

**REMARKS ON THE
CHARACTER
AND WRITINGS
OF JOHN MILTON**

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Remarks on the Character and Writings of John Milton by William Ellery Channing

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WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING

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REMARKS
ON THE
CHARACTER AND WRITINGS
OF
JOHN MILTON;
OCCASIONED BY THE
PUBLICATION OF HIS LATELY DISCOVERED
TREATISE
ON
CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE.

William Ellery Channing.

FROM
THE CHRISTIAN EXAMINER
FOR 1826.

Third Edition.

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1828.

JOHN MILTON.

A Treatise on Christian Doctrine, compiled from the Holy Scriptures alone. By JOHN MILTON. Translated from the Original by CHARLES R. SUMNER, M. A. Librarian and Historiographer to His Majesty, and Prebendary of Canterbury. From the London Edition. Boston, 1825. 2 vols. 8vo.

THE discovery of a work of Milton, unknown to his own times, is an important event in literary history. The consideration, that we of this age are the first readers of this Treatise, naturally heightens our interest in it ; for we seem in this way to be brought nearer to the author, and to sustain the same relation which his cotemporaries bore to his writings. The work opens with a salutation, which, from any other man, might be chargeable with inflation ; but which

we feel to be the natural and appropriate expression of the spirit of Milton. Endowed with gifts of the soul, which have been imparted to few of our race, and conscious of having consecrated them through life to God and mankind, he rose without effort or affectation to the style of an Apostle.—‘**JOHN MILTON, TO ALL THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST, AND TO ALL WHO PROFESS THE CHRISTIAN FAITH THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, PEACE, AND THE RECOGNITION OF THE TRUTH, AND ETERNAL SALVATION IN GOD THE FATHER, AND IN OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.**’ Our ears are the first to hear this benediction, and it seems not so much to be borne to us from a distant age, as to come immediately from the sainted spirit, by which it was indited.

Without meaning to disparage the ‘*Treatise on Christian Doctrine*,’ we may say that it owes very much of the attention, which it has excited, to the fame of its author. We value it chiefly as showing us the mind of Milton on that subject, which, above all others, presses upon men of thought and

sensibility. We want to know in what conclusions such a man rested after a life of extensive and profound research, of magnanimous efforts for freedom and his country, and of communion with the most gifted minds of his own and former times. The book derives its chief interest from its author, and accordingly there seems to be a propriety in introducing our remarks upon it with some notice of the character of Milton. We are not sure that we could have abstained from this subject, even if we had not been able to offer so good an apology for attempting it. The intellectual and moral qualities of a great man are attractions not easily withstood, and we can hardly serve others or ourselves more, than by recalling to him the attention, which is scattered among inferior topics.

In speaking of the *intellectual* qualities of Milton, we may begin with observing, that the very splendor of his poetic fame has tended to obscure or conceal the extent of

his mind, and the variety of its energies and attainments. To many he seems only a poet, when in truth he was a profound scholar, a man of vast compass of thought, imbued thoroughly with all ancient and modern learning, and able to master, to mould, to impregnate with his own intellectual power, his great and various acquisitions. He had not learned the superficial doctrine of a later day, that poetry flourishes most in an uncultivated soil, and that imagination shapes its brightest visions from the mists of a superstitious age ; and he had no dread of accumulating knowledge, lest it should oppress and smother his genius. He was conscious of that within him, which could quicken all knowledge, and wield it with ease and might ; which could give freshness to old truths and harmony to discordant thoughts ; which could bind together, by living ties and mysterious affinities, the most remote discoveries, and rear fabrics of glory and beauty from the rude materials, which other minds had collected. Milton had that universality which

marks the highest order of intellect. Though accustomed almost from infancy to drink at the fountains of classical literature, he had nothing of the pedantry and fastidiousness, which disdain all other draughts. His healthy mind delighted in genius, on whatever soil, or in whatever age, it burst forth and poured out its fulness. He understood too well the rights, and dignity, and pride of creative imagination, to lay on it the laws of the Greek or Roman school. Parnassus was not to him the only holy ground of genius. He felt that poetry was as a universal presence. Great minds were everywhere his kindred. He felt the enchantment of Oriental fiction, surrendered himself to the strange creations of 'Araby the Blest,' and delighted still more in the romantic spirit of chivalry, and in the tales of wonder in which it was embodied. Accordingly his poetry reminds us of the ocean, which adds to its own boundlessness contributions from all regions under heaven. Nor was it only in the department of imagination, that his ac-

quisitions were vast. He travelled over the whole field of knowledge, as far as it had then been explored. His various philological attainments were used to put him in possession of the wisdom stored in all countries, where the intellect had been cultivated. The natural philosophy, metaphysics, ethics, history, theology, and political science of his own and former times, were familiar to him. Never was there a more unconfined mind, and we would cite Milton as a practical example of the benefits of that universal culture of intellect, which forms one distinction of our times, but which some dread as unfriendly to original thought. Let such remember, that mind is in its own nature diffusive. Its object is the universe, which is strictly one, or bound together by infinite connexions and correspondences ; and accordingly its natural progress is from one to another field of thought ; and wherever original power, creative genius exists, the mind, far from being distracted or oppressed by the variety of its acquisitions, will see more and