

Roland Mushat FRYE: Milton's Imagery and the Visual Arts. Iconographic Tradition in the Epic Poems. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Up, 1978. xxv+409 pp, 269 illustrations 8 in color.

By now "Miltonology", just like Shakespeare-criticism, has become a kind of industry and its yearly production fills volumes of bibliography. However not more than a few works in every decade can be said to really add new insights to our perspectives on Milton. Two fundamental studies from the 1970s can be mentioned which radically reconsidered two fairly distinct aspects of this English genius. Christopher Hill's Milton and the English Revolution /New York: The Viking Press, 1976/ is an extensive monograph on Milton's ideology while R.M. Frye's monumental study deals with Milton's imagery and its relation to the contemporary iconographical traditions. Hill's book combines the best achievements of social and ideological history completed by sound literary analysis. Frye's work represents the newest and remarkably most fruitful trend in criticism: imagery analysis carried out using the methods of iconology. His starting point is the following: "My purpose is to study the ways in which artists represented the scenes, events, and characters that Milton treats poetically in his epic works. Over the centuries prior to Milton's time, arts had developed an extensive vocabulary of visual imagery relating to sacred subjects. Unfortunately, that vocabulary has been very largely lost to modern readers" /p. 4/. Consequently, "our task here, then, is to recover the vocabulary of visual images which Milton and his readers may reasonably be expected to have known. ... I have no interest in arguing that I have discovered particular and individual 'sources' for the descriptive passages in Milton. I shall engage in considerable analysis of individual works of art, but such

analyses are undertaken to show the traditional ways of seeing things" /ibid./.

Before starting his own examination Frye reviews the changing opinion of Milton criticism regarding the poet's visual faculty. As it turns out the critics of the 18th century still highly evaluated Milton's imaginative power, and it is not by chance that Paradise Lost inspired such illustrators as Blake or Turner. If Milton's images were criticised the objection was directed against the concrete precision of the visions which was too sensual, too material for the classicists. Doctor Johnson complained that Milton saw nature through the spectacle of books. /Here Frye ironically remarks that "poor Johnson himself was so very nearly blind throughout his life that he scarcely ever saw nature directly at all, and so might be taken as an extraordinarily bad witness on this subject."/ The critical tradition that questions Milton's visual strength was actually established by Coleridge who claimed that "Milton is not a picturesque but a musical poet". This topical comment has been effective up to now, decisively influencing, for example, T.S. Eliot /"Milton maybe said never to have seen anything"/.

After the review of criticism Frye examines the question whether Milton, by his blindness, was ever really physically prevented from having relevant visual memories of nature and art. This can be easily rejected as he started losing his sight only from the age of 36 and became totally blind by 43. As his vision deteriorated he fought against it, ordering special glasses from France and never giving up the ambition of having contact with the world of forms and images around him.

The next problem is to survey what actual experiences Milton may have had with the visual arts. Frye discusses this topic briefly /referring to his travels in Italy, reminding us of his deep interest in Italian Baroque art and in the remains of Roman and Greek classical culture/ and soon arrives at his main concern: registering the iconographical topics in Milton's epic works and contrasting them with contemporary art.

His thematic order is the following: the demonic world /war in Heaven, sin and death, Hell/; the heavenly world /images for the divine, the vision of angels, Heaven/; the created world /the garden of Eden, landscape art/; the human world /Adam and Eve, The Fall and the Expulsion/; and finally the redeemed world as shown in Paradise Regained.

Drawing his conclusions Frye claims that Milton's images can mostly be derived from contemporary iconographical lore, bearing in mind that the poet did not mechanically imitate this lore. He eclectically utilized the material at hand and when he selected certain motives he was more influenced by religious preoccupations and poetical needs than by preferences towards certain styles. This is how mediievally static and dignified angels are described in the neighbourhood of dynamic scenes such as can be found only in 17th century paintings. His descriptions sometimes can be compared to the contrast-oriented, rigid mosaics, sometimes to the graded shades of oil-painting. Naturally, in certain cases Milton's sources can be exactly indicated. "So Raphael's animals erupting from the ground at Creation, Naccherino's maudlinly tearful tempter serpent, and perhaps Beccafumi's fallen angels rising from the lake of Hell. Milton could have seen these works, and I suspect that he probably did, but I am unwilling to press the point: striking and even unique analogues are not necessarily sources, and we can be more confident of direct influence from widespread traditions than from single instances" /p. 349/. After this enormous work of analysis Frye's farewell is surprisingly modest: "I have merely written an introduction to reading Milton with a more adequate visual recognition" /p. 350/.

The least that can be said is that Frye's introduction is exhaustive and in certain respects revolutionary, not only in Milton scholarship but in the study of literary imagination. However the present reviewer cannot help noticing one aspect missing from Frye's research. Already in his preface the author rejects any consideration of Milton and any period

styles like Mannerism or the Baroque. His hardly convincing argument is that these style categories are so uncertain even in art history that there is no real possibility of applying them to literature. We can but regret this self-limitation because Frye's results clearly demonstrate how deeply Baroque is Paradise Lost and it is this iconographical demonstration which proves that such a work could be born in Puritan England, so far away from the mainstream of the Catholic-Baroque world.

Since the publication of this book Frye has been continuing his studies concerning the relationship of literature and the visual arts. His new field of research-work is Shakespeare, especially Hamlet. In his recent articles he has acknowledged the importance of the emblematic genre in providing a kind of dictionary to the literature of the late Renaissance, an extravagantly Manneristic period. Allusions like this seem to pick up the above mentioned missing link from his approach.

György E. Szőnyi