Even at the very first this duty is neglected so thoroughly, that Satan gains access without challenge or suspicion. That is awful: for, ask yourself, reader, how a constable or an




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deur chasing and surmounting another, or of abysses that swallow up abysses. Persecutions of this class oftentimes are amongst the symptoms of fever, and amongst the inevitable spontaneities of nature. Other people I have known who were inclined to class amongst bulls Milton’s all-famous expression of ‘*darkness visible*,’<sup>20</sup> whereas it is not even a bold or daring expression; it describes a pure optical experience of very common occurrence. There are two separate darkneses or obscurities: first, that obscurity *by* which you see dimly; and secondly, that obscurity *which* you see. The first is the atmosphere through which vision is performed, and, therefore, part of the *subjective* conditions essential to the act of seeing. The second is the *object* of your sight. In a glass-house at night illuminated by a sullen fire in one corner, but else dark, you see the darkness massed in the rear as a black object. *That* is the ‘visible darkness.’ And on the other hand, the murky atmosphere between you and the distant rear is not the object, but the medium, through or athwart which you descry the black masses. The first darkness is *subjective* darkness; that is, a darkness in your own eye, and entangled with your very faculty of vision. The second darkness is perfectly different: it is *objective* darkness; that is to say, not any darkness which affects or modifies your faculty of seeing either for better or worse; but a darkness which is the *object* of your vision; a darkness which you see projected from yourself, as a massy volume of blackness, and projected, possibly, to a vast distance.





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inspector of police would be received who had been stationed at No. 6, on a secret information, and spent the night in making love at No. 15. Through the regular surveillance at the gates, Satan passes without objection; and he is first of all detected by a purely accidental collision during the rounds of the junior angels. The result of this collision, and of the examination which follows, is what no reader can ever forget – so unspeakable is the grandeur of that scene between the two hostile archangels, when the *Fiend* (so named at the moment under the fine machinery\* used by Milton for exalting or depressing the ideas of his nature) finally takes his flight as an incarnation of darkness.

‘And fled  
Murmuring; and with him fled the shades of night.’<sup>28</sup>

The darkness flying with him, naturally we have the feeling that he *is* the darkness, and that all darkness has some essential relation to Satan.

But now, having thus witnessed his terrific expulsion, naturally we ask what was the sequel. Four books, however, are interposed before we reach the answer to that question. This is the reason that we fail to remark the extraordinary oversight of Milton. Dislocated from its immediate plan in the succession of incidents, that sequel eludes our notice, which else and in its natural place would have shocked us beyond measure. The simple abstract of the whole story is, that Satan, being ejected, and sternly charged under Almighty menaces not to intrude upon the young Paradise of God, ‘rides with darkness’<sup>29</sup> for exactly one week, and, having digested his wrath rather than his fears on the octave of his solemn banishment, without demur, or doubt, or tremor, back he plunges into the very centre of Eden. On a Friday, suppose, he is expelled through the main entrance: on the Friday following he re-enters upon the forbidden premises through a clandestine entrance. The upshot is, that the heavenly police suffer, in the first place, the one sole enemy, who was or could be the object of their vigilance, to pass without inquest or suspicion; thus they *inaugurate* their task; secondly, by the merest accident (no thanks to their fidelity) they detect him, and with awful adjurations sentence him to perpetual banishment; but, thirdly, on his immediate return, in utter contempt of their sentence, they ignore him altogether, and apparently act upon Dogberry’s direction, that, upon meeting a thief, the police may suspect him to be no true man;<sup>30</sup> and, with such manner of men, the less they meddle or make, the more it will be for their honesty.

\* What I mean is the subtle gamut of denominations, by means of which Satan is made to revolve through a labyrinthine scale of elevations or depressions; now being called the *Devil*, that is, the *accuser* or *calumniator* (ὁ Διὰβολος)<sup>27</sup> which suggests his degradation and malice to man; now the *Enemy* (fiend), which suggests his *power* as a principle of evil; now again *Lucifer*, *Prince of the air*, or *Prince of Darkness*, all of which suggest his original archangelic majesty.

