SUMMARY- & CONCLUSION.

The discussion in the preceding chapters on the contents of Eighteenth Century Milton critics, both major and minor, against a general study of the background of the age, lead us to certain assessment of the intrinsic achievements of these criticisms as well as of their contributions to the Milton criticisms of other ages.

The greatest achievement of the Eighteenth Century Milton criticism was undoubtedly the very establishment of the Miltonic tradition. The critics of the age made critical and scholarly observations on Milton as a man, as a thinker and as an artist and thus accorded him a full fledged critical recognition. But we, however, must not forget that the foundation of this tradition was laid by Dryden from within the Seventeenth Century - a fact which has been emphasised in the previous chapters also.

In their approach to Milton the man, the Eighteenth Century critics were less biased than their Seventeenth Century counterparts, for the obvious reason that they no longer had that active interest in Milton's political or theological ideologies. Of course, all the Royalist and Tory critics were not willing to forgive or forget Milton's activities so easily. But if we compare William Winstanley's
observation in 1687 that Milton's fame was gone out like a candle in a sunff, and his memory would always stink as "he most impiously and villainously bel'y'd that blessed Martyr King Charles the First"\(^1\), with bitter criticism of Milton by Dr. Johnson who labelled the poet as a man obliquely informed by spiteful republicanism and displeasing personal qualities\(^2\), it becomes obvious that, at least, in expression political and religious antipathy to Milton in the Eighteenth Century showed less fervour.

Thus being less prejudiced than the poet's contemporaries, the Eighteenth Century biographers discovered in Milton a more or less normal human being though none-theless great.

The Eighteenth Century critics attached maximum emphasis on Milton as a thinker. They frequently declared Milton's thoughts to be sublime, sacred and divine. The sacred and divine character of Milton's thoughts appealed to their essentially religious outlook on life, and the sublimity of his imagination simply enthralled their mind which was trained by Longinus. All significant Milton admirers of the age, of whom Addison was the pioneer,

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highly appreciated the power of Milton's thoughts to expand the imagination of his readers and they maintained that with this characteristic of sheer sublimity Milton out-ranked all his predecessors.

The Eighteenth Century assessment of Milton as an artist, was, however, not very confident. When the critics, of that age came to judge Milton as an artist they, of course, did not isolate his expression from his thought. For, following the classical and English tradition of the intent of epic poetry, they preferred fusion of thought and expression in their analysis of Milton's literary works, and took it for granted that Milton's expression always felicitously and unobtrusively elevated his subject matter. They hardly bothered to look into the methods utilised by Milton in his works to achieve their total effect. But, whenever they bothered about them at all, they felt uneasy. They suspiciously eyed the non-conformity of Milton's epic to the classical rules and even such an admirer of the poet as John Dennis came to conclude that Paradise Lost was the most lofty but most irregular Poem produced by the mind of Man. But no critic of the age felt it necessary to investigate elaborately
the poet's artistic purposes in his studied variations or the basic pattern of his verse in *Paradise Lost*. The subtle matter of style of Milton's minor poems also remained totally unattended till the time of Gray, Cowper and the Wartons.

The Eighteenth Century critics' continuation (particularly in the first half of the century) of the Seventeenth Century discussions on Milton's political and theological ideology, though with much less fervour, added extra dimensions to the critical tradition they established for Milton.

Among Milton's literary works, the Eighteenth Century critics (unlike their Seventeenth Century predecessors) were mostly busy with his poetical productions, and with insignificant exceptions of a few mid-eighteenth and late-eighteenth century side glances, his prose works received very scanty attention from them.

Again, of all his poems, the critics paid maximum attention to *Paradise Lost* and also occasionally discussed a few minor poems like *Allegro* II *Penseroso* and *Comus*. In their discussions on *Paradise Lost*, the critics of the age discovered all the main avenues of criticism of this epic that were later followed and broadened by
the Milton critics of the subsequent ages. They analysed
the story, characters, language and sentiments of the
poem. They detected an imbalance and want of human inter-
est in the plot construction of the epic, appreciated
the epic characters in general, discovered some obvious
irregularities in the language of the poem and highly
praised the moral sentiments of it. Even the autobiogra-
phial digressions, over-expansion of the similes,
confusion of matter and spirit in the description of
heavenly war or in the allegory of Sin and Death, the
impropriety in presentation of the characters of God and
his son, the relation of the last two books of the poem
with the rest, the controversy about the hero of Paradise
Lost and the inconsistencies in the conduct of the
narrative did not escape their critical observation.

Paradise Regained was regarded by the Eighteenth
Century critic as infinitely inferior to Paradise Lost
and there was heated controversy over the form of Samson-
Agonistes.

The three pieces among the minor poems namely
L'Allegro, L'Allegro and Comus were appreciated by
all in general and the first two poems gained extra
significance for their influence on the precursors of
Romanticism both in spirit and expression.

The Eighteenth Century provided Milton with maximum number of readers and with maximum applause. The poetic revolution wrought by Waller and consolidated by Dryden, and the cessation of political and religious hostilities created an atmosphere, from the very early of Eighteenth Century which nourished and encouraged an ever-widening circle of reading public. These readers came to like Milton in their antipathetic reaction to the poets of the Restoration age and as a contrast to the poets of the day, and enlightened by the teachings of Longinus's 'On the Sublime' they discovered in Milton all that was appreciable in a poet. They were so much enthralled by the sublimity of Milton's imagination that almost all their criticism of the poet turned into Milton idolatry. Their tributes to Milton's genius pervaded by warmth and insight, composed a chorus of praise.

This chorus continued uninterrupted till Johnson published his observations on the life and works of Milton. Johnson was critical both about Milton's political creeds and theological ideologies and exposed an unpleasant, austere character of the poet in his biography. He discovered in Milton the man a Turkish contempt for females, in his religious attitude an unpardonable indifference to
prayers and in his political ideology an hatred of greatness, a sullen desire for independence and inordinate pride.

Johnson expressed strong objections to Milton's literary style also, for the irregularity of his language and for the absence of unity between sound and sense in his verse. He in his Rambler articles labelled Milton as a dangerous model for practicing poets.

Obviously, Johnson's criticisms of Milton were sharply different from and opposed to the contents of his fellow critics who followed Addison. In fact Johnson's iconoclastic remarks undermined even his own reputation as a critic and provoked a storm of replies from contemporary Milton admirers who accepted the poet's liberalism as completely as they did his art. The climactic reaction against Johnson's critique was that of Cowper, who expressed his earnest desire to thrash the old Tory for his adverse comments on Milton till his pension should jingle in his pocket. But ironically, all these Milton worshippers were ultimately out-done by Johnson in the judgement of the Twentieth Century critics of the poet. To modern critics Johnson's critique has proved to be the most authoritative assessment of Milton, while the critical
opinions of most of Eighteenth Century Milton admirers seem to have turned into faddish judgement. Johnson's criticisms has indeed exerted a tremendous impact on the attitudes of the Milton critics of our own day.

The Nineteenth Century critics dichotomised thought and expression in their analysis of Milton's works and by and large, neglecting the former ingredient, they were all busy with Milton's expression. They highly appreciated Milton's artistry and admired the melody and artificiality of Milton's verse in particular. The Romantic critics also introduced the Satanic cult in Milton criticism. Thus, they differentiated themselves from the critical trend of their predecessors both with their shift of emphasis and innovations.

The twentieth Century critics have followed the Nineteenth Century critical method of dichotomisation all right. But they, like their Eighteenth Century counterparts have showed great concern for Milton's thought, though they have not continued the same appreciative attitude of their predecessors to it. Again, many starting points of discussions of Milton's artistry have been provided by the reservations and suspicions of the Eighteenth Century Milton admirers, and of course by Johnson's open and
vehement objections to Milton's style.

Indeed, in the discussion of Milton's artistry, Johnson is regarded as an authority by modern Miltonists. In modern Milton criticism Johnson's position is so significant that modern critics have either taken his opinions for granted totally or have only tried to examine how far their predecessor's critique is true and if true, how far it is damaging. Some of the most influential modern Milton critics, in their assessment of Milton's style, have only paraphrased and expanded Johnson's accounts and, thus, have thought that they have finished their duty.

A juxtaposition of Johnson's remarks and those of some of the most significant critics of our day will show the extent to which the Eighteenth Century critic has influenced the Twentieth Century critics of Milton.

Johnson discussing Milton's style in his life of Milton once wrote, "Though all his greater works there prevails an uniform peculiarity of 'Diction', a mode and cast of expression which bears little resemblance to that of any former writer, and which is so far removed from common use that an unlearned reader, when he first opens his book finds himself surprised by a new language."
The novelty has been, by those who can find nothing wrong in Milton, imputed to his laborious endeavours afterwords suitable to the grandur of his ideas. Our language, says Addison, sunk under him. But the truth is that, both in prose and verse, he had formed his style by a preverse and pedantic principle. He was desirous to use English words with a foreign idiom. Milton's style was not modified by his subject.

T. S. Eliot, in his first major statement about Milton in his 1938 contribution to *Essays and Studies of the English Association*, also discovered a "peculiar kind of deterioration" in Milton's language which, he thought, had affected all the subsequent practicing poets after Milton and in his *British Academy* lecture on Milton in 1947, he quoted three paragraphs from Johnson (two of which have been quoted here also) which he said, express "the essence of the permanent censure of Milton". T. S. Eliot in his final analysis, just like his Eighteenth Century counterpart, ultimately labelled the Seventeenth poet as a dangerous model.

F. R. Leavis, another most significant Milton critic of our day, analysed the readers' reaction to Milton's
verse and noted that there comes a positive feeling of protest when we go through Milton's verse, protest against the routine gesture, the heavy fall of the verse flinching from the foreseen thud that comes too inevitably and irresistibly. He said, reading Paradise Lost is a matter of resisting, of standing up against the verse movement. In the end our resistance is worn down and we surrender at last to the inescapable monotony of the ritual.

The critic said, "so complete and so mechanically habitual, is Milton's departure from the English order structure and accentuation that he often produces passages that have to be read through several times before one can see how they go, though the Miltonic mind has nothing to offer that could justify obscurity, no obscurity was intended: it is merely that Milton has forgotten the English language; cultivating so complete and systematic a callousness to the intrinsic nature of English Milton forefeits all possibility of subtle or delicate life in his verse".

Leavis, in his discussion of Eliot's lecture once more spoke about Milton's versification. This time,

3. F. R. Leavis, Revaluation 1936.
4. F. R. Leavis, Common Pursuit, 1952
Leavis declared that from the very manner of Milton's versification it can be deduced that "Milton had not the kind of energy of mind needed for sustained, analytic discursive thinking".\(^5\)

Now, when we go through these criticisms of Eliot and Leavis, we hear echoes of Johnson's critique. The same verdicts of the Eighteenth Century critic are repeated only with an extra air of exactness which was the contribution of the two hundred years extra education and familiarity with newer literary works.

The Twentieth Century's general antipathy to Milton the man also bore the impact of Johnson's biography of Milton. It was against the man presented by Johnson that Eliot said, "either from the moralist's point of view or from the theologian's point of view or from the psychologist's point of view or from that of political philosopher, or judging by the ordinary standards of likability in human beings Milton is unsatisfactory".

The prejudices against Milton the man initially induced by Johnson simultaneously infected the modern biography of the poet as well as what purports to be purely "Literary criticism" of his works in a very subtle but

\(^5\) Cf. Johnson's reflections in *The Rambler* Nos. 86, 88, 94.
But if we describe Twentieth Century attitude to Milton only as a mature version of Eighteenth Century Milton reaction, we are telling the half-truth. The Eighteenth Century critics indeed explored all the main avenues of Milton criticism for their Twentieth Century counterparts. But the critics of that age were totally blind to what we to-day call 'tension' of Milton's thought and expression. The Twentieth Century critics have explored it for themselves. None of the Eighteenth Century critics, again, including Addison, was alert to the subtle artistic strategies and complex integrations of Milton's poems. They examined the ideas, characters, language and sentiment in the most generalised terms and when they were satisfied, they characterised Milton with adjectives of superlative degree. But, the modern critics, even when they repeat their predecessors's opinions, are very calculative in their expression.

In the modern age all the important critics have become cautious about any arbitrary use of adjectives about Milton. They assess thoroughly, examine even the subtlest nuances of Milton's thought and expression and
never depend on their general feeling of admiration only, before making any comment on the Seventeenth Century poet. Thus, in a word, they prove themselves much more responsible critics than their Eighteenth Century counterparts. Evidences of the critical nature of modern Milton study are scattered in numerous literary reviews and journals of the day, all of which focus on the critical and calculative nature of modern Milton Study, in comparison with which the Eighteenth Century Milton Criticisms seems to be rather general discussions in generalised terms.

But, still the fact remains that no present or future critic or scholar ever will be able to deny his debt to his Eighteenth Century critical forefathers, Addison and Johnson, in particular, who would always provide them with the starting-points of their discussions about the great epic poet of England.