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# The Significance of Addison's Criticism

LEOPOLD DAMROSCH, JR.

Joseph Addison is one of those writers whose reputation, which once seemed established for all time, has fallen so drastically that literate people feel no shame in admitting complete ignorance of him. His poems and his *Cato* lost favor rapidly as the eighteenth century went forward, and even the *Spectator*, which readers like Benjamin Franklin pored over as a guide to culturally approved language and manners, long ago passed into eclipse. Since Addison has lost all authority as poet and moral censor, it would be surprising if his criticism had survived intact. But its historical influence is still conceded to have been immense, and I shall argue that the full implications of that influence have not had adequate recognition. Addison's role in the history of aesthetics is familiar enough, but I want to distinguish criticism from aesthetics and to propose that his critical *example* is what calls for our attention and respect. In an age when criticism prides itself on its rigor, and when poetics enjoys greater prestige than criticism, such a project may seem beside the point. But Addison himself was no stranger to the claims of criticism to be rigorous and theoretical, and it is possible that we can still learn something from his suspicion of those claims.

Writing sixty years after Addison's death, Johnson approached our topic in these words: "Addison is now to be considered as a critick; a name which the present generation is scarcely willing to allow him. His criticism is condemned as tentative or experimental rather than scientific, and he is considered as deciding by taste rather than by principles." Johnson's defense of Addison rests on two points: that later critics ought to acknowledge the debt they owe their superseded master, and that critics like Dryden had written for apprentice poets, so that a guide was still needed for the common reader.

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An instructor like Addison was now wanting, whose remarks being superficial, might be easily understood, and being just might prepare the mind for more attainments. Had he presented *Paradise Lost* to the publick with all the pomp of system and severity of science, the criticism would perhaps have been admired, and the poem still have been neglected; but by the blandishments of gentleness and facility he has made Milton an universal favourite, with whom readers of every class think it necessary to be pleased.<sup>1</sup>

Johnson's defense is forthright and yet ambiguous: it raises some crucial doubts. First of all, what is the real value of a master who has been superseded, whether or not his successors owe him a debt? Next, how can criticism be "just" if it is also "superficial"? And finally, if Johnson is right—as I believe he is—to see the Milton papers as Addison's central achievement, can that achievement be separated from the cunning blandishments that seduce an uncritical audience into liking an author whom it becomes socially obligatory to like? Johnson's parrot-critic Dick Minim found Milton the only author whose books he could "read for ever without weariness" (*Idler* 61); Johnson himself said that *Paradise Lost* is a poem which one lays down and forgets to take up again. Is Addison a mere pander to the Dick Minims of the world?

Every one of these doubts has real substance. If they did not, Addison might still be a living critic. But a critic's influence depends as much on the way he approaches literature as on the things he says about it, and here Addison has not received the praise he deserves. Let us briefly consider his great predecessor Dryden. Dryden's essays are not only directed, as Johnson says, to aspiring writers who want to learn the technique of their art, but are also designed as propaganda to recommend the poems or translations to which they are attached. Even the *Dramatic Poesy* is oriented to Dryden's career: Are rhyming plays good or bad? Should one imitate the ancients or the French or the Elizabethans? Already, then, his criticism is complicated by motives which Addison, writing for the ordinary reader, can ignore. And more important still, Dryden is obsessed with the fear that the tough-minded French and their tough-minded English disciples will expose his criticism as casual or even shallow. Hence the endless casting about for arguments and precedents when he states an opinion; hence the otherwise inexplicable deference he shows the ferocious but silly Rymer.

It is immensely suggestive that Addison, a generation later, was contemptuous rather than impressed when John Dennis claimed to be a rigorous theorist basing his theories on French neoclassicism.

<sup>1</sup>*Life of Addison*, in *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G.B. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1905), 2: 145-46.

The marks you may know him by are, an elevated eye, and dogmatical brow, a positive voice, and a contempt for every thing that comes out, whether he has read it or not . . . . He hath formed his judgment upon Homer, Horace, and Virgil, not from their own works, but from those of Rapin and Bossu. He knows his own strength so well, that he never dares praise any thing in which he has not a French author for his voucher.<sup>2</sup>

Dennis was a much more powerful critic than Rymer, more powerful in some respects than Addison, but his authoritarian air represents the critic as judge or even prosecutor, arraigining each work of literature by the standards of a code of law. Addison's originality lies in his conviction that the reader is more important than the prosecutor or judge, and should not let himself be bullied by authority. It is not simply as a pose that Addison appears as the reader's companion rather than his master.

Though I shall not examine Addison's contribution to aesthetic theory, it is significant that his emphasis there is affective or psychological, rather than formalist and systematic. Meyer Abrams speaks of his "eclectic, but endlessly suggestive, papers on 'the Pleasures of the Imagination.'" <sup>3</sup> They are eclectic because Addison is not afraid of gathering interesting ideas from a wide range of sources; they are suggestive because he stresses the openness of imaginative experience rather than any single doctrine about the nature of art. As he writes in the paper that introduces the series, "I could wish there were authors . . . who, beside the mechanical rules which a man of very little taste may discourse upon, would enter into the very spirit and soul of fine writing, and show us the several sources of that pleasure which rises in the mind upon the perusal of a noble work" (*Spectator* 409). Addison is firmly neoclassical; even humor "should always lie under the check of reason," and the humorist should possess "a certain regularity of thought which must discover the writer to be a man of sense" (*Spectator* 35). But the tendency of this aesthetic is, as Johnson said, experimental rather than scientific, deciding by taste rather than principles. Addison wants to know what readers feel and why they feel that way, not to dictate what their feelings must be or to analyze literary structure in narrowly formalist terms as the French neoclassicists had been doing.

<sup>2</sup>*Tatler* 165. For the *Tatler* I follow Robert J. Allen's text in *Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970); for the *Spectator*, *Critical Essays from the Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970). Editions that retain Addison's insistent capitalization impose a distracting quaintness—dear to parodists—that would get in the way of my argument.

<sup>3</sup>*The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Norton, 1953), p. 274.

A good illustration is furnished by Addison's famous defense of plays that violate poetic justice. Without doubt he sought to prepare the public mind for his own *Cato*, in which poetic justice would be violated, but he rests his case on audience response rather than the structure of the drama or the moral order of God's universe.

We find that good and evil happen alike to all men on this side the grave; and as the principal design of tragedy is to raise commiseration and terror in the minds of the audience, we shall defeat this great end, if we always make virtue and innocence happy and successful . . . . Terror and commiseration leave a pleasing anguish in the mind; and fix the audience in such a serious composure of thought, as is much more lasting and delightful than any little transient starts of joy and satisfaction.

(*Spectator* 40)

In a fine phrase Addison says that the dramatist should not obstruct "the tide of sorrow." The attack on poetic justice, then, is empirically based: life is not like that, and tragedies wouldn't be moving if playwrights pretended it was. And although Dennis later stung Addison to further reflections on the suffering of the innocent,<sup>4</sup> he never abandoned this essential orientation toward the audience rather than the artist or the art abstractly considered.

As soon as we turn to Addison's practical criticism, we are faced once more with the question, How can it be "just" if it is also "superficial"? Addison has been called a great popularizer;<sup>5</sup> is he then a parasitical writer who simplifies other men's ideas in order to convey them to a large and not very thoughtful audience? It is worth quoting at some length from George Watson, who has sought to write the history of descriptive criticism and has found Addison grievously wanting.

<sup>4</sup>In *Spectator* 548 Addison makes a (probably imaginary) correspondent revive the issue and assert that "The most perfect man has vices enough to draw down punishments upon his head, and to justify Providence in regard to any miseries that may befall him." He concedes that although the innocent may sometimes suffer, the guilty should never escape punishment. Dennis was famous for his uncompromising claim that tragedy must imitate God's providential justice: "The great Design of Arts is to restore the Decays that happen'd to human Nature by the Fall, by restoring Order" (*The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*, in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward N. Hooker (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1943), 1: 336).

<sup>5</sup>Bonamy Dobrée, *English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), p. 102.

The book-by-book analysis [of *Paradise Lost*] . . . only confirms how very far from the text Addison is. At a glance, its abundance of quotations looks impressive. But Addison's comments on his quotations have all the vagueness of a schoolboy's ("wonderfully poetical," "truly sublime"), and he almost never ventures a strictly descriptive or interpretative statement. Casual value-judgements are the only mode of proceeding. For the Augustan Man of Taste, it soon appears, intelligent inquiry concerning the meaning of a passage is barely a possibility. Whatever is obscure is merely bad; the critic's function is simply to point and enthuse: "to point out its particular beauties, and to determine wherein they consist" (no. 369), as Addison explains in his concluding paper. And "wherein," for Addison, means only "under what preconceived category" (the Sublime, the Soft, the Natural). Much of the awful glibness of the Augustan aesthetic, its pathetic readiness to take shelter behind a modish terminology of criticism, is plainly visible in the language of this ambitious but complacent critic.<sup>6</sup>

Watson has more than enough complacency of his own, but the indictment needs to be faced, and it is well to have it stated so openly. Addison does not analyze, and his survey of *Paradise Lost* does fall, despite his interest in reader response, under a series of conventional categories drawn from neoclassical epic theory and specifically from René Le Bossu, the very writer he mocks Dennis for following.

My defense of Addison will take two parts. He fails to analyze because he holds a consistent, if modest, view of the scope and uses of criticism; I shall return to this point later. And he adopts conventional categories largely for tactical reasons: they help to organize one's impressions of a work, and may help to persuade a hostile reader who can only see the work plainly if he can see it through categories which he already knows. Consider, for instance, Addison's praise of the popular ballad by comparison with Homer and Virgil. As C. S. Lewis and Albert Friedman have shown, this discussion forms part of Addison's larger account of "true wit" and participates in a general European reaction against the metaphysical mode. If the neoclassical principle of universality is valid, then it should apply to works outside the canon of classical literature. The ballads offer a suitable test case, and Addison selects his examples, *Chevy Chase* and *The Two Children in the Wood*, precisely because their popularity was longstanding and widespread.<sup>7</sup> In these terms, Addison is not particularly interested in the

<sup>6</sup>*The Literary Critics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 71-72.

<sup>7</sup>Lewis, "Addison," in *Essays on the Eighteenth Century Presented to David Nichol Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1945), pp. 1-14; Friedman, *The Ballad Revival* (Chicago, 1961), Ch. 4.

ballad at all, but in a neoclassical principle which he illustrates in the ballad, not without sly amusement at turning the term "Gothic" against the very poets who called the ballads Gothic.

This account is a fair statement of the theoretical impulse behind Addison's ballad papers, and of his use of the ballads to argue a neoclassical point. But it does an injustice to his genuine sense of what the ballads are and why people would want to read them. Consider his treatment of *The Two Children in the Wood*:

This song is a plain simple copy of nature, destitute of all the helps and ornaments of art. The tale of it is a pretty tragical story, and pleases for no other reason, but because it is a copy of nature. There is even a despicable simplicity in the verse; and yet, because the sentiments appear genuine and unaffected, they are able to move the mind of the most polite reader with inward meltings of humanity and compassion. The incidents grow out of the subject, and are such as are the most proper to excite pity. For which reason the whole narration has something in it very moving; notwithstanding the author of it (whoever he was) has delivered it in such an abject phrase, and poorness of expression, that the quoting any part of it would look like a design of turning it into ridicule.

(*Spectator* 85)

Watson is right: Addison does not analyze here, evading analysis with phrases like "has something in it very moving." But he sees no reason to analyze; his purpose is to cajole the reader into rethinking his *attitude* toward ballad. Though the ballads are specifically invoked in the argument about true wit, Addison's esteem is none the weaker for that. Their simplicity is the true, permanent simplicity that readers have been taught to admire in Homer and Virgil, and if the best way to make them see it is to place parallel passages together, then Addison is glad to do so. If it seems incongruous to us to measure the ballads against Virgil, that is because we have learned a historical relativism that allows us to value them in their uniqueness. Addison writes for readers who see their simplicity as "despicable" and their language as "abject"; for them the Virgilian comparison is essential. Its strategic success is shown by the praise of another classically-trained reader a century later: Macaulay says that Addison "raised his voice against the contempt with which our fine old ballads were regarded, and showed the scoffers that the same gold which, burnished and polished, gives lustre to the *Aeneid* and the *Odes* of Horace, is mingled with the rude dross of *Chery Chase*."<sup>8</sup> And, as always, Addison is concerned with

<sup>8</sup>"The Life and Writings of Addison," first pub. in the *Edinburgh Review*, July 1843.

affective response: though the ballads are unsophisticated, they are above all moving.

Addison's major critical achievement, the eighteen *Spectator* papers on *Paradise Lost*, confirms these observations: he wants to help the reader open his sensibility to the poem, and his tactic is to relate the poem to the classical epics whose status was firmly established as the best poems in the highest genre. He is not really measuring *Paradise Lost* by the standards of Aristotle and Le Bossu, but is using their categories as a convenient means of opening up the poem. It was original to give so much space to a single work. As contrasted, say, with Dryden's spare, rigorous "examen" of *The Silent Woman* after the model of Corneille,<sup>9</sup> Addison conveys an expansive sense of open-minded attentiveness and of the critic as reader, not judge. In his youth he seems to have been impressed by Dryden's view of Milton as a literary as well as political rebel;<sup>10</sup> in the *Spectator*, twenty years later, he has not forgotten that Milton often exhibits "the wantonness of a luxuriant imagination" (No. 315), but he wants to emphasize control and order rather than anarchic licence. He sets out, then, by proposing an undogmatic classicism: whether the epic (or "heroic poem") can be rigorously defined or not, he will consider the relation of *Paradise Lost* to epic poems of admitted excellence.

I shall therefore examine it by the rules of epic poetry, and see whether it falls short of the *Iliad* or *Aeneid* in the beauties which are essential to that kind of writing. The first thing to be considered in an epic poem, is the fable, which is perfect or imperfect, according as the action which it relates is more or less so. This action should have three qualifications in it. First, it should be but one action. Secondly, it should be an entire action; and thirdly, it should be a great action.

(*Spectator* 267)

The terms come straight from Le Bossu, but are used in a notably relaxed manner. Addison's intention is to show that *Paradise Lost* is at least as great and unified as the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, not to find fault with it by some abstract standard of epic theory. And if parts of the poem cannot be strictly defended on these terms, then, as he cheerfully admits, he is prepared to drop the terms. "Milton's complaint of his blindness, his panegyric on marriage, his reflections on Adam's and Eve's going naked, of the angels eating, and several other passages in his poem, are liable to the same exception [of being extraneous],

<sup>9</sup>In *Of Dramatic Poesy*. Neander (usually identified with Dryden himself) seeks to prove the English drama equal to the French, and lays stress mainly on Jonson's plot.

<sup>10</sup>See C. Blakemore Evans's remarks on the "Account of the Greatest English Poets" (1694) in "Addison's Early Knowledge of Milton," *JEGP*, 49 (1950): 204-7.



though I must confess there is so great a beauty in these very digressions, that I would not wish them out of his poem" (No. 297).

As with the ballads, the principal tactic is to emphasize the classical element in Milton's epic. Even the epigraphs are shrewdly chosen: of the eighteen, nine are from Horace—all but one from the *Ars Poetica*, insinuating Milton's conformity to received Augustan notions—and seven are from Virgil, mostly in the *Aeneid*, insinuating that *Paradise Lost* can be properly compared with the most "regular" of the epics. The first epigraph of all is from Propertius (who alludes to the *Aeneid*), "Give way, ye Greek and Roman writers!", and the papers that follow are designed to show that they must give way to Milton on their own ground. Addison of course recognizes how often Milton draws on the Bible rather than the classics, but he is at pains to demonstrate Milton's judgment "in duly qualifying those high strains of eastern poetry, which were suited to readers whose imaginations were set to an higher pitch than those of colder climates" (No. 339). While this points to a real quality in *Paradise Lost*, Milton himself must have thought of it as operating in the other direction—Biblicizing the epic, not classicizing the Bible. And at times Addison shows something like embarrassment about his tactic. He defends Milton's style, for instance, by asserting that Homer does similar things (No. 285), but later confesses that he has been making the best of a dubious business for the sake of argument. "Our language sunk under him, and was unequal to that greatness of soul, which furnished him with such glorious conceptions" (No. 297).

This last observation points to the true tendency of the *Paradise Lost* papers, which is to celebrate the poem for what it is, not to worry much about its classical credentials. It is only a debating point, as Addison says, whether an epic can be allowed to end unhappily or not. The deeper truth is that this poem turns upon a *felix culpa* whose religious basis distinguishes it from the happy or unhappy endings of traditional epics. "Our two first parents are comforted by dreams and visions, cheered with promises of salvation, and, in a manner, raised to a greater happiness than that which they had forfeited: in short, Satan is represented miserable in the height of his triumphs, and Adam triumphant in the height of misery" (No. 369). By emphasizing the sublime in Milton, as Dennis had done before him and as Johnson would do after him, Addison invokes a quality of greatness that transcends the ordinary preoccupations of prescriptive criticism.

It remains true that Addison's critical remarks are informal and, in Johnson's term, superficial. But we must not forget that Addison himself knew they were; in an important sense, he believed they had to be. He introduces his hesitant account of Milton's faults with the observa-

tion that it can only be useful to a reader who is fully at home with the poem.

It is in criticism, as in all other sciences and speculations; one who brings with him any implicit notions and observations which he has made in his reading of the poets, will find his own reflections methodized and explained, and perhaps several little hints that had passed in his mind, perfected and improved in the works of a good critic; whereas one who has not these previous lights, is very often an utter stranger to what he reads, and apt to put a wrong interpretation upon it.

The critic's role is to help the reader clarify what he thinks about a poem he already knows well or should seek to know well, not to create meaning for him. The critic is, first and foremost, a reader himself, whose special qualification is a rigorous training in the art of logical thinking—Addison goes on to invoke Locke—and whose own style must prove his competence to judge the work of others. And after the critic has finished, the reader must be left alone with the poem. Having examined, for instance, the subject of epic simile, Addison concludes, “If the reader considers the comparisons in the first book of Milton, of the sun in an eclipse, of the sleeping Leviathan, of the bees swarming about their hive, of the fairy dance, in the view wherein I have here placed them, he will easily discover the great beauties that are in each of those passages” (No. 303). After the critic has placed the general issue in what he thinks is the proper light, the reader must go on to consider specific passages for himself.

Watson, we remember, disliked the smugness of Addison's Augustan notion of taste. Perhaps it was smug. But it derives from a strong humanist tradition of openness to literature. When Addison defines taste as “that faculty of the soul, which discerns the beauties of an author with pleasure, and the imperfections with dislike” (No. 409), he goes on to say that although this faculty must be based on some inborn potentiality, it can only be developed through years of thoughtful reading and conversation.

Notwithstanding this faculty must in some measure be born with us, there are several methods for cultivating and improving it, and without which it will be very uncertain, and of little use to the person that possesses it. The most natural method for this purpose is to be conversant among the writings of the most polite authors. A man who has any relish for fine writing, either discovers new beauties, or receives stronger impressions from the masterly strokes of a great author every time he peruses him: besides that he naturally wears himself into the same manner of speaking and thinking.

Believing this, Addison must trust the reader to make his own application of general conceptions. And if he is complacent, his assumptions are a valuable challenge to the modern complacency that assumes literary experience to be a technique that can be easily taught. As the pages of our professional journals all too bleakly attest, our criticism is a machine that can run on any fuel. Turn it upon the *Divine Comedy* or *King Lear* and it generates splendid structures of imagery and meaning. Turn it upon the most insignificant poem that ever fell still-born from the press and it will still generate magnificent structures. Addison urges the humanist view that reading must precede analysis and that the habit of analyzing can often get in the way of intelligent reading. What is Ned Softly, who interprets metaphors and explains the "gliding" of a line free of consonants (*Tatler* 163), but a New Critic striving to be born?

I maintain, then, that Addison was immensely influential in developing a criticism that could deal directly with individual works of literature and make them more fully available to potential readers. He does not classify works by species like Aristotle or Frye, or rank them in order of merit like Arnold or the Scrutiny school, or deconstruct their inner contradictions; he helps the reader to understand and appreciate them, and so inaugurates a long line of later critics, however divergent their theoretical principles—Johnson and Hazlitt and Bradley and so on to the present day. If Johnson was right to call Dryden the father of English criticism, then Addison is at least its uncle, and like other uncles he enjoys a privileged status: one can be fond of him without the more turbulent emotions of competitive love and ritual defiance that a father calls forth. If later critics have surpassed him—and they certainly have—it is in large measure because they learned what he had to teach, which lay not so much in particular judgments or aesthetic theory as in a wise and humane conception of the function of criticism itself.

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