

Fernando Pessoa

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Blank verse, the one so called, is an extremely dull medium to write in. Only the subtlest rhythmical faculty can ward off flatness, and it cannot ward off flatness for a long time. Perfect poems can be written in blank verse, that is to say, poems which can be read with interest and attention, and will fulfil and satisfy; but they must be short — “Tithonus”, or “Ulysses” or “Oenone” and the like. When not short, or not sufficiently short, they can hold themselves up only by strong interest, and it is very difficult, except in drama, to carry strong interest along the desert of blank verses. Blank verse is the ideal medium for an unreadable epic poem. All the metrical science of Milton, and it was very great, cannot make of “Paradise Lost” anything but a dull poem. It is dull, and we must not lie to our souls by denying it. One element such a poem may have — quick action, material or mental — and it might escape dullness thereby: action as in Arnold’s “Sohrab and Rustum”, which is marvellously readable (...)

In Milton there is very little action, properly such, very little quick action, and the thought is all theological, that is to say, peculiar to a certain kind of metaphysics which does not concern the universality of mankind.

The fact is that the epic poem is a Graeco-Roman survival, or very nearly so.

Only prose, which disengages the aesthetic sense and lets it rest, can carry the attention willingly over great spaces of print. “Pickwick Papers” is bigger, in point of words, than “Paradise Lost”; it is certainly inferior, as values go; but I have read “Pickwick Papers” more times than I can reckon, and I have read “Paradise Lost” only one time and a half, for I failed at the second reading. God overwhelmed me with bad metaphysics and I was literally God-damned.

s. d.

“Erostratus”. in Páginas de Estética e de Teoria Literárias. Fernando Pessoa. (Textos estabelecidos e prefaciados por Georg Rudolf Lind e Jacinto do Prado Coelho.) Lisboa: Ática, 1966: 214.