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# CRITICAL COMMENTARY

ON

# Milton's 'Comus' and Shorter Poems

ALAN RUDRUM

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LYCIDAS



THE SONNETS

# *Foreword*

THE present series of *Critical Commentaries* is offered in the belief that, faced with a work of exceptional density of texture or complication of structure, the reader may be helped in his appreciation by a 'conducted tour' or point-by-point critical exposition These commentaries are intended as a supplement to the material normally supplied in a scholarly edition and not, of course, as a substitute for it. A 'further-reading list' will normally be provided, together with selected questions for discussion.

# *Acknowledgements*

I AM grateful to the University of Adelaide for granting me a year's study-leave, during which most of this book was written; to my students in The Queen's University of Belfast, for their kindly reception of my lectures on Milton, and to Miss June Sturrock, for her patient help in preparing the typescript for publication.

# *Abbreviations*

OED *The Oxford English Dictionary*
SM *The Student's Milton*, ed. F. A. Patterson.
PL *Paradise Lost.*

# *A Note on Quotations*

I HAVE quoted throughout from Helen Darbishire's edition of 1952, since many of my readers will be using other editions, I have given line-references or stanza-numbers for all quotations. Anyone who is in difficulties with my quotations can quickly look them up in a modernised edition.

A. R.

# *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*

## INTRODUCTION

In mid-December of 1629, Milton received a letter from an old school-companion, Charles Diodati, who shared his scholarly interests and his enthusiasm for poetry. Diodati, who was staying with friends, said that he was being fed so well that he was unable to write good verses. Milton wrote a half-amused, half-serious reply, saying that eating and drinking were very good for certain kinds of poetry, though not for the highest. He who would write epic poetry must drink only water and eat only herbs. He ended his letter by telling Diodati about a poem he was writing just then:

> But if you shall desire to know what I am doing . . . I am hymning the king of heavenly lineage, prince of peace, and the happy days promised by the sacred books, the wailing of the Christ child and the stabling under a poor roof of Him who rules, together with his Father, the realms on high, and the starry heavens and the hosts that sang in the upper air and the gods suddenly shattered in their own shrines. This is my gift to the birthday of Christ, the first rays of its dawn brought the theme to me.

We learn from this that the 'Nativity Ode' was begun early on the Christmas morning of 1629. The point is made again in the third introductory stanza:

> Say Heav'nly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein
> Afford a present to the Infant God?
> Hast thou no vers, no hymn, or solemn strein,
> To welcom him to this his new abode,
> Now while the Heav'n by the Suns team untrod,
> Hath took no print of the approaching light,
> And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

We can take these references to the time of day quite literally if Milton's habits in later life are any guide: according to John Aubrey, he used to get up at four o'clock in the morning. However, Milton is not merely leaving tips for future biographers: the reference to the earliness of the hour in the third stanza has a poetic, imaginative point.

Although he was to write many more important poems, it seems likely that Milton himself thought of the 'Nativity Ode' as having a special place in his work He was twenty-one when he wrote it, an age when one takes decisions, makes resolutions, and assumes responsibilities. We can take the 'Nativity Ode' as marking Milton's coming-of-age as a poet It was not merely that by this time he had enough technical skill to feel very confident of his powers, he had decided what *kind* of poet he wanted to be. The letter to Diodati is one piece of evidence, among many others we have, that Milton was thinking seriously about his poetic vocation, that he was considering what kind of verse he should write and what kind of life he must lead in order to fulfil his ambitions. When he came to print his first book of poems, in 1645, he gave the 'Nativity Ode' pride of place at the beginning of the volume, putting it before poems he had actually written earlier. Milton's contemporary Henry Vaughan, who published a volume of religious verse five years later, placed first in his collection a poem called 'Regeneration', which seems to be about his own 'conversion', or as we should say nowadays the deepening of his religious experience. It has been argued that the 'Nativity Ode' marks a similar conversion-experience of Milton's, that the harmony of the spheres which plays so important a part in the poem's imagery represents the poet's own new-found sense of harmony in his religious dedication I do not think the 'Nativity Ode' offers a very firm foothold for such biographical exploration. I should agree however that its assured technique

and intellectual elaborateness mark the appearance of a mature poet.

## FORM

Although Milton did not use the word in his title, we usually call this poem an *ode*, partly perhaps following the poet's reference to 'humble ode' in the fourth introductory stanza, partly because it answers to the description of 'a rimed lyric, . . . dignified or exalted in subject, feeling, and style', which is how the OED defines the word 'ode'. The poem is certainly dignified and exalted, it bears the same sort of relation to the familiar Christmas carols as a great cathedral does to a humble parish church: both are designed for the worship and praise of God, but one is more elaborate, and demands much more from its maker, than the other. Because in explanation of the 'Nativity Ode' it is easier (and seems more necessary) to talk about its images and its 'meaning', it is easy to overlook the poem's *sound*, and to give the impression that it is a deep philosophical pamphlet disguised by rhyme and rhythm. This is not so. Difficult as it may be to explain, the sound of the poem is at once the easiest to appreciate and one of the most important things about it. In an ordinary hymn, the words and the rhythms are simple so that they can be understood at once, so simple that they would seem banal if we were to say them rather than sing them. Milton's language is much more complex, and so are his rhythms and his rhymes, than those of an ordinary hymn, we might say indeed that where an ordinary hymn-writer writes words to which music is to be added, Milton *writes his music into the words themselves*.

The four introductory stanzas have each seven lines, rhyming *ababbcc*. The first six lines have ten syllables each, the seventh has twelve, and is called an alexandrine. Milton retains the alexandrine in the *Hymn* proper, though otherwise

the stanza-form there is a more subtle and difficult one than in the introduction. The rhyme scheme is *aabccbdd*, if we express the number of syllables as well as the rhymes we have *a6*, *a6*, *b10*, *c6*, *c6*, *b10*, *d8*, *d12*. Each stanza then includes four rhyming elements and four different line-lengths; and, incidentally, this particular stanza-form seems to have been invented by Milton.

One thing he must have had in mind when writing it was to test and demonstrate his skill, to choose so complex a stanza-form and then to keep on without flagging through twenty-seven stanzas was a great feat for so young a poet. The publisher of the 1645 edition, Humphrey Moseley, claimed that Milton's poems were 'as true a Birth, as the Muses have brought forth since our famous Spenser wrote', and Milton himself said that Spenser was his 'originall' or poetic ancestor. One can detect the influence of Spenser in the final alexandrine (Spenser's stanza-form in *The Faerie Queene* was famous for its last-line alexandrine), and also in the general mellifluousness of the verse and the felicitous chiming of the rhymes. Behind Spenser there lies the influence of Italian poets, whom Spenser had imitated in order to soften the natural harshness of English. The result in the case of the 'Nativity Ode' is a poem which is delightful to read aloud, but which is even more delightful to the 'inward ear' because the average human voice cannot do justice to the subtlety of its sounds. The thirteenth stanza provides a simple but effective illustration of the kind of effects Milton is able to produce in this stanza-form:

> Ring out ye Crystall sphears,
> Once bless our human ears,
> (If ye have power to touch our senses so)
> And let your silver chime
> Move in melodious time;
> And let the Base of Heav'ns deep Organ blow,

And with your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort to th'Angelike symphony.

Notice here, in the first five lines, how effectively the rhymes and rhythms suggest a musical harmony, the line which is 'out of place' is the third, which has a different number of syllables and does not rhyme with any of the others, and this seems right, because it is a parenthesis and it expresses a doubt. Notice too how effectively the ten-syllabled sixth line is used to express the grandeur of organ-music, and how the amplitude of the final alexandrine suggests the 'full consort' of the sphere-music with the symphony of the angels, and how the rhyme 'harmony-symphony' suggests the harmony between the music of the spheres and that of the angels. (See Tillyard's edition pp 24–5 for a useful general account of the stanza )

Obviously this is not a stanza-form which will suit rapid narration or intellectual discussion The poet may want to express a particular attitude towards the Incarnation, but given this stanza-form he will employ musical or pictorial effects, in a series of set-pieces, illustration rather than argument must be his method (See Blake's illustrations, referred to in the book-list at the end of this volume.) The leisurely amplification of his theme, as in the enumeration of the pagan gods, may be put down as one of Milton's debts to Spenser but seems in fact to have suited his own temperament. much of *Paradise Lost* consists of amplification of Biblical material.

## THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

I have said that the stanza-form is apparently original to Milton but that one can detect the influence of Spenser, and through him of Italian poetry. In its other features too, the poem is at once highly original and deeply indebted to an intellectual tradition. Already at the age of twenty-one Milton

was a very learned man, and the 'Nativity Ode' is a learned poem Fittingly so, I think, its subject is, from a Christian's viewpoint, the central event in human history, and therefore most fittingly dealt with by one who had a profound knowledge of that history While we should approach Milton's poetry with due humility, there is no reason to be afraid of his learning. I disagree completely with those scholars who claim that we cannot understand or appreciate Milton unless we are nearly as learned as he was. The only essential qualification is that we should be capable of enjoying good verse, and happily that is a qualification most of us have naturally.

The first stanza of the introduction introduces the theme, in a deceptively simple way: 'This is the Month, and this the happy morn.' These first seven lines announce the whole subject of the poem, just as in *Paradise Lost* Milton announces the whole subject before he writes the first verb. Man is forfeited to death, through the sin of Adam, and Christ, as foretold by the Hebrew Prophets, the 'holy sages,' is to enter into humanity and redeem mankind into a 'perpetual peace'. No one I think is confused by the apparent conflict of tenses this *is* the month, wherein Christ *did bring* our redemption. We all accept this as normal, because of the universal custom of keeping anniversaries: this *is* my birthday, the day when I *was born*. But of course when we begin to think about anniversaries, and the apparent confusion of time to which they give rise, all kinds of questions are raised in our minds about the relationship between past, present and future. We keep our own birthdays because they have a personal significance, of interest to at least one person so long as we are alive. Christians celebrate Christ's birthday because it has an *eternal* significance: in a double sense. It represents the descent of eternity into time, and it guarantees eternity to the souls of believers. One of the functions of the Church's year, with its Advent, Christmas, Easter, Ascension Day, and

Whitsuntide, is to give an unceasing representation of the earthly life of Christ, so as to make Christians as it were contemporaries of Christ. Without elaborating on it here, I would like to recommend the reader to examine Milton's use of time throughout the 'Nativity Ode', to demonstrate the ever-present significance of the Incarnation. There are no past tenses in the third stanza, we notice, the time is the present, now, very early on Christmas morning In the fourth stanza we realise that it is *the* Christmas morning:

> See how from far upon the Eastern rode
> The Star-led Wisards haste with odours sweet

The imperative verb 'See' cancels out the Christian centuries and transports us, Milton's readers, back to the first Christmas morning, the last night of the pagan era.

The 'Nativity Ode' is built upon a number of ideas and traditions which are not familiar nowadays.

## THE 'GUILT' OF NATURE

The first of these ideas concerns the 'guilt' of Nature (stanza II). Modern science has accustomed us to think of Nature as being morally quite neutral. Yet a humane person might still deplore many things that occur in Nature without reference to man, such as animals preying on one another for food, or the fact that animals, like ourselves, are subject to painful diseases Looking at Nature with reference to man, we regret earthquakes, flood, drought, dangerous storms. The traditional theological explanation of the various occurrences in Nature that are felt to be evil is that Nature participated in the Fall, when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit Milton expresses this in *Paradise Lost*. Nature 'groans' when Adam decides to follow Eve in eating the fruit (IX, 1001); and Milton

devotes a long section of bk. x (651–714) to the effect of the Fall upon Nature.

Linked with the idea of Nature's involvement in the Fall is the hope of Nature's participation in the Redemption; a number of people in Milton's time thought that on the Day of Judgement a redeemed Nature would pass into God's presence along with redeemed humanity: a Nature freed from all cruelties and deformities. More important for our understanding of the 'Nativity Ode' is the associated problem of the relation between fallen Nature and fallen human beings. Throughout the Old Testament we hear much of idolatry — indeed the Jews thought of themselves as God's chosen instrument in eradicating idol-worship. These false gods, or idols, usually represented some aspect of the power of Nature; very often some aspect of 'fallen' Nature, so that idolatrous religions frequently involved cruelty. Moloch, for example, demanded the sacrifice of children, who were burned to death. The second part of the 'Nativity Ode' concerns the fleeing of the pagan gods, or idols, from Christ. Within the scheme of the poem great importance is attached to the action of Christ in overthrowing idol-worship — that is, in redeeming man from his subjection to Nature. This fits in with Milton's Puritan religious beliefs; he considered that there was a real danger of idolatry gaining power in his own time, and considered Roman Catholicism, with its images of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints, to be infected with idolatry. His identification of the *images* of the Roman worship with the ancient pagan idols is understandable enough. We need only to recall the worship paid to representations of the pagan deities in Old Testament times, and how the Jews, in guarding themselves from idolatry, enacted the law 'Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image . . . Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them.'

THE PEACE OF AUGUSTUS

In stanzas III–V is expressed the idea that there was peace on earth when Christ was born:

> No War, or Battails sound
> Was heard the World around

The idea of peace is centrally important to the poem, and is subtly carried forward in the account of the *harmony* of the angels and of the celestial spheres in stanzas IX–XIV. I shall deal with the harmony of the spheres shortly, here it is sufficient to note that stanzas IX–XIV do not mark a break in the poem's meaning, but rather a development of the idea of peace which is treated in its political aspect in stanzas III–V.

Christ was born in the reign of the first Augustus, at a time when Palestine was part of the Roman Empire. It is true that the reign of Augustus marked a period of comparative peace throughout the world known to the Romans The idea that this period of peace was especially ordained by God for the reception of Christ into the world became common after the fifth century A D. It was thought of as fulfilling the sayings of the Hebrew prophets concerning the Messiah. Milton would have known sufficient history to be aware of the peace of Augustus, and he could have found its application to the Nativity of Christ in many well-known authors, including St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, and Dante. In the latter he could have found a juxtaposition of the idea of peace on earth with that of the harmony of the heavens similar to that he makes in the *Ode*. In the sixth book of the *Paradiso* Dante writes that the heavens ordained the reign of Caesar for Christ's birth so that the heavenly harmony would be imitated on earth, in the *Convivio* (bk. IV, ch. 5) he introduces the same idea at greater length, and incidentally makes a more explicit reference to the harmony of the planets at Christ's birth.

In the course of developing the idea of the Augustan peace Milton connects with it the fable of the halcyon, in the line 'While Birds of Calm sit brooding on the charmed wave' (v). According to ancient fable, the halcyon 'bred about the time of the winter solstice in a nest floating on the sea, and that it charmed the wind and waves so that the sea was specially calm during the period' (OED). If we read stanza v carefully, we see that Milton adapts this fable to make it fit his own theme.

The halcyon, which bred 'about the time of the winter solstice' fits in with the 'astronomical' theme of the poem, announced in the first line 'It was the Winter wilde'. The winter solstice is one of the two times in the year when the Sun reaches its farthest point from the Equator and appears to stand still there before its return: as Milton writes in the seventh stanza, 'The Sun himself withheld his wonted speed.' Our measurement of time is very much bound up with astronomy, and Milton is concerned in the poem with the idea of Christ's birth as marking a turning-point in time (For example, a new era is strongly implied in his treatment of the flight of the pagan gods at Christ's coming)

## PAGANISM

Everyone has a good idea of why we number our years from the date of Christ's birth. Also important for Milton's imagery in the poem is the reason why we celebrate Christmas at the time of year we do. We do not know exactly when Christ was born, and the date chosen to celebrate his birth was dictated by astronomy rather than by history. The Roman God Mithra, the 'Unconquered Sun', had a festival at the winter solstice (25 December in the Roman calendar) because the sun grows in power from that date. For two centuries after the birth of Christ Mithraism was a popular religion in the Roman Empire,

and it was not until Mithraism had declined in importance that 25 December was fixed as the date of Christmas. Certain of the early Christians disagreed with this date, and accused those in favour of it of sun-worship. The defence was that Christ was 'the true Sun', 'our new Sun'. Christ was already connected with the sun in a sense by the three-hour darkness at the crucifixion recorded in Matthew xxvii, 45, but there is little New Testament warrant for the symbolic equation of Christ with the sun which was later so popular. Possibly this symbolism became used to attract pagans, most of whom worshipped the sun under some name or other

Some of these false sun-gods feature in the second part of Milton's poem, for example, Apollo, Baalim, Moloch, Ashtaroth. I have noticed that the idea of the harmony of the spheres is a development in the poem from the earlier-expressed idea of political peace. A similar continuity of ideas is seen when we recognise the role of the pagan deities as sun-gods: Christ, the 'greater sun' of stanza vii, expels the various gods who represent worship of the natural sun, that is, worship of unredeemed Nature. The contrast between Nature and the supernatural Christ, who came to redeem Nature, is important in the poem, and Milton makes unobtrusive but significant use of the fact that Christmas falls at the time devoted by pagans to worship of the sun. Incidentally, we may see the 'Nativity Ode' as a meditation by the Puritan Milton on a Christian festival about which his fellow-Puritans had deep reservations. They argued that it was a heathen festival (quite apart from Mithraism, 25 December was a religious festival in Britain long before the introduction of Christianity); and in 1644 they passed an Act of Parliament forbidding any merriment or religious services on that day.

Of course Milton wrote his poem in 1629, but it is significant that he did not omit it from the volume he published in 1645,

but rather gave it pride of place. The message of the poem might be: 'True, Christmas *has* a relation to pagan rites. Christ superseded paganism, and at Christmas we celebrate the fact. That is very different from reverting to paganism.' Or, 'What we Puritans hate most is idolatry, at Christmas what we celebrate is the *overthrow* of idolatry.'

Paganism is essentially the worship of the natural order; the Incarnation, the introduction of a 'greater sun', represents the victory of a super-natural order. This is the major theme of the poem. One of its expressions occurs in the sixth stanza, when Milton represents the stars as standing still in the heavens, refusing to disappear in spite of the morning light, until Christ himself bade them go. This beautifully expresses the moment of the intersection of time (represented by the moving stars) with eternity; it prefigures the eventual enfolding of time within eternity. In representing the stars as standing 'fixt in stedfast gaze', Milton is following a traditional idea, which is well expressed in the following quotation, taken from a book which he might easily have read:

> The stars that strayed in the midst of heaven, desired to stay, to see that great, and new marvel Those stars, that were passed, desired to turn back again: and those, that were behind, desired to hasten their journey, to be present at this happy and fortunate hour. All things created, yea Nature itself stood astonished and amazed...[1]

### CELESTIAL HARMONY

The idea of celestial harmony is most obviously important in stanza XIII, where it follows naturally after the stanzas dealing with the angelic choir. The 'music of the spheres' was an idea that greatly attracted Milton; it has a place in 'At a Solemn Musick' and *Comus* as well as in the 'Nativity Ode'.

[1] Alfonso de Villegas, *Flos Sanctorum, the Lives of Saints*, trans W. and E. Kinsman, p 1025. I have quoted from the 3rd edition, 1630. The first edition of this translation was published in 1624.

In the Ptolemaic system of astronomy, the motion of the heavenly bodies was accounted for by supposing a series of concentric hollow spheres into which they were fixed. The earth was the fixed centre of this system; then, moving outwards from the earth, there are the spheres of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the fixed stars, and the Primum Mobile from which the whole system derived its movements: nine spheres in all. The idea that the revolution of the spheres produced a celestial music goes back to Pythagoras: it was thought that the harmony of the spheres depended partly upon the distances between them, and partly upon their relative velocities of rotation. Milton seems to have thought that, although mankind in general had been unable to hear the sphere-music since the Fall, it might be possible for a man of exceptional purity to regain the ability to hear it, and perhaps write inspired religious poetry in consequence. Even the phrase 'the Base of Heav'ns deep organ' (line 130) is based on a tradition, in which the planetary system was called the organ of God — though there was disagreement whether the 'base' was the furthest sphere, or that of the moon. The idea of a harmony between the singing of the angels and the music of the spheres (stanza XIII) may have been suggested by Dante, in the thirtieth book of the *Purgatorio*; but Milton could easily have derived it from some other source, or indeed invented it himself, following the traditional notion that there are nine orders or hierarchies of angels, thus corresponding with the nine celestial spheres.

### STARS AND ANGELS

There seems to be a certain fusion of angels with stars in the third introductory stanza: 'And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright.' Here the primary reference is to

the stars, but their personification suggests the idea of guardian angels. There is some warrant for equating the stars with the angels in both the Old and the New Testament, and the Greeks imagined the stars as animate beings. Milton again suggests the fusion in the twelfth stanza when he describes the music as being such as

> Before was never made
> But when of old the sons of morning sung,
> While the Creator great
> His constellations set,
> And the well-balanc't world on hinges hung,
> And cast the dark foundations deep,
> And bid the weltring waves their oozy channel keep.

There is an obvious reference here to Job xxxviii, 7; a passage referring to the creation of the earth 'when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy'. It is generally thought that 'morning stars' and 'sons of God' are identical, that is, both phrases refer to the stars *and* the angels. This reference thus forms a link between the thirteenth, in which the sphere-music is most obviously meant, and the preceding stanzas, in which the song of the angels is foremost. As well as the passage from Job, Milton may have had in mind, when writing the twelfth stanza, a passage from Dante's *Convivio* (bk iv, ch 5) which I have already referred to in connection with the peace of Augustus. After writing of the Augustan peace which reigned at Christ's birth, Dante adds that since the heavens began to revolve (i e. since the Creation) they had never been in a better disposition than when Christ descended to earth, who made them and governs them; and, he adds, mathematicians are able to prove this by their arts. In the terms of the poem, this would mean that the music of the spheres had never been so beautiful in all history since the Fall; it was like a new creation.

### THE FLIGHT OF THE PAGAN DEITIES

The section of the poem which deals with the flight of the pagan deities ultimately depends upon a number of anecdotes of ancient history, which had become fused in the Christian tradition and referred to the time of Christ's birth, though in the original telling there was often no mention of Christ and the original anecdotes referred to times well before and well after the birth of Christ.

A. S. Cook comments on stanza XIX by referring to a tradition that 'at the birth of Christ, a priest of Apollo, who was sacrificing near Delphi, suddenly stopped, and declared that the son of a god was at that moment born whose power would equal that of Apollo'. The priest went on, however, to say that Apollo would ultimately triumph over the new-born divinity. These words were scarcely out of his mouth when the rock was split by a clap of thunder, and the priest himself slain by lightning. The stanza is beautifully illustrated by William Blake, who shows the spirit of Apollo leaping from the statue and diving into the sea with a movement that is the perfect visual rendering of a 'hollow shriek'.

There are similar traditions about the oracles being struck dumb (XIX); about the statue of Apollo sweating or weeping (XXI); about the infant Christ's expulsion of the false gods of Egypt (XXIII–XXV). The historians Josephus and Tacitus both relate how one day the doors of the inner shrine of the temple were thrown open, and 'a voice of more than mortal tone was heard to cry that the gods were departing. At the same instant there was a mighty stir, as of departure'.

There is warrant in the Bible, of course, for stressing the action of Christ in overcoming demons and false gods. Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, all of whom were interpreted as referring to the coming of Christ, prophesied the downfall of the gods

of Egypt. Later Christian writers felt justified in referring the stories I have mentioned to the action of Christ, because of Gospel warrant that he did indeed cast out devils (Matthew viii, 29). Critics sometimes write as if Milton treats the false gods as 'quaint', good material for poetry but not to be taken seriously. This seems to spring from a feeling that 'serious' treatment of such a subject would necessarily involve 'harsh' poetry. Milton, on the contrary, thought that the musical, pictorial nature of his verse enabled his readers better to grasp the moral: remember the obviousness of his indebtedness here to Spenser, and Milton's reference to 'our sage and serious Spencer, whom I dare think a better moral teacher than Aquinas'. The tone is quite right: evil things are dealt with in the poem, and seriously dealt with: but overall the 'Ode' is a hymn of joy and celebration.

# *L'Allegro and Il Penseroso*

## INTRODUCTION

'L'ALLEGRO' and 'Il Penseroso', while they are among the more approachable of Milton's poems, are not altogether 'easy'. They have neither the obvious rhythmical and pictorial power of the 'Nativity Ode', nor the urgent emotional undercurrent of 'Lycidas'; moreover they contain a large number of difficult allusions and of words used in senses now obsolete. If it is appropriate to use them, as is often done, to introduce new readers to Milton's work, it is because of their manageable length and more importantly because of their simplicity of theme and easy, pleasing metre. One or two modern critics, indeed, regard them as being complex and difficult, but their interpretations seem to me strained.

We do not know exactly when Milton wrote these two poems; and one of the most widely-popularised theories about them is connected with an attempt to give them a date. Dr Tillyard argued that they were written during or very soon after Milton's period at Cambridge University He noticed certain resemblances between the poems and one of those prolusions (or academic debating-speeches) that Milton wrote while a student. This was the *First Prolusion*, 'Whether Day is more excellent than Night', in which Milton argued for the superiority of day (SM 1097). Tillyard thought that 'L'Allegro' represented a poetic counterpart of the first prolusion, and 'Il Penseroso' a poetic version of what Milton would have written had he been required to argue for the superiority of night. One advantage claimed for this theory was that it answered a criticism made by Dr Johnson, that the characters

of the cheerful man and the pensive man are not sufficiently distinguished. 'Nevertheless,' Tillyard writes, 'the two poems *are* sharply contrasted, and the contrast is that between day and night "L'Allegro" written in praise of day corresponds to the *First Prolusion*, "Il Penseroso" written in praise of night corresponds to what Milton would have said had he been called to take the other side.'

I disagree. In spite of similarities of phrase and even of rhetorical method, I do not consider that the relationship between these poems and the *First Prolusion* is really very close. One sign of weakness in Tillyard's argument is that it leads him to invent a previously-unrecognised 'main theme' for the poems. I believe this innovation is unjustified: 'L'Allegro' is *not* written in praise of day; and 'Il Penseroso' is not written in praise of night. Day may predominate in one, and night in the other, but there are day-scenes and night-scenes in *both*, and no indication that the cheerful man prefers the pleasures of day nor the pensive man those of night. Traditional opinion is that what these poems are 'about' is Mirth and Melancholy, and tradition is surely right. It would be interesting to know why Milton gave 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' Italian titles. The most plausible suggestion is probably that he thought of the poems as being like contrasting movements in a musical composition. Musical directions (*Allegro* being a common one) are usually given in Italian. The titles mean 'the cheerful man' and 'the thoughtful man'.

This apparently raises a problem. Why should 'thoughtfulness' and 'melancholy' go together? What relation has the 'loathed Melancholy' who is banished at the beginning of the one poem, with the 'divinest Melancholy' of the other? The reader will find some interesting clues under 'melancholy' and its close relatives in the OED. Hamlet (and other melancholy figures of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama) and Burton's

enormous volume *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), bear witness that 'melancholy' had been an important literary and social phenomenon for some time before Milton's poems were written. Its importance is hard to recapture from the present 'feel' of the word. The relation between 'loathed Melancholy' and 'divinest Melancholy' is simply explained: two different (though related) kinds of melancholy, one good, the other bad. These correspond to two traditional theories, one deriving from Galen, the other from Aristotle. The Galenist theory (most influential in Elizabethan days among medical men) held that melancholy was bad; the Aristotelian (more influential among literary men) held that it could be good, because it was the temperament natural to those of scholarly bent, and, providing that it did not become excessive and morbid, was conducive both to thinking and to sober enjoyments. The latter view of melancholy goes back to a question put by Aristotle, who wanted to know why all men eminent in philosophy, politics, poetry and the arts were of melancholy temperament. In the Renaissance the great scholar Ficino popularised Aristotle's view by arguing that it was the melancholy temperament natural to men of letters which endowed them with superior faculties. So naturally enough, during the Elizabethan period and afterwards, 'melancholy' became a pose among those who wanted to be thought superior. Ben Jonson made fun of the affectation in *Every Man in his Humour* (1598). This should serve to explain why the pensive man invokes 'divinest Melancholy'.

## RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER WORK OF THE PERIOD

A question that does not arise so obviously in the case of 'Lycidas' or the 'Nativity Ode' is: where did Milton get the idea for these twin poems? There is, I think, both a 'general'

background in the literature of the period, and a few probable 'particular' sources. In the general background there is the element of debate in the educational system of the time: 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' have a relationship to Milton's academic prolusions, if not the very close one suggested by Dr Tillyard. In the verse of the time (quite probably as a result of the element of debate in the education received by most poets) there was a fashion for 'companion-poems' and 'for-and-against poems'. Marlowe, for example, wrote a poem beginning:

> Come live with me, and be my love,
> And we will all the pleasures prove
> That hills and valleys, dales and fields,
> Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

To this Sir Walter Raleigh replied with a poem which begins:

> If all the world and love were young,
> And truth in every shepherd's tongue,
> These pretty pleasures might me move
> To live with thee and be thy love.

Two such poems have a very probable bearing on Milton's pair. In the 1620s and 1630s a popular song, appearing in several manuscript collections, was Fletcher's 'Hence, all you vain Delights', from the play *The Nice Valour*. In one such collection it is followed by a reply called 'Against Melancholy', probably by William Strode. I reproduce these poems in an Appendix on p. 28, so that the reader may judge for himself, but it does seem evident that Fletcher's 'Hence, all you vain Delights' suggested the opening section of 'Il Penseroso', and that Strode's catalogue of the qualities his returning joys were to bring suggested the personified moods which Mirth and Melancholy are exhorted to bring with them in Milton's poems.

Another poem which has been suggested as a 'source', and

which certainly has affinities with 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', is that prefixed by Burton to his *Anatomy of Melancholy*. The poem was first printed in the third edition, 1628. A few lines will serve to illustrate the similarity — and the difference:

> When to my self I act and smile,
> With pleasing thoughts the time beguile,
> By a brook side or wood so green,
> Unheard, unsought for, or unseen,
> A thousand pleasures do me bless,
> And crown my soul with happiness.
> All my joys besides are folly,
> None so sweet as Melancholy.

## THE METRE

The eight-syllabled line was popular in the early seventeenth century. Ben Jonson, Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan and many others used it to good effect. In Milton's hands, the octosyllabic measure is capable of great variety and flexibility; one aspect of his artistic triumph here is the way in which he is able to represent the gay, tripping rhythms of the cheerful man and the slower, almost stately rhythms of the meditative man *in the same metre*:

> While the Plowman neer at hand,
> Whistles ore the Furrow'd Land,
> And the Milkmaid singeth blithe,
> And the Mower whets his sithe,
> And every Shepherd tells his tale
> Under the Hawthorn in the dale.
>
> ('L'Allegro' 63 ff.)

> Or let my Lamp at midnight hour,
> Be seen in som high lonely Towr,
> Where I may oft out-watch the *Bear*,
> With thrice great *Hermes*, or unsphear

> The spirit of *Plato* to unfold
> What Worlds, or what vast Regions hold
> The immortal mind that hath forsook
> Her mansion in this fleshly nook
> ('Il Penseroso' 85 ff.)

Of course it was essential to Milton's purpose of combining similarity with difference that the metre should be the same for both poems There is one critical point to be made while on the subject of the octosyllabic measure. Critics who write about these poems, particularly with reference to their 'pastoralism', frequently mention Spenser. It is true that Milton greatly admired Spenser's poetry and even called him his 'original' (or as we might say, his poetic father); it is also true that the publisher of the 1645 volume in which 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' appeared claimed that Milton's poems 'imitated' those of Spenser Milton owed a great deal to Spenser, but perhaps not very much in verse-technique. the development of his poetic practice is *away* from Spenser's influence. Milton's octosyllabics have a most un-Spenserian ring. There is a kind of *wit* in these poems, and in the perfection of phrasing something of the jeweller's art, such wit and such lapidary perfection are not to be found among Spenser's undeniable poetic virtues. Moreover, they are qualities which have a relation to Milton's choice of metre. The octosyllabic is an easy metre, and in careless or unskilful hands soon degenerates into doggerel. There is as much art in taking a facile measure, and writing a poem in which almost every line is a miniature masterpiece, as there is in coping with an elaborate stanza-form. The *wit* in the poems is related to the need to pay close attention to small details. In choosing octosyllables, Milton chose to write in such a way that his divergence from Spenser goes beyond the mere 'sound' of the poems.

STRUCTURE

The structure is very similar in both poems. They open in the same way the cheerful man banishes 'loathed Melancholy', the pensive man banishes 'vain deluding joys', both Melancholy and the 'deluding joys' are personified and given an appropriate parentage. Next follows an invocation of the 'patroness' of each poem, 'heart-easing Mirth' and 'divinest Melancholy' respectively, again personified and again assigned an appropriate mythological parentage. These are asked to 'bring with them' corresponding moods, actions, and qualities: in the case of Mirth, these are, for example, 'Jest and youthful Jollity', 'Laughter holding both his sides', and 'The Mountain Nymph, sweet Liberty'. In the case of Melancholy, they are 'calm Peace, and Quiet', 'Spare Fast', 'retired Leasure', 'The Cherub Contemplation', and 'the mute Silence'. The parallelism between the two invocations is underlined by the 'similarity-in-contrast' of 'So bucksom, blith, and debonair', and 'Sober, stedfast and demure'. In each poem the *persona* or 'mask' that the poet assumes, i.e that of the cheerful man and the pensive man respectively, now joins his favourite goddess and her companions, and the round of pleasure begins. Again the parallelism is underlined: in each case the entry into the 'action' of the poem (the beginning of the 'plot' so to say) is marked by bird-song, in 'L'Allegro' the song of the lark, and in 'Il Penseroso' that of the nightingale. Now begins the round of pleasures; the cheerful man begins his at dawn, the pensive man at evening; it should be noticed again that the cheerful man's pleasures go on into the evening, after the country-folk have gone to bed, and the pensive man's go on into the next morning: the major contrast in the poems is certainly not that between day and night. It is fairly obvious that from the entry of the protagonist, the ideas and images in each poem follow

a time-sequence These do not, however, record the pleasures of any *one* day, as we might think on a superficial reading Nor, when we notice that the action cannot be confined to a single day, because of the different seasons mentioned, should we accuse Milton of carelessness The 'ideal' pleasures of these poems are related to human life, but not in the sort of way suggested by the word 'realism'.

The motif of the 'ideal day' had by the time Milton came to write become part of the stock-in-trade of English pastoral poetry And as Milton nearly always does, he takes the tradition but stamps his own individuality upon it. he never borrows inertly or without originality Neither 'L'Allegro' nor 'Il Penseroso' *end* on a note that can be assigned to a time-scheme; both, so to say, *escape* from time, the cheerful man into music, the pensive man beyond music to a timeless wisdom.

Close comparison makes it very clear that 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' were intended as companion-pieces In detail as well as in overall structure they correspond closely to one another In comparing them, of course, it is as important to notice the differences as the similarities in the many parallels one can find. These parallels include such lines as 'So bucksom, blith, and debonair', and 'Sober, stedfast, and demure', where the three adjectives and the metrical similarity force us to compare the lines so that we may contrast their meanings, the reference to the lark in 'L'Allegro' with the (more literary) lines on the nightingale in 'Il Pensoroso'; the references in both poems to towers, to Orpheus, to drama, to the power of music.

The very close relationship between the poems in itself raises problems, but makes one point very clear. that we cannot fully appreciate either poem in isolation. Though each poem taken by itself is fairly simple, a certain complexity of response is required of the reader if he is to do justice to Milton's twin

conception, as Handel was presumably aware in weaving passages from both poems into a single composition in his *L'Allegro and Il Penseroso* (1740).

## AN APPRECIATION

I wrote earlier of almost every line of these poems being a miniature masterpiece, echoing G. Wilson Knight, who writes that 'Each image in the sequence is of gem-like worth' This is not exaggeration, and it explains why two poems, of such slight apparent importance in the context of Milton's whole poetic work, should be so universally enjoyed.

If Milton's exquisite artistic carefulness is as I have suggested related to his choice of the octosyllabic medium it is no less imposed by the demands of his subject. The burden of the one poem is mirth, of the other melancholy, but the theme of both is delight, or happiness. This theme is one of the most difficult (and one of the most noble) an artist can undertake. As delight itself must be unmixed to be perfect, the poet can only succeed in expressing delight if his art is perfect. Imperfect expression is no more compatible with Milton's theme than a headache is with full appreciation of music or painting, or aching feet with unmixed enjoyment of a country walk.

Part of Milton's achievement may be perceived through a realisation of the unity of these poems. It would have been so easy for them to present themselves as rather loose strings of images. We owe the fact that they do not to Milton's structural carefulness, his rhythmical skill, the mastery which enables him to juxtapose and contrast similar images without sacrificing subtlety and freshness to a mechanically-conceived design In noticing particular effects one is embarrassed by richness of choice; one is bound to select arbitrarily. Let me quote the lines on the lark from 'L'Allegro':

To hear the Lark begin his flight,
And singing startle the dull night,
From his watch-towre in the skies,
Till the dappled dawn doth rise.

(41 ff)

One reason for my choice, let me confess, is that I enjoyed a country upbringing and have happy recollections of the companionship of the skylark during evening work in the fields. Another reason is that the *generality* of Milton's images has been deplored by an eminent critic; and one finds that students tend to combine T. S. Eliot's strictures with the comment of Johnson that Milton 'saw nature through the spectacles of books,' to emerge with the conclusion that Milton's natural descriptions are fuzzy and inaccurate. This is not so. Take the lines just quoted. They embody an exact knowledge of the habits of the skylark. The cheerful man *hears* the lark beginning its flight, because the skylark rarely sings while on the ground; he hears it *begin* its flight, because the skylark begins to sing as it begins to fly, while only a few feet from the ground. The song *startles the dull night* because the skylark's song may be heard very early in the morning, long before dawn. If, as is usually thought, 'his watch-towre in the skies' is the watch-tower of the skylark, this would constitute another piece of accurate observation (of the height to which the lark ascends, and the fact that it appears to hover almost stationary for quite long periods). But on balance it seems likely, in spite of the comma after 'night', that Milton meant us to understand it as the watch-tower of night. This gives a military metaphor which is carried on in the lines 'While the Cock with lively din, / Scatters the rear of darknes thin'. Whether Milton was one of those keen-eared observers who can tell from the lark's song whether it is ascending, or descending, or stationary, I do not know, but these lines certainly reveal a knowledge of the

skylark's ways beyond that of the average man of today. It is conceivable, though unlikely, that Milton may have derived his knowledge of the skylark's ways from reading rather than from personal observation, but the image is certainly not 'general'.

This is only the beginning of criticism, of course; indeed it would scarcely be worth stressing Milton's descriptive accuracy but for the fact that 'generality' and 'bookishness' are fairly frequent accusations A naturalist's accuracy does not necessarily make for good poetry, nor (where the charges can be made to stick) do 'generality' and 'bookishness' necessarily imply bad poetry. The corresponding lines of 'Il Penseroso' *are* bookish, and this obviously fits the more learned mood of that poem:

> And the mute Silence hist along,
> 'Less *Philomel* will daign a Song,
> In her sweetest, saddest plight,
> Smoothing the rugged brow of night.
>
> (55 ff.)

In 'Il Penseroso' a passage which testifies to Milton's closeness of observation is that on the dawn-shower 'Ending on the russling Leaves, / With minute drops from off the Eaves'. The phrase 'minute drops' (formed on the analogy of 'minute-gun', 'minute-bell' and so on, the OED lists many such phrases) beautifully catches the *regularity* with which the raindrops fall. Milton is the first poet in English to record this phenomenon. The observation is one of which Coleridge or Hopkins might have been proud.

One might still argue that if we can point to one or two images which suggest original observation and expression, for the most part Milton's language in these poems is derivative, from Shakespeare principally, but also from many other English poets. That is so; indeed a good exercise would be to

see how many words and phrases we can refer to Shakespeare. But the argument about Milton's poetic excellence cannot legitimately be fought on this ground. As J. B. Leishman pointed out, when Milton wrote Latin verse he followed the best classical examples; and when he came to compose English verse he wrote on the same principle, except that he had to decide for himself what were the best English examples. The question of Milton's originality, whichever work or phase of his career we are considering, always involves the tension between tradition and individuality in his work. This tension is an important element in Milton as an artist and as a religious and political thinker. In his art, he was aware of this tension, and makes conscious use of it: his ability to do so is one of the most interesting things about him, and one of the surest proofs of his maturity and intelligence as an artist.

## APPENDIX

(Both these songs were printed in the miscellanies *Wits Interpreter* (1655) and *Wit Restor'd* (1658))

Hence, all you vaine Delights,
As short as are the nights,
  Wherein you spend your folly.
Ther's nought in this life sweet,
If man were wise to see't,
  But onely Melancholy,
  O sweetest melancholy.
Welcome, folded Armes and fixed eyes,
A sigh that piercing mortifies,
A look that's fastned to the ground,
A tongue chain'd up without a sound.

Fountaine heads, and pathlesse Groves,
Places which pale passion loves:
Moon-light walkes, when all the fowles

Are warmly hous'd, save Bats and Owles;
A mid-night Bell, a parting groane,
These are the sounds we feed upon;
Then stretch our bones in a still gloomy valley,
Nothing's so dainte sweet as lovely melancholy.

Fletcher (from *The Nice Valour*)

Returne my joyes and hither bring
A heart not taught to speak but sing,
A jolly spleen, an inward feast,
A causelesse laugh without a jest,
A face which gladnesse doth anoint,
An arme for joy flung out of joynt,
A sprightfull gate that leaves no print,
And makes a feather of a flint,
A heart that's lighter than the aire,
An eye still daunceing in its spheare;
Strong mirth which nothing can controule,
A body nimbler than a Soule,
Free wandring thoughts not ty'de to muse,
Which thinke on all things, nothing choose,
Which ere wee see them come are gone:
These life itself doth live upon.
Then take no care, but only to be jolly
To be more wretched then we must is folly

William Strode

(Quoted from J. B. Leishman, *Essays and Studies* (1951), p 4)

# *Comus*

## INTRODUCTION

*Comus* is not Milton's own title The work we know by that name was originally called *A Mask presented at Ludlow-Castle.* The original title suggests two simple matters we need to consider before embarking upon critical subtleties. We ought, that is, to know something about the first performance of *Comus*, and to know something about the masque (as it is now more usually spelled) as a *genre.*

The history of the masque may be traced back to early Tudor times and indeed into the late middle ages. In those days a popular public entertainment, particularly in London, was the *pageant.* Mythological, historical and allegorical figures, in appropriate costumes, enacted simple stories to make a holiday for the public. In the late sixteenth century the masque, partly through Italian influence, developed into the form that we now recognise. It retained from the pageant both the didactic element and the importance of spectacle. The masque lies, we may say, between the old pageant and the regular drama: the more spectacular masque approaches the pageant, the more literary comes near to drama *Comus*, while not abandoning spectacle, has sufficient plot and distinctness of characterisation for us to feel that it has real dramatic qualities.

The great age of the masque was during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; it is often asserted that *Comus* marks the end of the tradition. The conflict between external spectacle and inner drama inherent in the form became personified in the uneasy collaboration between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones. Jonson was a great writer, Jones a great

designer of stage sets and 'machinery'. Between them they produced some excellent masques, but they were unable to harmonise their functions for long, and quarrelled.

The nominal subject of many masques was the same as that of *Comus*, the conflict between Vice and Virtue, but this serious theme was often made trivial by an emphasis on visual splendour, ingenious stage-mechanics, and various other subsidiary elements. Without seeing an actual stage-production, it is difficult to understand the attraction of many masques, for to the reader the dramatic development and moral argument is often blurred. *Comus* restores the balance. While it gives opportunities for splendid and beautiful visual effects, it does not create such opportunities at the expense of its verse or plot. It would be a mistake to criticise it as a full-blown drama, to read into it the psychological subtleties and dramatic tensions of one of Shakespeare's mature plays — it has a simplicity appropriate to its *genre* and its particular occasion. But it has, in comparison with most masques, a definite shape and a realised literary intention, which preserve it as a piece independent of stage-presentation.

One wonders whether in writing *Comus* Milton paid any attention to the fact that it was to be presented on Michaelmas Day. Part of the Collect for that day reads 'Mercifully grant, that as thy holy Angels always do thee service in heaven, so by thy appointment they may succour and defend us on earth'. The attendant Spirit certainly plays the part of a guardian angel. The Epistle for the day (from Revelation xii) tells how Satan was defeated in heaven by Michael and his angels, and cast out into the earth. The Gospel for the day (Matthew xviii) is the great passage in honour of children, ending 'in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my father'. The passage from the Epistle was later to suggest Milton's conception of the Battle in Heaven in *Paradise Lost*; if it is

influential in *Comus* it works at a very submerged level, but it may serve to remind us that the conflict in the masque is not so much between individual persons as between opposing spiritual states. In this respect *Comus* aligns itself with the great works of Milton's maturity, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, in all of which a conflict between good and evil, involving the temptation of the good, is a central theme.

Masques were usually written to celebrate particular occasions, and intended to be acted by amateurs, often people of high rank or birth. *Comus* was first performed on the Michaelmas night of 1634, to celebrate the inauguration of the Earl of Bridgewater as the Lord President of Wales. While it breathes an outdoor atmosphere, and is now occasionally played in the open air, *Comus* was almost certainly first acted in the great hall of Ludlow Castle. Michaelmas Day falls on 29 September and to have planned an outdoor performance at that time of year would have been rash.

The occasion of the masque's production laid down certain obvious conditions for its author. It should contain compliments to the Earl in his capacity as Lord President; it should show an interest in the lore and mythology of that part of Britain he was to administer; there should be good parts for his children When we are hunting for critical subtleties in *Comus*, it may be well to recall the ages of the children who took the parts of the virtuous human beings. Lady Alice Egerton was fifteen; John, Viscount Brackley (Elder Brother) was eleven, and Thomas Egerton (Second Brother) was nine. The attendant Spirit was played by Henry Lawes, who was music-tutor to the Earl's children and supervised the masque's production. (It is believed that Lawes and Milton had already collaborated in the much shorter masque of *Arcades*, which was presented for the dowager Countess of Derby, the grandmother of the children who acted in *Comus*.) The part of

Sabrina was probably taken either by a friend of the Lady Alice, or by her elder sister.

It was part of the masque convention that 'machines' should be used to provide spectacle: heavenly characters would descend by means of pulleys and wires, subterranean ones would rise into view Manipulation of stage lighting was important, so was the 'transformation scene' in which a character would suddenly appear in a different costume. In writing *Comus* Milton respected all these conventions of the masque, though he allows the producer to use his own discretion as to their employment: 'The attendant Spirit descends or enters', says the first stage direction, and 'I can fly, or I can run,' says the same Spirit in the Epilogue, just before his final departure. If we visualise the spatial relationships implicit in *Comus*, we may be reminded of certain stanzas in the 'Nativity Ode,' such as the fifteenth, which in turn remind us of those early religious paintings in which earth, sky and heaven with its inhabitants are portrayed on the one square canvas. The conventional mechanics of the masque, that is, were well adapted to the presentation of the old, naive, 'Christian' world-picture in which heaven is literally 'up there'.

## ON READING 'COMUS'

A perfect judge will read each work of wit
With the same spirit that its author writ

Pope's aphorism is perhaps the most hackneyed piece of advice that could be given to any ambitious student of poetry. Yet it is one of the most difficult to follow in practice. The judgements of all of us are affected by the age in which we live, the kind of *milieu* in which we have grown up, the art-forms popular in our own time. Indeed, one of the reasons for study-

ing older literature and art is to enlarge our vision, to enable us to make an imaginative leap outside our limitations, to gain a sympathetic insight into modes of thought and feeling and awareness which are remote from those of our own time. *Comus* was written not much more than three centuries ago, yet it is sufficiently remote to demand all the imaginative sympathy we are capable of if we are not to condemn it on largely irrelevant grounds. this is so whether we consider it as a work of art or as a vehicle for ethical teaching. One typical modern reaction is to complain of Milton's preoccupation with chastity. It is easy to feel that if Milton wanted to write about morals he ought to have developed a more complete view of human nature· chastity considered in isolation can come to seem a rather cold and incomplete virtue. One wants to say that the Lady is a prig. It is not that we are no longer interested in the moral status of chastity, merely that our awareness of the problem tends to be different. We are concerned primarily with family and social relationships, whereas Milton thought more in terms of the relationship between the chaste soul and God. It is the difference between a sociological and a theological approach to the problem. Quite commonly discussions of *Comus* turn into debates on the real value of chastity as an element in the moral life. There is nothing wrong with this if we remember that what we are then talking about is moral problems as they appear to us, not about *Comus*.

Another common difficulty arises from the expectation that the action of a play should be *realistic*. This leads us into fruitless discussion as to whether two affectionate brothers, in the given circumstances, would have gone off together leaving their sister alone in the forest: would not one of them have gone, leaving the other to keep her company? This kind of realism was simply not part of the masque convention. The objection is appropriate when we meet with unlikely actions in those

modern plays which marry fiction with documentary, as many television serials do. It simply would not have occurred to the audience of *Comus*. The attitude of children hearing a fairy-tale is, in this respect, the appropriate way to respond to *Comus*. This does not mean that it is not meant to be taken seriously. Good fairy-tales often have a literary subtlety and a moral bearing which the reading adult is more likely to appreciate fully than the child listening.

Another objection based upon the presumption of realism is to the length of the speeches made by the two brothers (though of course the acted version of *Comus* was not quite so long as the version we normally read today). Dr Johnson's objection, in his 'Life of Milton', was, fundamentally, that the length of the speeches renders them undramatic: 'they have not the spriteliness of a dialogue animated by reciprocal contention, but seem rather declamations deliberately composed, and formally repeated, on a moral question'. This is just, if we take the view that *Comus* is a stage-play, in which every line of every speech should be immediately related to a dramatic contingency But it is surely obvious that the action of *Comus* is very different in this respect from the action of, say, *Othello*. The situation in *Comus* is more in the nature of a pretext or starting-point; through much of its length, it may be regarded as a debate in a rather artificial dramatic setting (though we should not over-emphasise 'debate' at the expense of other important elements).

It is useful to view this question against the background of the kind of education common at that time, which was much more *oral* than modern education. Students were expected to be very competent in handling the spoken word. Educated in this way, the audience of *Comus* would be in a better position than most of us to appreciate the beauty of its speeches, and their suitability for public recitation, quite apart from their dramatic

tension. Another aspect of the emphasis on the spoken word in education was the attention paid to debate and disputation. Students were expected to argue at length, and according to set rhetorical forms, on either side of a question. Several of the intellectual debating speeches which Milton wrote during his education at Cambridge have survived. Milton's first audience, many of them similarly educated, would have appreciated his skill in putting both sides of a question, as in the debate between the two brothers, or that between Comus and the Lady. If we are looking for stage analogies, we have to go to the *contrasti* of sixteenth-century Italy, in which pairs of allegorical figures carried on disputations, rather than to any other dramatic form in English.

## THE ATTENDANT SPIRIT (1–92)

The universe of *Comus* is three-tiered, or perhaps more accurately we may picture it as the old universe of Ptolemaic astronomy, interpreted according to Christian Platonism. The ethical significance of this interpretation may be gauged from a consideration of the attendant Spirit's opening speech. I described the Ptolemaic astronomy briefly when discussing the music of the spheres in the 'Nativity Ode'; here the important point is the idea that 'immortal shapes / Of bright aereal Spirits live insphear'd' in the various celestial regions. The conception that the stars are living beings is at least as old as Plato, who called the stars and the planets 'heavenly gods' and asserted their immortality Around line 10 Milton employs the idea that after death the virtuous soul would inhabit an appropriate star 'Amongst the enthron'd gods on Sainted seats'. It is also assumed in the passage that conditions on earth are different from those elsewhere in the cosmos. It was part of this world-picture that the realm beyond the moon was perfect

and unchanging, while the sublunary realm was imperfect, subject to change and decay. Man is a being whose nature reflects the *whole* cosmos, if, in his free-will, he elects to honour that part of himself which is derived from the immortal realm, he will after death inherit immortality. All these ideas were commonplaces of the time, and Milton was not assuming a particularly high level of education in his audience in using them.

We may imagine this opening scene as it was first acted. 'The attendant Spirit descends or enters' says the stage-direction. In view of his opening speech, one hopes that the stage-machinery allowed him to descend. Imagine him descending, quite slowly. At the beginning of his speech he is 'Before the starry threshold of *Joves* Court', by the end of the first paragraph he has completed the descent and his feet rest on the earth, 'this Sin-worn mould'. His movement represents the characteristic descent of the guardian angel, and it no doubt took place against a painted background illustrating the planetary spheres reaching up to heaven, '*Joves* Court'. Probably this opening scene, as well as being easier to stage, would actually be more effective indoors, against a painted universe, than if enacted under an evening sky, which would be too vast for the symbolism to operate effectively and without distraction: the sphere-astronomy represents an interpretation, a construction of the human intellect, rather than anything we actually see when we look into a night-sky. But, paradoxically, the artistic intention, and the effect of these opening lines, is to carry the imagination upwards and outwards, to give the action a *cosmic* setting. Physically, it may take place, here in the west, in 'this tract that fronts the falling Sun'; ethically it has universal significance. We are now used to the idea in physics that everything in the universe affects everything else; Milton here symbolises the illimitable consequences of *moral* decisions.

Lines 1–17 thus sketch in the cosmic setting of the action, a setting which is inseparably linked with an ethical interpretation of human life Lines 18–45 narrow the scene down to the particular place in which the action is to be presented. The earth comes indistinctly into view, with 'all the Sea-girt Iles' that 'inlay / The unadorned boosom of the Deep'. Then the British Isles come into focus, then Wales. Probably for Milton's contemporary audience, these opening lines would conjure up a mental image more clearly than they do for us. Moreover, there was in those days a general fascination with maps and models of the universe which would help to ensure clear visualisation. Certainly Milton's imagination worked in this way, projecting into the heights and depths of the universe — an ability which lends a 'science-fiction' fascination to many passages in *Paradise Lost* It was probably a matter of deliberate training, see the *Third Prolusion*, particularly the penultimate paragraph, in which he advises his fellow-students, 'Nay, let not your mind suffer itself to be hemmed in and bounded by the same limits as the earth, but let it wander also outside the boundaries of the world.' (SM 1106.)

In lines 18–45 Milton compliments the Earl of Bridgewater ('A noble Peer of micle trust, and power') and his children, and links his fiction with the occasion it was designed to celebrate. The children are coming 'to attend their Fathers state', but their way lies through a 'drear Wood' in which dangers lurk. (J. B. Broadbent (p. 12) remarks that 'The local, personal vibration, the sense of here-and-now this very day, make up for the deficiency of imagined drama.') The attendant Spirit proceeds to explain the peril (46 ff.). We notice that, in contrast to most stage-plays, the *exposition* is here formally presented by the attendant Spirit acting as prologue, rather than in the unfolding action itself The attendant Spirit thus combines two functions, he both sets the scene for the action, and plays a

part within it He is both outside and inside the action, which is appropriate to a supernatural being who yet descends to protect virtuous humanity.

In lines 46 ff. the attendant Spirit announces in effect that the action is to occur within a framework adapted from the well-known Circe episode from bk x of the *Odyssey*. Many writers before Milton had treated in terms of moral allegory this story of the enchantress who turned men into swine. Comus (the name comes from a Greek noun meaning 'revelry') had also figured, in masques and plays known to Milton, as the type of irresponsible sensuality It seems to have been Milton's own idea, however, to present him as the son of Bacchus (god of wine) and of Circe. Like his mother, Comus deforms those human beings who, through intemperance, place themselves in his power (66 ff.), but whereas Circe transformed her victims into swine, those of Comus retain their human shape, only 'their human count'nance, / Th'express resemblance of the gods', is disfigured It has been suggested that Milton made this alteration because of the production difficulties involved in having human beings on stage representing four-footed animals There may be something in this, but it also seems likely that the moral point is made more effectively if the degraded humans retain a general human semblance, with only their countenances defaced. We may recall Adam's exclamation at Eve's fall. 'How art thou . . . Defac't' (PL IX, 900); and the poet's beautiful lament for his blindness, with its reference to the 'human face divine' (PL III, 44)

The audience thus learns from the first speech of the attendant Spirit that the masque is to dramatise a moral threat to the Earl's children, an attempt to deface their 'human face divine'. At the end of the speech occurs one of the 'transformations' of the masque convention. The attendant Spirit puts off his 'skie robes spun out of *Iris* Wooff' (we can imagine him dressed in a

rainbow-coloured garment), and appears as Henry Lawes, 'a Swain, / That to the service of this house belongs', in fact, the children's music-tutor

> Who with his soft Pipe, and smooth-dittied Song,
> Well knows to still the wilde winds when they roar.

The poet thus pays a complex compliment, to Lawes as a musician, to his position in the Egerton household, and to the moral value of a musical education. Milton himself loved music, and no doubt thought of it as equalling poetry in its power to 'allay the perturbations of the mind, and set the affections in right tune'. It is likely too that he thought of music as being a valuable earthly imitation of the music of the spheres, a symbol of the harmony of the virtuous soul. Certainly music is given a serious rôle throughout *Comus* as a moral symbol; for example the Lady's beautiful song (230 ff.) wrings from Comus the description 'Divine inchanting ravishment' and the admission 'Sure somthing holy lodges in that brest'. With the Lady's 'sober certainty of waking bliss' is contrasted the 'barbarous dissonance' of Comus and his revellers.

## COMUS (93–169)

With the entry of Comus, the decasyllabic lines of the attendant Spirit give way to a quite different rhythm, meant to suggest the rapidity of a dance. Down to line 145 (when Comus interrupts the dancing of his crew and begins to speak soberly because he hears the 'chast footing' of the Lady), there are only a few lines of ten syllables, most have eight and some have only seven. It is possible that the seven-syllabled lines are intended to convey a tipsy, lurching rhythm, though before we put this too confidently we should decide what they convey when used by Sabrina in breaking the spell. It is not only the

measure that changes: the attendant Spirit had spoken unrhymed verse, Comus speaks in rhyme; and when, after hearing the Lady, he changes to decasyllabic verse, he also ceases to rhyme

Comus's tone is light-hearted at first, though an instructed audience would notice something akin to blasphemy in the lines:

> We that are of purer fire
> Imitate the Starry Quire,
> Who in their nightly watchfull Sphears,
> Lead in swift round the Months and Years.
>
> (111–14)

The order of the 'cosmic dance' (the regular motion of the stars and planets) was a symbol of divine order, through the contemplation and imitation of which men could indeed become virtuous and fit to take a place in the 'purer fire' of the insphered immortals after death. What Comus and his rabble have in common with the celestial bodies is merely the dance, and as we have seen they, unlike the planets, dance to an *irregular* measure. The continuation of this speech ('The Sounds, and Seas with all their finny drove / Now to the Moon in wavering Morrice move') also draws on the Elizabethan commonplace of the cosmic dance. (The reader will find a very enjoyable treatment of this commonplace in Sir John Davies's poem *Orchestra, or a Poeme of Dauncing* (1596).) Thus we see that Comus is drawing on the same world-picture as did the attendant Spirit in the beginning of his prologue; but Comus perverts it, in a sense employs it blasphemously. The point is significant. It is the same sort of appeal to 'Nature' that he is to employ later in his attempt to pervert the goodness of the Lady.

Comus's speech darkens, becomes sinister, when he moves into the invocation of Cotytto, the Thracian goddess who was worshipped in obscene midnight orgies:

Hail Goddesse of Nocturnal sport
Dark vaild *Cotytto*, t'whom the secret flame
Of mid-night Torches burns, mysterious Dame
That ne'ere art call'd, but when the Dragon woom
Of Stygian darknes spets her thickest gloom,
And makes one blot of all the ayr.

(128–33)

In invoking the cosmic dance as justification for his activities, Comus would subvert the order of nature; in the worship of Cotytto, he would practise a horrible parody of religion.

It is sometimes objected that Comus often sounds more convincing than, for the sake of Milton's ethical design, he should be allowed to. This kind of criticism recurs again in connection with *Paradise Lost* — Adam in his fall sounds like an *admirable* man. Here I think it comes about partly because Comus's *meanings* are less immediately apparent to us than the quite pleasant sound of his verse (most modern readers, for example, need some explanation of the 'purer fire — Starry Quire' passage), but in any case Milton surely intends to create this tension between the sound of the verse and the meanings it conveys. The point is that this tension only exists for the individual reader or member of the audience if he *experiences it as tension* within himself. Now this experience is akin to the way in which temptation is felt within the good man (the bad man succumbs immediately so there is no tension). Thus the tension between 'sound' and 'meaning' vibrates in sympathy with the main theme of *Comus*, which concerns the temptation of the good. The Lady might not experience this tension, might be so complete in virtue as to be invulnerable. No doubt in writing *Comus* Milton would have had a delicate awareness both of Lady Alice's tender years and her position within the family his masque was intended to honour. But we do experience it. There is an inner, subjective drama latent in

much of the *writing* of *Comus*, even if we do not find it in the *plot*

A famous passage from *Areopagitica* is relevant to my point here:

> As therefore the state of man now is, what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear, without the knowledge of evil? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian. That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure.
>
> (SM 738)

At the approach of the Lady, Comus naturally dismisses his rabble and decides to 'appear som harmles Villager' This provides opportunity for a little more of the stage-business so dear to the masque, as Comus says 'Thus I hurl / My dazling Spells into the spungy ayr' (153) we may imagine him throwing out handfuls of 'Magick dust' (165). However, we need not accept the suggestion of one critic that Comus removed his outer robe under cover of the dust-cloud. The words 'I fairly step aside' (168) indicate that he would go off stage before the actual entry of the Lady.

## THE LADY (170–243)

The 'argument' of *Comus*, which as I have said is often implicit in the tension between sound and meaning within the verse, is also carried on in the contrasts between speeches, even where there is no overt discussion or argument between them. For example the lady uses religious imagery to describe the onset of Night:

when the gray-hooded Eev'n
Like a sad Votarist in Palmers weed
Rose from the hindmost wheels of *Phœbus* wain.
(188 ff.)

This is a kind of 'echo-by-contrast' of what the onset of Night had meant to Comus (122 ff.). The description of course refers to a time *before* the Lady had heard the sounds of 'ill manag'd Merriment', there is no real inconsistency in the fact that she feels apprehension *after* she has heard them. Fear, welling up from the subconscious, is superbly expressed, in a passage of Shakespearean intensity and power:

What might this be? A thousand fantasies
Begin to throng into my memory
Of calling shapes, and beckning shadows dire,
And airy tongues, that syllable mens names
On Sands, and Shoars, and desert Wildernesses.
(205 ff)

This passage establishes an extra dimension in the characterisation of the Lady, establishes a capacity for feeling and instinctive response so that we apprehend her more fully than as a mere cold blueprint for virtue. The continuation of this passage, in which Conscience, Faith, Hope and Chastity are invoked, may be open to the objection that the supernatural props to rationality are set up rather too easily, but without the previous expression of instinctive fear it would have sounded intolerably priggish. In any case, it is central to Milton's life and art to set these shining abstractions up against the inflooding of superstition, which he always saw as a threat to conscious rational living.

As light returns to the Lady's mind, so it reappears in the external world. The poetically somewhat inept repetition (221–4) was probably intended to give time for the 'sable

cloud' of the stage scenery to 'Turn forth her silver lining on the night'. The Lady's desire to guide her brothers back to her side provides a natural pretext for one of the songs without which no masque was complete, a lovely, delicate lyric of which Dr Johnson very churlishly said that it 'must owe much to the voice, if it ever can delight'.

The song in turn provides the natural occasion for Comus to step forth Just as Satan was to be struck 'stupidly good, of enmitie disarmd' at the sight of Eve's beauty (PL IX, 465), so Comus here, against his own nature, is moved to pay tribute to the religious quality of the Lady's song, contrasting it with the singing of his 'Mother *Circe* with the Sirens three':

> Yet they in pleasing slumber lull'd the sense,
> And in sweet madnes rob'd it of it self,
> But such a sacred, and home-felt delight,
> Such sober certainty of waking bliss
> I never heard till now.
>
> (260 ff)

There follows an exchange between the Lady and Comus, in which they speak alternate lines. This dramatic form is called *stichomythia*. It was commonly used in Greek drama, and as the OED says, was 'employed in sharp disputation, and characterised by antithesis and rhetorical repetition or taking up of the opponent's words'. This description helps us to see why Milton's use of *stichomythia* here is not very successful. It does not have the quality of quick-firing wit for which the form is obviously designed, and indeed the occasion for it is here lacking. Comus has not yet revealed his true colours to the Lady, so the context does not require 'sharp disputation'. The upshot of the conversation is that the Lady accepts Comus's offer to guide her to her brothers, or, failing that, 'to a low / But loyal cottage'. This decision is made in lines 291–330, a passage which for much of its length does little to ad-

vance the action, but is nevertheless poetically beautiful, a reminder that the masque, like opera, is a mixed art-form which cannot be properly judged on any one of its attributes taken singly. Of course Comus's first speech in this conversation has the quite important function of paying a graceful compliment to the Lady's brothers.

### THE TWO BROTHERS (331–490)

The exit of Comus with the Lady clears the stage for the other two children of the Earl for whom Milton had to provide good rôles. They enact their real-life parts of the Lady's brothers, thus bringing a *kind* of realism into the production. In their conversation, before the arrival of the attendant Spirit in the habit of Thyrsis (490), the element of debate in *Comus* is exhibited most clearly.

The Elder Brother represents mature wisdom. The arguments of the Younger Brother are not in direct opposition to those of the elder. Their relationship would not admit this. It is rather that the Younger Brother is a novice in wisdom: his arguments represent an earth-bound, incomplete, insufficiently 'philosophical' view, and, naturally, the persuasions of his elder brother eventually prevail over him.

In a sense the brothers' debate represents the place of rationality within the moral life. Against the chaos welling up from within, called forth by the 'nodding horror' of the woods, the Lady had set Conscience, Faith, Hope and Chastity. Against the '*Chaos*, that reigns here / In double night of darknes, and of shades' (334), the brothers implicitly set the power of reason. But, in the Elder Brother's case (and the Second Brother comes to accept it), it is a rationality that incorporates a supra-rational view. At least, this is how most moderns would take

it. For the Platonic philosophy within which the Elder Brother elaborates his mystique of chastity (418–75), reason, being the light of divine wisdom in the soul, is not discontinuous with mystical intuition. It is understandable that Milton should terminate the discussion with this long speech.

Looking at the brothers' speeches in a little more detail, we notice that while it is the Elder Brother who speaks of the Chaos of darkness (with which we have already *seen* the Lady coping), it is the younger who makes the first concrete reference (358) to the 'Savage heat' which might even now threaten the person of their sister. It is noteworthy that the Elder Brother's reply to the apprehensions expressed by the younger is, apart from the parenthetical 'Not being in danger, as I trust she is not' (370), almost entirely irrelevant as an answer. In fact, if we examine their speeches carefully throughout this exchange, we may well conclude that it represents a rather low level of debate. It is easy to become impatient at this point. I think that Milton deliberately intended that the arguments of the two brothers should not be allowed to meet, intended them in fact to represent two different levels of discourse, the natural and the spiritual. In reading the masque, it is particularly important to be alert to significances, echoes, reinforcements of meaning that a well-produced performance would bring out. Here for example the passage (*c.* 370) about 'the single want of light and noise' being unable to 'stir the constant mood of her calm thoughts', while it may seem irrelevant as an answer to the Second Brother, is a very relevant reinforcement of something the audience has aready *seen*, that is the manner in which the Lady has drawn principles from virtue's book to quell the natural fears born of darkness and eerie silence.

The Younger Brother's reply (385–407) is again concerned with a severely practical issue. What if our sister is in genuine, physical danger from some ravisher? The question provides

the occasion for the Elder Brother's great speech on chastity (418–75).

The 'argument' of that speech is as follows: Chastity (which he does not here define, but which he seems to make synonymous with 'Virgin purity' and 'true virginity') is as effective as actual physical armour. It emits 'sacred rayes' which frighten off the potential rapist or seducer; no evil spirit or goblin has power over it. Again it is worth noticing that in the context of *Comus*, this is meant literally. We have already seen this power in operation, when Comus was moved to pay tribute to the Lady's song. Though we have seen the Lady *deceived* by Comus, we have not seen her *overcome*; what we have seen so far corroborates rather than contradicts this assertion of the Elder Brother. Having asserted the protective power of chastity, and backed the assertion with such references to mythology as were currently popular, the Elder Brother goes on to widen his statement, and in doing so to broaden the theme of the masque, so that chastity comes to represent the whole gamut of virtues. The masque is seen to concern itself with the operation of good and evil within human life. A seventeenth-century audience would, more naturally than we do, extend the lust-*versus*-chastity theme to this much wider one (though even for us it should not be difficult to sense that there is much more at stake than one girl's physical intactness). Rosemond Tuve notes 'a general tendency in criticism to proceed as if Milton's entire presentation could be summed up as a chastity-test', and comments that 'We can hardly find a time when the Circe image has not figured intemperance very broadly conceived — "Lust" itself being almost figuratively used as a way of typifying every excess of passion.' (*Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton*, 135.) The word 'chastity' was used figuratively in the seventeenth century in the sense of 'fidelity to God'. An additional help to a seventeenth-century audience

would have been the sight of Comus's monsters 'headed like sundry sorts of wilde Beasts', and presumably representing the deformation consequent upon a whole *range* of sins. This is not to deny that the masque is concerned in a very special sense with chastity or virginity; it is, as Milton himself demonstrably was when he wrote it. In this respect, we may justifiably read it as his manifesto. I think the key to the matter is contained in the Lady's final reply to Comus (784–9). Her chastity finds its full justification and meaning only if seen in relation to, as continuous with, as the secular equivalent of, the virginity offered to God by one who takes religious vows. The nun, the Church, the chaste soul — all are brides of Christ. In the Lady actual physical chastity is the emblem and token of fidelity to God. Unless we see this we shall, to quote Rosemond Tuve, 'move in a world of meanings in which one brother is deluded, the other stupid, their sister self-righteous, and Milton's concern obsessive'. (*Images and Themes*, p. 138.)

The Elder Brother continues his argument by relating how the chaste soul may have mystical apprehensions of the divine (453–63). Again, we have heard and seen that this is so: 'And thou unblemish't form of Chastity, / I see ye visibly,' the Lady has said (215), and the reality of this has been brought home to the audience. From whence does the cloud derive its 'silver lining' (222) if not from the moon, Diana, 'Queen and huntress, chaste and fair'? The chaste soul's 'converse with heavenly habitants' enables it to work upon the body by a kind of divine chemistry, and change body to soul 'till all be made immortal'. Conversely, when lustful action 'lets in defilement to the inward parts' the opposite process takes place, and the soul becomes degraded. It is such brutalised souls which, after death, form 'those thick and gloomy shadows damp' (470) which are sometimes to be seen 'sitting by a new made grave'. Again, it is worth recalling that the audience has been presented

with an image of such corruption in the degraded persons of Comus's crew. When we contemplate the various ways in which the lofty assertions of the Elder Brother are linked with their previous visible presentation, we may come to modify our estimate of his speech as over-theoretical. Certainly we shall applaud the skilful way in which Milton has worked the various elements of this essentially mixed art-form into a unified design.

We may still want to complain, in view of the immediate capitulation of the Younger Brother, that an obviously central issue has never really been *debated*, just as we may feel later that the Lady is scarcely touched by temptation. In fact the masque-form was ill-equipped to offer such direct dramatic conflict. What we have here, mediated by language, music, spectacle and symbolic action, is a direct vision into the nature of the moral life.

### THYRSIS AND THE TWO BROTHERS (490–658)

In this scene the attendant Spirit, disguised as the shepherd Thyrsis, takes a part within the action. We should remember that this rôle was almost certainly taken by Henry Lawes, so that, as in the case of the Lady and the brothers, there is an important continuity between fiction and everyday life. He is the piping, artificial shepherd of the pastoral convention, 'whose artful strains have oft delaid / The huddling brook to hear his madrigal'; he is only concerned with sheep insofar as that concern symbolises a Good Shepherd, whose protective rôle includes that of supernatural guardian (attendant Spirit) and moral guide (Henry Lawes as respected tutor).

The scene's principal function is to prepare, by advancing both 'plot' and 'meaning', for the scene between Comus and the Lady which is to follow. In explaining to the brothers that

their sister has wandered into a land of evil enchantment, Thyrsis also lessons the audience in the power of fiction to disclose a world of spiritual reality.

> Ile tell ye, 'tis not vain, or fabulous,
> (Though so esteem'd by shallow ignorance)
> What the sage Poets taught by th'heav'nly Muse.
> Storied of old in high immortal vers
> Of dire *Chimera's* and inchanted Iles,
> And rifted Rocks whose entrance leads to Hell,
> For such there be, but unbelief is blind.

These 'inchanted Iles' and 'rifted Rocks' would have recalled to the audience Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, bk. II, canto XII, with its 'perilous rocke' and 'Wandring Islands'. Book II of *The Faerie Queene*, in which Guyon, embodiment of 'Temperaunce', overthrows the Bower of Blisse and defeats the enchantress Acrasia, or Excess, helps us to catch the spirit of *Comus*.

The moral status of fictional writing was still in question in Milton's time (and indeed remained so among the Puritan middle class for long afterwards). One of the first works of literary theorising in English, Sir Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie*, was written in 1580 in answer to moralistic attacks upon fictional prose and poetry, and Sidney sought to show how fiction could initiate men into truths. Milton seems never to have been in doubt about this; from his boyhood he had been a delighted reader of 'our sage and serious Spenser (whom I dare be known to think a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas)'. (*Areopagitica*, SM 738.) It is worth noticing that Milton introduces this compliment to Spenser in connection with the twelfth canto of *The Faerie Queene*, book II, which one cannot help feeling is a pervasive influence throughout the temptation-scene in *Comus*. In speaking of Spenser as a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas, Milton meant a better teacher of moral truths. In another passage from the prose works, of

particular interest to the reader of *Comus*, we sense how Milton's reading in poetic fictions had fired his moral imagination:

> Next . . . I betook me among those lofty fables and romances, which recount in solemn cantos the deeds of knighthood founded by our victorious kings, and from hence had in renown over all Christendom. There I read it in the oath of every knight, that he should defend to the expense of his best blood, or of his life, if it so befell him, the honor and chastity of virgin or matron, from whence even then I learnt what a noble virtue chastity must be, to the defence of which so many worthies, by such a dear adventure of themselves, had sworn.
>
> (*An Apology for Smectymnuus*, SM 549)

Reading such as this not only helped Milton to form his own views upon morality, it influenced him in deciding upon his own moral purposes as a poet (*Reason of Church Government*, SM 525).

To return to the scene in hand: much of the attendant Spirit's speech (513 ff.) is a recapitulation and expansion (so far as the audience is concerned) of what we already know, from his opening speech and from subsequent action. It is not redundant; the action requires that the brothers be initiated at this point, and in relating what he does Thyrsis modifies our sense of their previous discussion, makes it clear that real dangers exist on a 'supernatural' level, that the most important rocks and shoals of existence occur on the sea of our *moral* voyagings.

Whereas in the earlier scene the Elder Brother had instructed the younger, here he in his turn is instructed by Thyrsis. He does not relinquish the faith in the protective power of virtue which he has previously affirmed, but nevertheless makes to do battle against Comus with the sword (584–608). There has been much learned discussion about the precise allegorical

meaning of *Hæmony*, the root 'of divine effect' (630) which, as Thyrsis informs the brothers, will protect them from Comus's charms. As Milton makes clear (636), it is meant to remind us of the plant moly which Hermes gave to Odysseus to protect him against the spells of Circe Its general significance, given the context, cannot be in doubt· the Elder Brother would tilt against a spiritual foe with a physical weapon, Thyrsis (as befits his higher status as guardian angel) instructs him that only spiritual weapons can be efficacious against spiritual evil. *Hæmony* represents white magic against Comus's black magic, faith in God against his worship of Cotytto and Hecate.

## COMUS AND THE LADY (659–813)

If we recall the attendant Spirit's prologue at the beginning of *Comus*, we shall remember how it provided a *cosmic* setting for the action of the masque, revealing man's relationship with spiritually-permeated spheres beyond this world, an eternal realm relevant to mankind, because man might aspire to enter it by the practice of virtue. The Elder Brother, in explaining the virtue of chastity, inhabits essentially the same realm of discourse as the attendant Spirit, though his idiom is different. Christian Platonism and the Ptolemaic astronomy as moralised by the Elizabethans are closely related; they are both *transcendentalist* philosophies, assuming that man's value, dignity and meaning are derived from his relationship to a world beyond the world of sense. That Lawes and the Egerton children enact rôles within the masque continuous with their everyday rôles gives *Comus* a local bearing and particularity; the *framework of thought* in which the action takes place endows it with universal significance. Both particularity and universality are essential to Milton's design· our actions, in the here

and now, have a significance and scope beyond that we can readily imagine for them, as Adam in *Paradise Lost* realises to his grief when he begins to sense the measure of the consequences of his sin (bk. x).

Bearing in mind this transcendentalist framework, we see that Comus's arguments are, in essence, an attempt to blot it out They amount to *naturalism*, a denial of the existence, or relevance, of supernatural or spiritual law (He does, of course, make a verbal concession to the Lady's faith in God: 'Th'all-giver would be unthank't', etc., line 723.) Comus advocates the following of instinct, and bases his argument on the teeming abundance, the 'spawn innumerable' of the natural world. The verse he speaks (especially 710 ff) is attractive, especially perhaps to our age, which likes 'concreteness' and 'particularity' in verse Comus is naturally concerned with 'things' and Milton always knew how to give the devil good arguments.

Against the 'false rules pranckt in reason's garb', against the 'stately Palace, set out with all manner of deliciousness' required by the stage-direction, we have to set the 'ougly-headed Monsters' of Comus's rabble, and the earlier invocation to the obscene Cotytto. This is not mere artifice on Milton's part. The two conditions, the attractiveness and the repulsiveness, have a *real* connection. The point is that the naturalistic arguments of Comus are merely the sophisticated guise of his paganism. Remember the pagan deities' procession in the 'Nativity Ode', the roll-call of the heathen gods in PL I, led by '*Moloch*, horrid King besmeard with blood / Of human sacrifice, and parents tears'. What is implied by the 'ougly-headed Monsters' and the invocation to Cotytto if not a similar rank paganism? And what is paganism but an acknowledgement of the supremacy over man of *Nature's* forces?

The argument between Comus and the Lady cannot be satisfactorily terminated on the level of discussion because

reality for Comus falls far short of what the Lady recognises as such, for him there is no transcendental world Therefore the Lady is speaking quite accurately, not making a mere debating point, when she concludes

> Fain would I something say, yet to what end?
> Thou hast nor Eare, nor Soul to apprehend
> The sublime notion, and high mystery
> That must be utter'd to unfold the sage
> And serious doctrine of Virginity.
>
> (783 ff)

Sabrina, the *dea ex machina*, is required not simply by the conventions of masque, but by the radical spiritual incompatibility of Comus and the Lady.

## SABRINA

The failure of the brothers to snatch Comus's wand and say his spells backward (815) is the device Milton employs in order to end his masque with a flattering reference to the mythology of the district over which the Earl of Bridgewater was to preside. The Lady is to be rescued by a local goddess. Attempts have been made to read subtleties into the brothers' failure to rescue the Lady from the enchanted chair, and into the subsequent rôle of Sabrina, the 'gentle Nymph' and 'Virgin pure' whose story (825 ff.) Milton adapts from *The Faerie Queene*, II, x, 14–19. Sabrina, as a goddess (i.e. a virtuous mortal who after death becomes a guardian spirit of a particular locality), is endowed with higher spiritual power than the brothers. Beyond this, I see no reason for critical flights at this point Milton wanted to end his masque with singing and spectacle; he wanted a delicacy which would contrast with the rabble of Comus; he wanted to compliment the local people by an appropriate refashioning of part of their traditional lore; it

seems likely that he wanted a minor but still considerable part for Lady Alice Egerton's sister or her 'best friend'. I cannot see in all this any subtle new development, any meaning that has not already been implied in the masque. From the attendant Spirit's first speech, through the Elder Brother's speech on chastity, the audience has been told (what as a Christian audience it should know already) that supernatural aid is available to virtue in distress. Milton's version of Sabrina's story renders that aid visible. One has only to read the attendant Spirit's song of thanks to Sabrina (922–37), bearing in mind that she was the tutelary spirit of the River Severn, to appreciate the delicacy of Milton's compliment to local feeling.

### THE SPIRIT'S EPILOGUE (976 ff.)

In the printed version of 1637, the Epilogue consisted of forty-eight lines. As *Comus* was first acted, the Epilogue consisted of only the last twelve of these. The longer version has an allegorical complexity which has invited as much critical discussion as the Sabrina episode. One recent critic would sweep this discussion aside with the simple conjecture that Milton envisaged using *Comus* on another occasion, possibly as a wedding-masque. It is certainly true that the stories of Venus and Adonis, Cupid and Psyche are adapted for such an occasion, it is equally certain that Milton would not have 'tacked on' to *Comus* such an epilogue unless he saw it as being an essentially suitable addition to what he had already written: he was not the man to spoil a work of art for reasons of opportunism. Therefore, whether we accept the 'wedding-masque' conjecture or not, the question still remains of how Milton saw his lengthened Epilogue in relation to the masque as a whole. One thing we cannot do is to conclude that Milton introduces these erotic figures because the rigidity of his

attitude towards chastity is softening. We could as legitimately argue in the opposite direction from the absence in the acted version of some famous references to virginity (e.g. 737–55, 779–806). In Renaissance Christian interpretation, these figures have senses different from those they bear in their original mythological settings. The marriage between Cupid and Psyche figured the relationship between celestial love and the virtuous soul, was an emblem in fact of the 'fidelity to God' for which 'chastity' in this life was both preparation and token. The marriage of Cupid and Psyche is thus the consummation of that 'high mystery' of Virginity which the Lady tells Comus he is too base to understand.

In his Prologue the Spirit descended from the 'starry threshold of *Joves* Court', and told us what those realms are like and how virtue may aspire to them. Now he is ascending to those realms again, and again he is telling us what they are like, in terms which do not conflict with those he has used before, which are in fact merely influenced by a different aspect of Renaissance Platonism, but which are more specifically related to the action we have witnessed. The doctrine of virginity, as I mentioned in connection with the Lady's lines on it, cannot be understood except by reference to a marriage: the nun, the Church, the virtuous soul, all are 'brides of Christ'. This is the marriage which is consummated, in the eternal realms, between Cupid and Psyche, Divine Love and the virtuous soul. From this marriage are born 'Youth and Joy, so *Jove* hath sworn'. Could one's hopes of eternal life be summed up in two better words than 'Youth and Joy'?

# *Lycidas*

## INTRODUCTION

It is often assumed that for those who are not scholars 'Lycidas' is an extremely difficult poem to appreciate. Critics tend to approach it gingerly, giving the impression that while *they* well know how to enjoy the poem, initiating the amateur is bound to be extraordinarily difficult; but this attitude overrates the importance of scholarship and underestimates the power of poetry. Nevertheless, it is understandable that scholars should fall into it. Anyone aware of the numerous critical and scholarly questions raised by 'Lycidas' must find it very easy to forget that he knew and loved the poem before he was even aware of the existence of literary critics. As soon as one begins to *discuss* it, which is not at all the same thing as reading it, one discovers that 'Lycidas' is as problematical in detail as it is lucid and strong in the whole. For that reason, as well as for its great poetic value, it has received more scholarly attention than almost any other poem of similar length in our language.

The first 'problem' I shall mention is, however, not one of detail. It is the rock on which Dr Johnson foundered: 'Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting' (or, as we should say, facile, commonplace and unpleasing). If we find ourselves bothered by the pastoralism of 'Lycidas', it will probably be for reasons different from these. For Johnson, 'Lycidas' was written in an over-popular convention; and he could not see the poem for the *genre*. Where in his view 'Lycidas' departed from the convention, Johnson liked it even less. 'With these trifling fictions are mingled the most awful and sacred truths, such as ought never to be polluted with such

irreverent combinations. The shepherd likewise is now a feeder of sheep, and afterward an ecclesiastical pastor, a superintendent of a Christian flock. Such equivocations are always unskilful; but here they are indecent, and at least approach to impiety . . .'

Our problem is likely to be that, unless we have previously encountered Arnold's 'Thyrsis' or Shelley's 'Adonais', 'Lycidas' is likely to be the first pastoral elegy we read. The 'problem' may take one of two forms. The reader may find that the poem has little or no aesthetic impact on him, and may decide that this is due to the unfamiliarity of its form. Or — and I think this is the more likely — he may want to ask himself how it is that so moving a poem has, when you come to look at it closely, such a large element of 'artificiality'. This is an important question, perhaps the prime critical question to ask about 'Lycidas', and I shall not attempt to supply a full answer. What must be stressed is that, in explaining the various conventional elements in the pastoral elegy, one has not explained 'Lycidas'. One cannot do justice to a noble building by giving a textbook account of the architectural styles incorporated in it. On the other hand, however sincere our appreciation, we may find it difficult to discuss the aesthetic qualities of the building if we are totally ignorant of the history of architecture.

What *is* a pastoral elegy? Most fundamentally, it is a lament for a dead person supposedly uttered by a shepherd moving in rustic scenes. To say this gives the defining characteristics: if a poem is not this, then it is not a pastoral elegy. Beyond this, however, pastoral elegies from Theocritus down to Matthew Arnold have several common characteristics:

(1) *The refrain*: 'Lycidas' is rather unusual in not having a refrain. Milton's Latin elegy for his close friend, Charles Diodati, does have one.

(2) *Nature's mourning*. almost all pastoral elegies contain either an appeal to Nature to mourn for the dead person or a representation of the sorrow of Nature:

> Thee Shepherd, thee the Woods, and desert Caves,
> With wild Thyme and the gadding Vine o'regrown,
> And all their echoes mourn.
>
> (39 ff.)

(3) *Reference to the nymphs*. this may occur either by way of invocation, or by way of complaint that they were absent while the lamented one was dying:

> Where were ye Nymphs when the remorseless deep
> Clos'd o're the head of your loy'd *Lycidas*?
>
> (50–51)

(4) *Procession of those who come to ask the cause of the disaster*: (in 'Lycidas', these are *Neptune's* herald, *Camus*, and the Pilot of the *Galilean* lake).

(5) *The command to deck the bier or the grave of the dead with garlands; or the representation of friends of the dead bringing flowers*.

> Return *Sicilian Muse*,
> And call the Vales, and bid them hither cast
> Their Bels, and Flourets of a thousand hues. . . .
>
> (132–151)

(6) *The expression of resentment against the cruel fate which brings people to an untimely end* (I give no illustrative quotation here, but the reader will agree that this is an element in 'Lycidas').

(7) *The expression of reassurance and consolation:* the pastoral elegy is of course predominantly a lament, but it usually rises to an expression of consolation based on the thought that the dead one is now living on in another world ('In the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love'). This consolatory element

occurs in classical elegies, but as we might expect it is of greatest importance in pastoral elegies written in Christian times, for example 'Lycidas', 'Adonais', 'Thyrsis'.

This statement of the common characteristics of the pastoral elegy was arrived at by a scholar who was paying no particular attention to 'Lycidas', but simply regarding it as one among many poems in the *genre*. It will be seen that 'Lycidas' exhibits a very high proportion of features commonly met with in pastoral elegies. Milton's originality thus co-exists with, indeed is somehow involved with, a high degree of conventionality. In studying the relationship between Milton's originality and his employment of convention, the student is advised to set 'Lycidas' alongside Matthew Arnold's 'Thyrsis', and ask himself why it is that the latter poem, while moving, lacks the qualities which makes 'Lycidas' a great poem rather than a very competent one.

## PROLOGUE (1–23)

The broad meaning of 'Lycidas' is clear enough, but there are so many problematical details that one feels that Milton may have intended a certain enigmatic quality. We encounter one such problem in the first five lines. On one interpretation the laurels, myrtles and ivy represent the wreaths of the poet, and 'to pluck their berries' means 'to write a poem'. On this view Milton recognises his artistic immaturity, going on to explain that a sad occasion constrains him to publish prematurely. Such an interpretation fits what we know of Milton — his wholehearted dedication to poetry, his feeling that his gifts were slow in coming to fruition, expressed in the sonnet 'How soon hath Time' and elsewhere. Some readers believe that 'Lycidas' is only nominally about Edward King's death, that it is really about Milton's own hopes of poetic fame and his

fear of dying before their fulfilment. If this view is correct, then this interpretation of the first five lines fits it very well.

However, there is another possibility. What if Milton is thinking here not of his own slowly-ripening talents, but of the untimely death of Edward King? Are the berries 'harsh and crude' because King died before *his* talents had ripened? There is a difficulty here: if we take literally the words 'Yet once more... I come,' we shall have to ask on what previous occasion Milton had lamented the death of a young poet or scholar. Perhaps we do not have to take the words in quite this sense; possibly Milton is saying that all too commonly poets die young before the laurels of their fame have ripened; it has happened before, and on this occasion it is he who must lament. I do not find this explanation altogether satisfactory, but the phrase 'dead ere his prime' does show that the 'unripeness' of King was in the poet's mind.

The first of these interpretations has usually been favoured by the majority, but the second has never lacked confident adherents. Perhaps the argument is unnecessary. Poetic meanings do not have to be a clear-cut 'one thing or the other'. My own view is that the primary meaning of the passage is the assertion of Milton's artistic unripeness; and that he deliberately expresses this in a way which *might* be taken to refer to King's early death in order to suggest the poignancy of the event which constrains his pen, and to suggest that it is ironically appropriate that King's elegist should be unripe since Lycidas himself was 'dead ere his prime'. This kind of compression, suggesting in a few lines of verse meanings which would require several paragraphs of prose, is typical of the rich texture of 'Lycidas'.

The poet goes on to state the occasion for his poem. Lycidas is dead, and since he was a poet his death must be commemorated in verse, with 'som melodious tear'. Why should Milton

himself write an elegy? Because he is a poet also, and must do as he would be done by:

> So may som gentle Muse
> With lucky words favour my destin'd Urn,
> And as he passes turn,
> And bid fair peace be to my sable shrowd
>
> (19 ff.)

In these lines Milton unarguably links the thought of his own death with the death of King; but he drops this thought immediately, and turns to the more 'personal' reasons why he should lament on this particular occasion.

## PART ONE (24–84)

It is common for critics to translate the pastoral detail of lines 25–36 in terms of life in seventeenth-century Cambridge. Undergraduates rose early ('ere the high Lawns appear'd / Under the opening eye-lids of the morn'); serious students worked late into the night, until Hesperus began to disappear under the horizon. Nevertheless, there were fun and games, and even lechery ('Rough *Satyrs* danc'd'). This is all true enough, but I think we falsify and coarsen these lines if we translate them in terms of undergraduate routine. I have said that these lines give Milton's 'personal' reasons for lamenting King's death and obviously in a sense they do refer to the sort of communal life Milton and King had shared. But when we understand them in terms of 'daily life in the seventeenth century', we are doing *precisely the opposite of what Milton did when he wrote them*, and we degrade the pastoral convention into a prettifying and indeed falsifying way of talking about ordinary things, when in fact it is a way of *universalising* particular incidents, making them part of a tradition, seeing them as significant human life. If we want to say what the lines are 'about', we must speak of

the ardour and idealism of study, the joy and creative influence of intellectual companionship, rather than about the time-table of study in a Cambridge college.

From pastoral reminiscence the poet turns naturally to pastoral lament ('But O the heady change, now thou art gon'· 37–49) The pastoralism of the preceding lines related the intellectual companionship of Cambridge undergraduates to the history of humane culture, and, incidentally, those lines carried their own submerged comfort, since the pastoral detail inevitably carries the mind to examples of intellectual hopes which had been fulfilled, in the works of great poets. In lines 36–49 the death of Lycidas is related to Nature In this passage Nature is conceived somewhat ambiguously, on the one hand as friendly to man, mourning the death of Lycidas, on the other as obliterating itself by its own indifferent excess ('With wilde Thyme and the gadding Vine o'regrown'). Nature is not thought of as being totally indifferent, but rather as subject to the same fate as humanity: roses become cankered, 'weanling Herds' are destroyed by 'Taint-worm' before they are properly grown; flowers are destroyed by frost before their seeds have time to ripen. It might not be misreading to see these lines also as bearing their own submerged comfort. We are so accustomed to think of the natural world in terms of spring and rebirth that, if the overt meaning of the passage is 'All that lives must die', none of us are far from recalling the continuation of Gertrude's words to Hamlet. But, for the moment, what is insisted on is the fact of death, not the fact of rebirth or the hope of resurrection.

Incidentally, it is a critical commonplace that there is not much 'nature poetry' in the seventeenth century, apart from the arguable instance of Henry Vaughan's work. Nevertheless natural imagery has a very important function in 'Lycidas'; and whereas there is a tendency to think of the pastoral con-

vention as prettifying Nature, the natural images of 'Lycidas', while not obviously going beyond the convention, are in sum powerful rather than pretty. This is due partly to the grave sonority of the poem's sound, partly to the fact that the natural images are never merely 'decoration', but always informed by the poet's living and developing thought. In lines 39–41, for example, the fact that Nature has cause to lament for itself as well as for Lycidas lends added resonance to what might have been a purely conventional 'pathetic fallacy'. This in turn prepares for the lines which follow. Here we do not merely see Lycidas's death in terms of natural parallels (which might have the effect of reducing its significance), instead our awareness is broadened to take in the inescapability and universality of death. 'All that lives must die', and in practice many creatures suffer untimely death. Considering the poem as a passionate meditation, this is its *datum*, the fact which it must face, assimilate, and be reconciled to.

The next passage (lines 50–63) moves from the conventional invocation of the nymphs to a vision of horror, in which Milton recalls the death of Orpheus, the archtype of the poet. Milton's interest in ancient Britain, expressed in *Comus*, is again given play, but in a manner strictly relevant to the occasion. The places mentioned are in sight of the place where King was shipwrecked; the 'old *Bards*, the famous *Druids*' recall that King was both a poet and intended for the ministry.

The reference to the Druids, moreover, forms a subtle preparation for the lines describing the end of Orpheus. Like King, the Druids were poets and priests. Like him too they are dead, though Milton only mentions this by implication and does not stress it. With Orpheus they share a third characteristic. They had magical powers, that is powers over Nature; or, says Milton (this is the implication of the whole passage) did they? Tradition tells us that the Druids had powers over

nature Yet they are dead. Nature destroyed them, and has assimilated them ('the steep, / Where your old *Bards*, the famous *Druids* ly'). Orpheus too had powers over Nature. When he sang and played on his lyre wild beasts were charmed, trees and rocks followed him, rivers forsook their course. And he too is dead

The 'pastoral detail' of 'Lycidas' thus represents no inert acquiescence in convention. It really *is* a poem about Nature, Nature which produces, and destroys, men of genius, as it produces and destroys everything else. One element in the greatness of 'Lycidas' is that beneath its 'decorum' and conventionality there throbs a sense of primitive power. Another is the manner in which from its imagery and the movement of its thought there arises a passionate questioning about what *meaning* can be assigned to lives which, however nobly dedicated and heroically pursued, are inevitably (and in the event often terribly) to be crushed by the natural world. However much in the tradition this is, what strikes us is the ring of urgent personal experience here.

In the magnificent climax to this passage we notice an ambiguity similar to that noticed in connection with lines 39–46. 'Universal nature' lamented Orpheus, and yet 'nature' destroyed him, not 'external nature' but that in humanity which is perhaps nearest to impersonal natural forces. Orpheus, after the death of Eurydice, swore to have nothing more to do with women — and he was torn to pieces by the Thracian women in a Dionysiac orgy. Dionysus was a fertility-god, particularly sacred to the vine; and the link between this passage and lines 39–41, with their reference to 'the gadding Vine' may not be as fanciful as it seems at first glance. A poet, sworn to chastity, and torn to pieces. We might expect that Milton's preoccupation with chastity and its relation to the life dedicated to poetry would find expression in an elegy on the death of another high-

minded young poet. One might well sense in the horror of Orpheus' death something of what it had cost the sensuous but idealistic Milton to refrain from sporting 'with *Amaryllis* in the shade' in order to dedicate himself thoroughly to the task of self-preparation for his poetic vocation.

If this interpretation is granted, Milton's transition to a questioning of the poet's vocation, and the manner in which he puts the question, seems quite inevitable:

> Were it not better don as others use,
> To sport with *Amaryllis* in the shade,
> Or with the tangles of *Neæra's* hair?
>
> (67 ff)

What comes as an answer to the question turns out to be no answer at all:

> *Fame* is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
> (That last infirmity of Noble mind)
> To scorn delights, and live laborious dayes;
> But the fair Guerdon when we hope to find,
> And think to burst out into sudden blaze,
> Comes the blind *Fury* with th'abhorred shears,
> And slits the thin-spun life.
>
> (70 ff)

This re-states what I have called the poem's *datum*, in terms closer to Milton's actual life-experience. It is worth noticing that the apparently noble but ultimately futile aspiration is expressed in terms of that courtly chivalry ('spurs', 'guerdon') which Milton was later to reject in the Prologue to book IX of *Paradise Lost*: 'Not that which justly gives Heroic name / To Person or to Poem.' Milton's attention to mythological detail here also deserves attention. Conventionally, it was the *Fates*, not the *Furies*, who cut the thread of life. The Fates were inexorable, but also impartial and just; the Furies on the other hand were spirits of vengeance, seeking out a particular person. The Furies were sometimes identified with fertility-spirits, and

it is just possible that there is another link here, with 'the rout that made the hideous roar' (the Thracian women) and the 'gadding Vine' of lines 39–41 If so, one of the submerged themes of the poem is fear of what revenge Nature might take for sexuality too rigorously suppressed. Another change is that Milton has made the Fury blind. what we have here is the infinitely depressing thought that the *best* of mankind are *especially* the prey of a hostile, irrational power in the universe. This is a development from the comparatively simple earlier thought that the *young* are subject to an untimely death (*c.* 45).

This is the emotional low point of the poem, at least so far. The question implied in this outburst seems unanswerable. To look closely at Milton's handling of the mythological detail is to see just how deeply pessimistic this passage is. Nevertheless Milton does answer it, in a dramatic, apparently unprepared *volte-face* which recalls the sudden resolutions which climax some of George Herbert's poems. His answer cuts sharply across the middle of a line:

> But not the praise,
> *Phœbus* repli'd, and touch'd my trembling ears,
> *Fame* is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
> Nor in the glistering foil
> Set off to th'world, nor in broad rumour lies,
> But lives and spreds aloft by those pure eyes,
> And perfet witnes of all-judging *Jove*,
> As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
> Of so much fame in Heav'n expect thy meed.
>
> (76 ff)

So we come to the end of the first major section of the poem, and to a major critical disagreement. One school of thought regards this as a 'false' climax, a 'pagan' consolation which is later to be superseded by the Christian consolation of the poem's close. David Daiches, *Milton* (p. 84), writes, 'An explicit reply of this kind would have been given by a more

inclusive representative of poetry than Apollo ... And the pat aphoristic nature of that final couplet ... could not possibly be a solution to such a complex poem as "Lycidas".'

I do not see the poem's movement in this way; its progression does not have that kind of logic. The three major sections parallel each other, they do not represent thesis, antithesis and synthesis or some other quasi-logical momentum. To argue for the 'pagan' nature of the passage from Milton's use of the terms 'Phoebus' and 'Jove' instead of 'Christ' and 'God' is to ignore the common practice of Milton and many other Renaissance poets. Phoebus Apollo, the god of poetry, was also the Sun-God, who was frequently equated with Christ; and one has only to go to the first line of *Comus* for another example of Milton using 'Jove' for 'God'.

The argument from Milton's use of pagan names is very easily disposed of; and I can see no evidence for the 'paganism' or 'falsity' of the consolation which is any more satisfactory. The sentiment expressed is a perfectly Christian one, put crudely, it is that our job is to do our best, and that we must leave it to God to sit in judgement on our efforts. An argument against the 'pagan' interpretation is the phrase 'all-judging Jove'; in pagan mythology Jove was *not* the judge of Hades; in Christianity God *is* our Judge

## PART TWO (85–131)

A further argument for regarding lines 76–84 as being essentially Christian may be found in Milton's transition to the second major section:

> O Fountain *Arethuse*, and thou honour'd floud,
> Smooth-sliding *Mincius*, crown'd with vocall reeds,
> That strain I heard was of a higher mood,
> But now my Oate proceeds, ...
>
> (85 ff)

This marks a return to pastoralism. *Arethuse* is the fountain-nymph Arethusa, who fled from the river-god Alpheus and reappeared in Sicily as a spring welling up near the sea. The 'Fountain *Arethuse*' is thus one of the poem's resurrection-images Appropriately, in an elegy on a man who was drowned, these images are all related to water cf. 'So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed, / And yet anon . . . Flames in the forehead of the morning sky,' and 'So *Lycidas* sunk low, but mounted high, / Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves'. Milton is here recalling the pastoral poetry of the Sicilian Theocritus, who mentions this fountain in his first Idyll. Similarly, Mincius is an Italian river described ('honour'd') by Virgil in his *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. 'That strain I heard was of a higher mood' refers back to the end of the first section, placing it higher than the inspiration of the pastoral poets, who lived in pagan times

The first part of the second section, with its procession of mourners, closely follows the tradition of the pastoral elegy. The prose 'meaning' of the passage is simple almost to banality; the weather was good when King's ship went down, so there must have been something wrong with the ship. Hippotades, the ruler of the winds (more familiar by his name of Aeolus) declared to Neptune's herald that 'not a blast was from his dungeon stray'd, / The Ayr was calm', so calm that 'on the level brine, / Sleek *Panope* with all her sisters play'd'.

Milton employs the circumstances of the wreck to reach a conclusion which parallels the 'blind Fury' passage of the preceding section.

> It was that fatall and perfidious Bark
> Built in th'eclipse, and rigg'd with curses dark,
> That sunk so low that sacred head of thine.
>
> (100 ff)

This conclusion fits perfectly into the pagan context; this is precisely the sort of explanation that would have occurred to the pagan mind. But again, one notices that there may be a difference between working in a convention and being 'conventional'. The conclusion is not unoriginal, not artificially determined. Again we have the suggestion that the most excellent ('that sacred head') are somehow the prey of an irrational and malignant force in the universe. Exalt this to a philosophy, take away counter-balancing considerations, and you have sheer pessimism.

The suggestion that we are subject to blind chance is carried over into the next passage:

> Next *Camus*, reverend Sire, went footing slow,
> His mantle hairy, and his Bonnet sedge,
> Inwrought with figures dim, and on the edge
> Like to that sanguine flower inscrib'd with woe.
>
> (103 ff.)

*Camus* is of course the river Cam, 'reverend Sire' because Cambridge was already an 'ancient university' in the seventeenth century. 'That sanguine flower inscrib'd with woe' is the hyacinth, supposed to have sprung from the blood of a youth accidentally killed by Apollo during a game of quoits. It is 'inscrib'd with woe' because it is supposed to be marked with the letters *aiai*, the Greek exclamation expressing grief. Apollo was grief-stricken for the death of Hyacinth: not even those beloved of the gods, not the 'clear spirit', the 'sacred head', the 'dearest pledge', are immune to the malignancy of fate; neither Apollo nor 'the Muse her self that *Orpheus* bore,' can protect their favourites.

*Camus* is of course not a pagan god, and so this passage provides a subtle transition to the explicit Christianity of the last spirit of the waters: St Peter, 'The Pilot of the *Galilean* lake'. (It has been argued that Milton had in mind Christ,

rather than St Peter, but I find this unconvincing.) This final passage of the second section (108–31) has been called a digression; it has been felt that neither decorum nor logic permit this denunciation of the unfaithful clergy in a pastoral elegy lamenting the death of Edward King. If the passage had been full of obvious contemporary reference, such a view might have justification, but it is not. The point is, surely, that the first section is primarily concerned with Lycidas as a poet, and the second with his vocation for the priesthood. Neptune, Camus and the Pilot of the Galilean lake form a progression: Nature, Culture, Religion. St Peter speaks, as the first bishop of the Christian Church, the father of the clergy:

> How well could I have spar'd for thee young swain,
> Anow of such as for their bellies sake,
> Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold!
>
> (113 ff.)

This does not in the least represent Milton taking off at a tangent from the proper course of the poem. It is the logical corollary of a thought which has been central to the development of the poem up to this point. If it is true that excellence is especially liable to the malignancy of Fate (and this idea need not be regarded as artificial for it has often been expressed — by survivors of the First World War, for example) then it follows that many of the unworthy survive and flourish. The prosperity of the wicked, and the consequent perplexity of the religious mind, is one of the commonest themes in the Psalms.

Milton's expression in this passage fuses Christianity and pastoralism in a quite natural way. Indeed, this fusion is not to be credited to Milton himself; it is the product of centuries of Christian speech, based upon the theme of Christ as the 'Good Shepherd' and of the clergy as 'pastors'. Johnson's own phrase, in criticising this passage ('a superintendent of a Christian flock'), indicates how artificial his strictures are at this point.

John Ruskin's analysis of this passage, in the first lecture of *Sesame and Lilies*, is still worth reading.

Lines 108–31 should not be read merely as a denunciation of the seventeenth-century clergy, or even merely as a denunciation of unfaithful pastors in whatever age. The anger is the counterpart of a great pity, which glows in the line 'The hungry Sheep look up, and are not fed', a line which derives the strength of its pathos from a time-honoured speech which goes back to the New Testament. Once again the passage moves towards that moment which is darkest just before the light breaks:

> Besides what the grim Woolf with privy paw
> Daily devours apace, and nothing sed
> (128–9)

Those three simple words 'and nothing sed' are too sublime to be referred merely to the government's acquiescence in the activities of popish priests; they are a great question hurled at the state of affairs which allows the corrupt to flourish: their meaning as well as their vehemence parallels the 'blind Fury' passage in the preceding section. And like that passage they are immediately followed by the assertion that justice *is*:

> But that two-handed engine at the door,
> Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.
> (130–1)

Whatever the precise reference in these lines, this is not Milton the Puritan calling down vengeance on the Anglican clergy, but a Christian who is willing to assert, against all the evidence available to his senses, that there is a justice in the heart of things. His words have a sternness, a terrible power, but it is a power which answers to and masters the terrible state of things he has been contemplating. If there is justice against the evildoer, there is consolation for the faithful. In that important respect, the end of the second section precisely parallels the end of the first. Innumerable solutions have been

offered to the 'puzzle' of what Milton meant by 'that two-handèd engine', from the Houses of Parliament to the 'Jack o' th' Clock' which adorned several churches in Milton's day. (A good one survives in Blythburgh Church, Suffolk, a beautiful old church which is well worth visiting.) The poem offers no compelling internal evidence (the case for linking the two-handed engine with the sword held by the angel Michael — 'the great vision of the guarded Mount' — is not particularly convincing), and evidence brought from outside the poem to support various solutions cannot be conclusive. The relevant question is: 'what picture would the words have conjured up in the minds of seventeenth-century readers?' Obviously there is no good reason, when the question is put, for preferring one highly specific answer to another, and the thought suggests itself that the lines are vague because Milton meant them to be vague. What they do suggest, with very adequate clarity and force, is the terror and finality of God's avenging justice.

### PART THREE (132–85)

The transition to the third section is achieved in a manner similar to that from the first to the second:

> Return *Alpheus*, the dread voice is past,
> That shrunk thy streams, Return *Sicilian* Muse.
>
> (132–3)

The poet modulates back to pagan pastoralism. *Alpheus* is the god of one of the rivers of Arcadia. The correspondence with the previous transition is more satisfyingly exact if we recall that the stream of Alpheus was supposed to join that of Arethusa in Sicily. The *Sicilian* Muse refers to pastoral poetry, the Sicilian Theocritus being traditionally regarded as the father of pastoral poets.

The third section, down to line 151, draws upon another of

the conventions of pastoral poetry, the passage of the flowers. These are flowers that seem to mourn: 'the rathe Primrose that forsaken dies', 'Cowslips wan that hang the pensive hed'. Nevertheless the feeling is different from that in the opening section: the passage has more colour than the 'brown' Myrtles and the 'never-sear' Ivy; nothing here is 'harsh and crude'. In its gentleness, and delicacy of colour, the passage conveys consolation at least as much as lament. But it is a false consolation, as the poet recognises in bringing it to a close:

> For so to interpose a little ease,
> Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise
>
> (152–3)

The consolation of the flower-passage is based upon an assumption contrary to the facts of the case. Lycidas is not lying peacefully on a 'Laureat Herse'; he died too soon to win the laurels of poetic renown, and his body is in the ocean, beyond the reach of his mourners.

The function of the catalogue of flowers is to modulate between the prophecy of doom for the unfaithful clergy and the description of Lycidas's reception into Paradise, which closes the third section. The structure and emotional rhythm of each of the three main sections are broadly similar (a fact which is obscured if one thinks of the climax of the first section as representing a 'false' consolation). This is by no means to suggest a coldly-planned, symmetrical formal master-piece. In each case the structure seems to grow naturally from the emotional rhythm. Here, if we imagine the poem with lines 154–64 omitted, we can readily see that the assuaging of grief in the evocation of the flowers' beauty is too 'poetic' to lead into a majestic conclusion. That can only be properly prepared by the profundity of lines 154–64. The transition to these lines from the flower-passage has an adequate *intellectual* justification

in the poet's expressed recognition of the falsity of the consolation; its fidelity to human experience has been well suggested by one critic, who points out that the emotional rhythm expressed in the first two passages of the third section corresponds to what psychologists call, where it exists in a pathological form, the manic-depressive pattern.

Lines 154–64 form a perfect example of the ability of great poetry to communicate before it is properly understood. Probably there are few people who do not respond to the majesty of this passage. If anybody were completely unable to appreciate its emotional force, he would be very little helped by 'explanations' of the 'fable of *Bellerus* old', 'the great vision of the guarded Mount', '*Namancos* and *Bayona's* hold', and the reference to the dolphins. If my own experience is any guide, the danger is not that we should fail to respond to the sound of these lines, but rather that the lines offer so much before they are understood that we are content to rest within an inadequate understanding. (F R. Leavis complains that the words 'seem ... to be occupied with valuing themselves rather than with doing anything'. *Revaluation* (1953), p. 56.)

Why does the poet ask St Michael to look homeward? (Commentators have argued over whether the Angel who is asked to 'Look homeward' in line 163 is St Michael or Lycidas. I believe that the weight of opinion today favours St Michael, and I incline strongly to this view myself.) In this context we may dismiss the notion that the angel's home is in heaven. It is true that one of the traditional functions of St Michael is to guide the souls of the dead to heaven, but there is no reason why he should 'melt with ruth' when looking in that particular direction. The relevant consideration here is Michael's status as guardian angel of England. Milton was a patriot and a *Puritan*, and if he had written 'Lycidas' before the Armada was defeated in 1588 he would not have written this line. By

1637 the danger of popery being imposed by Spanish invasion had long passed: to the Puritans, who saw popery in what we should nowadays regard as moderate Anglican practices, the danger lay at home. Taken in this way, the references to Spain ('*Namancos* and *Bayona's* hold') and to St Michael, link up with the passage on the corruption of the clergy. We could of course take line 163 as asking St Michael to look homeward and 'melt with ruth' for Lycidas, but it has been so firmly established by now that we do not know where Lycidas's body is, that I do not think this can be the intended primary meaning. Moreover, it rather fits the energetic, forward-looking attitude Milton is moving toward that he should here enlist an Angel to look at England's troubles, and consign Lycidas's body to the dolphins The point is not affected by the statement in Pausanius that 'a dolphin took up Palaemon's body and laid it on the shore at Corinth, where he was deified' (relevant as this deification is to lines 183–4) It is very much in keeping with the *kind* of originality we find in 'Lycidas' that Milton should employ a classical allusion to throw a decorous veil over a rather harsh implication, namely that the poet had resolved the problem posed by the death of his colleague, and was no longer vitally concerned with the dead man.

I am inclined to think, that is, that lines 165–85, logically as they fit into the structure of the poem, and truly as they express Milton's belief in an after-life, do not embody the degree of vitality of thought we find elsewhere in 'Lycidas'. The 'real' conclusion of the poem, the climax toward which Milton's passionate meditation has been moving, is I think the resolve to act expressed from line 186 to the end of the poem The answer to death that is most meaningful to a man of Milton's temperament and ideals is that the living should go on living, as fully as may be. At the beginning of the poem its author is fully identified with the shepherd who laments for Lycidas:

'Yet once more . . . I com'. At its end Milton stands apart from his shepherd-*persona*: 'Thus sang the uncouth Swain'. The effect is, brilliantly, to place what has just passed at an 'aesthetic distance', to gain a certain detachment, which is both aesthetically valuable, in that it enables us to see the poem as a shaped, completed whole, and essential to the total meaning of 'Lycidas'. The living owe to their dead, firstly, a 'melodious tear', and then, after that, to go on living: 'To morrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new.'

# *The Sonnets*

## 'O Nightingale, that on yon bloomy Spray'

MILTON'S sonnets, as much as 'Lycidas' or *Comus*, combine traditionalism with radical originality. His work represents almost a complete break with the love-sonnet of the Elizabethans; almost, but not quite Before he composed the 'soul-animating strains' to which Wordsworth paid his famous tribute, Milton wrote a sequence of love-sonnets. He probably intended this sonnet to introduce the sequence, of which the other poems are in Italian. Various reasons have been suggested for Milton's employment of Italian· he was in love with an Italian lady, or he was afraid to write amorous poems in English, lest he should be teased. The biographical foundation for such assumptions is very slight What we *do* know is that Milton made it part of his self-education as a poet to perfect his knowledge of Italian. That he was able to employ it creatively indicates how well he succeeded. Throughout his major work, Milton adapted the craftmanship of the Italians in forming his own unique poetic style. I shall not discuss Milton's Italian sonnets here; but it is worth remembering that he did write love-sonnets, and that they have earned high praise from Italian scholars.

This sonnet depends upon a piece of folk-lore which was current in mediaeval poetry both in English and in French: if a lover hears the song of the nightingale before that of the cuckoo, he will be successful. The poet conveys this essential information to the reader by the device of supposing the nightingale to be unaware of its link with the destinies of lovers,

he *tells the nightingale* that it fills the lover's heart with hope, that its song portends success in love Someone of a literal turn of mind might want to say that the nightingale *would* be unaware of its relevance to human love. No doubt; and moreover nightingales cannot comprehend sonnets. My point is that Milton *employs a fiction*. the fiction that the nightingale is capable of understanding human speech. I think that what distinguishes this sonnet from others that Milton wrote in English, quite as much as its being on the subject of love, is the importance in it of a fiction. Elsewhere Milton *refers to fiction* in order to make his point, but he does not often make a sonnet's whole structure dependent upon a fiction in the way that this one is.

This employment of a fiction has the effect of subtly flattering the reader If the information about nightingales and lovers were conveyed directly those of Milton's readers who already knew the folk-lore might be bored or even affronted: 'Why tell us what we know already?' Further, the device of addressing a nightingale which is not there rather than a reader who (by definition) is, works in the interests of *dramaticality*. Characters on the stage ignore the audience, and address each other. From the first two words of the poem, the reader is aware, not only of the nightingale, but of a human person addressing it, a person who finally declares the point of his address in the imperative verb of the ninth line: 'Now timely sing' From this point in the poem the person reveals himself more fully; he is not merely a suppliant to the powers which affect lovers' destinies, but one who for some years has been an unrequited lover, and undeservedly so. With characteristic daring, Milton raises an idea in the last two lines of the poem which has not been mentioned before. the idea that the nightingale is auspicious for poetry. The idea is put in a form which suggests a doubt: is the nightingale really propitious to

lovers, isn't its real concern with poets? No matter, the last line says, in either case I deserve its favours, and if the nightingale favours both love and poetry, then I have a double claim upon it. It is almost as if Milton is signalling to the reader not to take the love-interest in the poem too seriously, that what really interests him is poetry.

## 'How soon hath Time the suttle theef of youth'

This sonnet is of autobiographical interest. In it Milton writes of his apparent failure to produce work worthy of his years, speaking of his immaturity both of physical appearance and of accomplishment. Yet it is itself a genuine achievement. One should notice how naturally the movement of thought from regret to confidence fits the sonnet form, with the change occurring just after the octet. It is a difficult thing to analyse, but a notable point is that both the regret and the confidence sound real. The closeness with which the subject-matter is made to fit the sonnet-form, with its 'turn', does not produce an effect of falsity. It sounds 'sincere', whereas many poems having this shape give the impression that the emotion expressed in the early part of the poem exists merely as a necessary background for the fine sentiments of the close. Milton achieves the effect of a genuinely personal meditation.

One component of this effect is the very different 'feel' that the sestet has compared with the octet. This is no doubt partly determined by the breaking of the pattern of imagery after the eighth line. The imagery of the octet is naïve, suggesting the 'bookishness' of a young poet who has not yet found his own poetic voice. The image of Time as a thief has an Elizabethan air about it, redolent of the literary atmosphere of the time

when Milton was only a boy. There is a similar naïvety about the imagery of 'spring', 'blossom', 'ripeness'. The play of imagery becomes more subdued after the fourth line, and after the eighth imagery gives way to syntax: the balance of 'less or more', 'soon or slow', 'mean or high', is suggestive both of moderation and of assurance.

It may save some confusion if I mention that the word 'it' in the ninth and tenth lines refers back to the 'inward ripeness' of the seventh line. Milton refers to the degree of ripeness to be attained, to the time of its appearance, and to its adequacy to the work God intends for him.

The phrase 'in strictest measure even' may suggest the even tread of a man walking confidently towards a landmark; and it might be thought that the apparent assertiveness of 'It shall' supports this sense. But seventeenth-century usage did not observe our present conventions regarding 'shall' and 'will'. The primary meaning is certainly that whatever the degree of ripeness, whether it comes early or late, it will be equal to, proportionate with, the 'lot' towards which the poet is being led by time and the will of heaven The confidence expressed in the poem's close is confidence in God rather than in John Milton.

On the last two lines, I cannot do better than quote Brooks and Hardy:

> The last two lines make plain his own responsibility. 'All is, if I have grace to use it so, As ever in my great task-Masters eye,' but only 'if I have grace to use it so': that is, only if I have the grace to use everything as if it were being observed by Him. The young poet's confidence in Providence, far from mitigating his own responsibility, doubles it, the reference to God as a 'task-Master' implies that God's overseeing requires his work to be of the best . . not merely that a good outcome is certain because of God's supervision

## 'Captain or Colonel, or Knight in Arms'

As in the earlier 'Nightingale' sonnet, Milton here draws on tradition. Two episodes of ancient history are involved. When Alexander the Great ('The great *Emathian* Conqueror') sacked Thebes, he ordered his soldiers to spare the house of the poet Pindar. The tradition, which is of dubious authority, has it that Pindar's house was the only one to be spared in the whole of the city. The Spartans, Thebans and Corinthians, after destroying the Athenian fleet, besieged Athens. The city was forced to surrender, and was spared only upon harsh conditions. Later a tradition grew up that the city was spared because the allied captains heard one of the citizens recite some verses from Euripides' *Electra*, and felt that they could not destroy a city which had produced such great men as Euripides.

This sonnet is often printed with the heading 'When the assault was intended to the city', and referred to a particular event in the Civil War, when London was in danger of falling before the Royalist forces. On one interpretation, Milton actually wrote the poem to pin on the door of his house in an attempt to placate any Royalist officer who might threaten it. Milton can hardly have been so naive. Another view is that while the city was in a hubbub of preparations for the assault, Milton serenely dissociated himself from the panic by sitting down to write a sonnet. What we know of Milton makes it seem unlikely that he would ever have placed himself 'above the conflict' in that way.

The sonnet is best seen, I think, as a rather smiling, good-humoured treatment of a serious theme, that of the dignity of literature. Milton must have thought seriously of the value of a poet's vocation in times of conflict. As we know, he gave up writing poetry for many years in order to serve the Parliamentary cause. So, addressing a hypothetical officer, he writes

of the fame which the poet can give to acts of chivalry performed in times of war, and of famous occasions in the past when warlike men have respected the dignity of literature. The movement of the sonnet, from 'Captain or Colonel, or Knight in Arms' to 'sad *Electra's* Poet' and 'th' *Athenian* Walls', takes us from the immediate contemporary situation to a sense of the permanence of literature the significance of those '*Athenian* Walls' would be lost to us today but for the power which literature has to commemorate great events. There is a hint that in the end literature accomplishes much, war very little. What importance do the wars of ancient times retain, except as they are material for literature? As Milton says in his sonnet to Fairfax: 'For what can War, but endless warr still breed'?

## 'Lady that in the prime of earliest youth'

This is one of a number of sonnets addressed to Milton's friends and acquaintances, in this case we do not know the identity of the person addressed. The occasion for the poem is revealed in the reference to 'they that overween, / And at thy growing vertues fret their spleen'. Obviously the young lady was of a virtuous and religious disposition, and had irritated her less devout friends, perhaps members of her family. Such a situation must have been fairly common in that time of religious enthusiasm; it is possible indeed that the young lady espoused Puritan and Parliamentary ideals while being a member of an Anglican and Royalist family.

It is a poem of encouragement, Milton tactfully avoids giving advice Rather he reinforces the lady's religious determination by praising the course she is following already. So, he does not advise her to be patient in the face of opposition, but states that those who fret at her 'No anger find in thee, but pity and ruth',

and in the eleventh line he is not *exhorting* her to be sure, but *stating* that she may be sure.

As befits the subject, the compliment is worked out in Biblical terms Mary (Luke x), Ruth (The Book of Ruth), and the Five Wise Virgins (Matthew xxv), are all examples of feminine devotion. The possibility that the lady to whom the poem is addressed might have incensed her own relatives seems reinforced when we recall the stories of Ruth and Mary. Ruth forsook her own country and tribe in order to accompany her mother-in-law Naomi to Palestine; Mary was resented by her sister Martha because she neglected the housework to sit at the feet of Jesus. The story of the Five Wise Virgins would also be relevant to the situation of a devout girl in a less devout family: they trimmed the wicks of their lamps and saved their oil while their companions wasted theirs.

Each of these stories, then, implies a high compliment; and each would also carry consolation and hope. Ruth found a second husband, Boaz, and thus became the ancestress of Joseph the earthly father of Jesus. Mary was commended by Christ for having chosen the one thing needful. In the parable of the virgins Christ exhorted his followers to be ready for the coming of His Kingdom. The wise virgins were prepared for the Kingdom. It is no earthly consolation that Milton offers then, but the assurance of a place in Christ's Eternal Kingdom.

## 'Daughter to that good Earl, once President'

This is a very fine sonnet of compliment. Lady Margaret Ley was one of Milton's friends, and for a time she and Milton were close neighbours. Edward Phillips, Milton's nephew and biographer, wrote 'This lady, being a woman of great wit and ingenuity, had a particular honour for him, and took much

delight in his company'. It might be asked why, in a poem addressed to the lady, so much space should be given to her father. There are several reasons for this. First, one gathers from the sonnet that Margaret Ley loved and honoured her father very much: 'So well your words his noble vertues praise'. The biographical evidence too suggests that there was a very close relation between father and daughter: she looked after him in his old age, and was specially provided for in his will. Margaret Ley must have felt that no higher compliment could be paid to her than this, which both nobly praises the father she loved and honoured, and implies that her virtues can only adequately be suggested by comparing them to his. Of course Milton could have complimented her in a more purely personal and 'domestic' way, but by referring to the public virtues of her father he achieves a far greater resonance of compliment.

Also, by making his compliment in this way Milton solves a problem which required great tact. He is able indirectly to refer to a difficulty in Margaret Ley's life which might have caused her pain and embarrassment if referred to more openly. Milton thus exercises, without presuming upon, the privilege of friendship. He does this by a submerged comparison of the events of the 'good Earl's' time with those of his own day. The 'sad breaking of that Parliament' refers to the dissolution of Parliament in 1629, marking the beginning of eleven years of arbitrary rule leading up to the Civil War. Margaret Ley must have told Milton that this breach between King and Parliament so distressed her father that it hastened his death, the implication being that the Earl disapproved of the King's hostility towards Parliament. The conflict initiated by the dissolution of Parliament in 1629 had, at the time this sonnet was written, flared up into Civil War. Margaret Ley's family favoured the Royalist cause, while her husband enlisted for service with the Parliamentary party. The sonnet, and indeed the circumstances

of her friendship with Milton, implies that Margaret herself favoured the Parliamentary side, but she must have been distressed through being at odds with her family. By praising the nobility of her father, by reminding her that he too had lived at a time of great difficulty, Milton offers tactful encouragement to Margaret

In the sonnet 'Captain, or Colonel, or Knight in Arms', Milton had set the troubles of his own times in the long perspective of history, and he does the same here. That is the point of the reference to 'that dishonest victory / At *Chæronéa*, fatal to liberty', which 'Kill'd with report that Old man eloquent'. This both dignifies the compliment to the Earl by a comparison with a famous episode of ancient history; and suggests to his daughter that as the troubles she has to endure represent another phase of the troubles of her father's time, so the struggles of her father's time represent an episode in a struggle which has been going on all through history. the struggle for political liberty. The struggle for liberty seems never to be won, but it can never be wholly lost so long as there are people with the courage to sacrifice personal happiness and even life in its service.

When he decided to compliment Margaret Ley in this fashion, Milton set himself a difficult technical problem: how to compress into a poem of fourteen lines both an adequate suggestion of her father's virtues and a sufficiently distinguished compliment to her. The problem is solved by a masterly handling of syntax. The first phrase is vocative: it addresses the lady: 'Daughter to that good Earl'. The rest of the octet consists of a complex piling-up of phrases and clauses modifying 'that good Earl', but all through the octet there is no main verb: whatever it was that Milton set out to say to the lady he has not said it yet. Now such a device, putting off the main verb of a sentence for so long, has the effect of setting up a

sense of anticipation in the reader's mind. There is a certain strain in taking in a string of subsidiary phrases and clauses; we *want* the main verb to come, so that our attention may be rewarded. This device of delaying the main verb, therefore, usually has the effect of giving it added force when it does come (look for example at the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*). It is not until the eleventh line that Milton supplies the main clause: 'me thinks I see him living yet'. This statement has derived great force from being so long delayed, like the sudden release of the latent energy in a tautly-stretched spring; and it is a tremendous statement in itself Not 'you resemble your father', but 'I see him living yet'. Thus the full force of the compliment paid to the Earl in the octet is transferred (by a great feat of compression, in a single line) to his daughter. All the energy of the poem up to this point is compressed into that eleventh line: it is because of this that one is not driven to protest that the sonnet is really a compliment to the Earl rather than to his daughter.

## 'A Book was writ of late call'd *Tetrachordon*'

This sonnet is one of Milton's few humorous pieces; and its ending is harsh rather than humorous. *Tetrachordon* was one of the tracts in which Milton had urged liberty of divorce. He had taken for its title a musical term which signified a combination of four notes, to point to the fact that in it he had reconciled the four principal Biblical texts on divorce. Naturally the title had bewildered many people. Milton humorously points out that the title sounded no stranger than many of the Scottish names to which people had become accustomed during the Civil War. These rugged Scottish names would have made Quintilian stare and gasp, Milton suggests, referring to an ancient authority on oratory who had laid it down that

proper names of foreign origin were objectionable because of their harshness of sound.

There is some controversy over the meaning of the last three lines. Some consider that they mean 'Thy age did not, as ours does, hate learning worse than toad or asp'. I incline to the view that the meaning is 'Thy age, like ours, hated not learning worse than toad or asp (but just as much as they hated either)'. Sir John Cheke himself had complained that 'The Greek language [is] hateful to many . . . The good men of the present age abhor the scholarly mind.'

The question arises why, if Milton was not decrying his own contemporaries by referring to a more scholarly age, he should have made this reference to Sir John Cheke at all. Part of the point may be that he was cheering himself up with the wry reflection that, as a scholar in an unscholarly age, at least he had distinguished predecessors (compare the way he employs historical references in other sonnets, for example 'Daughter to that good Earl'). But the reference may have significance beyond the fact that Cheke represented classical scholarship. Mark Pattison, in his edition of the sonnets (1883), points out that Cheke had been a member of a Commission appointed by Parliament to codify ecclesiastical law.

The draft of this code included a law of divorce, which enlarged the permission much beyond the limits assigned by the canon law of the Catholic Church. Thus it was only by chance that a law of divorce such as Milton was advocating was not actually in force in England. An account of this commission is given by Milton at the end of . . . *Tetrachordon.*

## 'I did but prompt the age to quit their cloggs'

This sonnet is Milton's reply, as he says, to 'the detraction which followed upon my writing certain treatises'. The treatises were those on divorce. Milton thought that a meet and

happy conversation [i.e. all that is implied in 'living together'] is the chiefest and the noblest end of marriage, and that where this was impossible, divorce by mutual consent ought to be allowed. As he writes in the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, 'The law can to no rational purpose forbid divorce. It can only take care that the conditions of divorce be not injurious.' Milton's divorce pamphlets evoked more scurrilous abuse than reasoned discussion.

Milton's reference to the animal noises made by his detractors is within a long tradition of employing animals as representing human qualities. The Owl signified ignorance, the preference for darkness rather than light, the Cuckoo ingratitude, from the way it ousts the offspring of its foster-parents from the nest, and also vanity, because in its cry it keeps calling out its own name; the Dog symbolised quarrelsomeness and the desire to belittle the achievements of others, and so on.

The reference to Latona and her offspring bears the implication that Milton's writings on divorce are a true interpretation of the Gospels. The story of Latona had been interpreted allegorically by Christians. It occurs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Latona was fleeing with her new-born twins, Apollo and Diana, from the wrath of Juno. Being thirsty, she went to drink from a lake of clear water. A number of rough country-people ('hinds') prevented her from drinking, and threatened and insulted her. As a punishment they were changed into frogs.

In a Christian interpretation of this story, Latona is said to represent 'faith or the Scripture, which from the beginning were pregnant with Phoebus and Diana, that is with Christ and the Blessed Virgin'. Alexander Ross, a contemporary of Milton, published in 1653 a work called *Mystogogus Poeticus*; here it is asserted that 'Our Saviour Christ is the true Apollo', and that 'God's Church is the true Diana'.

If we re-read the sonnet, bearing in mind this allegorical interpretation of the Latona story, we shall see more clearly what Milton is doing. He likens himself to Latona, his detractors to the boorish countrymen who persecuted her, and his works to Apollo and Diana, that is, Christ and the true Church. This interpretation is borne out by the line 'But this is got by casting Pearl to Hoggs', a reference to Matthew vii, 6 These pearls were conventionally interpreted as 'the mysteries of the gospel', and the swine as 'profane men, who despise and care nothing about the gospel'.

The last four lines mark Milton's sense of disillusionment with many of his own side. The implication is that they cry for liberty, but are neither wise nor good enough to understand 'Christian liberty', which is the basis of Milton's argument in the divorce tracts.

## '*Harry* whose tuneful and well measur'd Song'

Henry Lawes was a member of the King's Music and a leading composer and singer of his age. Although Lawes was a devoted Royalist, Milton admired his musical friend greatly. Lawes composed the music for *Comus*, and in the first performance at Ludlow Castle in 1634 he played the Attendant Spirit. In *Comus* Milton paid several delicate compliments to Lawes, 'Whose artful strains have oft delaid / The huddling brook to hear his madrigal, / And sweeten'd every muskrose of the dale'. He also speaks of 'the soft pipe and smooth-dittied song', and in this sonnet the tone is pleasant and temperate, in keeping with Lawes's music as Milton describes it. The phrases 'tuneful and well-measur'd', 'just note', 'worth and skill', 'smooth aire', 'humor best our tongue', 'their happiest lines', all convey harmony, lack of discord. In the octet Milton praises Lawes particularly for the way his music suits the words he set

'with just note and accent'. His good taste is contrasted with Midas, whose asses' ears were a just punishment for comparing Pan's music to that of Apollo. Lawes has clearly chosen Apollo; he is 'the Priest of *Phœbus* Quire'. Lawes was noted for the ability to set words to music without obscuring their sense, and wrote settings for many poets. One of them, Waller, praised him for the same qualities as did Milton: 'The writer's and the setter's skill / At once the ravished ears do fill'.

This sonnet has a definite pattern: in the octet the way in which Lawes honoured verse is recorded, and in the sestet verse honours him. Milton uses the parallel of another poet, Dante, honouring another enchanting musician, Casella. Lawes is assured of fame in two ways: 'To after-age thou shalt be writ the man' etc; and, more emphatically, 'Dante shall give Fame leave to set thee higher / Then his *Casella*'.

## 'When Faith and Love which parted from thee never'

This sonnet is headed in the Cambridge manuscript 'On the religious memory of Mrs Catharine Thomason, my Christian friend, deceased December 1646'. Mrs Thomason was the wife of George Thomason, the bookseller and collector of the famous Thomason tracts, a large collection of political pamphlets published between 1642 and 1661, now in the British Museum. Though Thomason himself was a Royalist, these were collected quite impartially, and are an invaluable record of the controversies of the time. The copy of *Areopagitica* in the Thomason tracts bears the inscription *Ex dono Authoris*. Mrs Thomason was apparently an educated woman, and Thomason in his will speaks of 'my library called my late dear wife's library' when leaving various books to his children 'hoping they will make the better use of them, for their precious and dear mother's sake'.

This sonnet is unified by the personification of Faith and Love As these personifications are established in the first line they give weight to the rather fantastic and baroque imagery of the second part of the poem, which presents, in a very pictorial manner, Faith pointing upward 'with her golden rod', while Love leads on the hand-maidens of Mrs Thomason, her good works, which are dressed by Faith in 'purple beams / And azure wings'. 'Beams' and 'azure' are words used of sunlight and sky, and enrich our visualisation of the image, which is an elaboration of Acts x, 4. 'Thy prayers and thy alms are come up for a memorial before God' and Revelation xiv, 13: 'they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them'. Despite the artifice of this image and the paradox of lines three and four, the sonnet gives a prevailing impression of sobriety. Its diction is simple and mainly biblical, and the sentence structure straightforward. It is the piety of the concluding lines, with their reference to the waters of life, which remains with us, as is proper in a sonnet to the 'religious memory' of a 'Christian friend'.

## '*Fairfax*, whose name in armes through Europe rings'

This beautifully made sonnet begins with a conventional and splendid eulogy of Fairfax, the commander-in-chief of the army and a man of great energy and courage. It exalts him up to and beyond the level of the 'jealous monarchs' and 'remotest kings' of Europe. Milton then turns to the actual occasion of the sonnet. In 1648, after almost two years of peace, Royalist uprisings had broken out in Kent and South Wales. Fairfax had driven the rebels out of Kent, but they crossed the Thames, joined the Royalists of Essex and took and held Colchester through a long siege. Thus the commonplace allusion to the Hydra is very apt, and the implication is that Fairfax is a

Herculean figure. (The killing of the Hydra was one of the twelve labours of Hercules, every time one of its heads was crushed another two grew in its place) Scotland, the 'fals North', had broken its Solemn League and Covenant with Parliament by invading England, thus encouraging the rebels, imping their wings, that is strengthening them by grafted feathers. (Milton follows Euripides in seeing the Hydra as a winged beast.)

This idea of dissension growing ineradicably ('For what can Warr, but endless warr still breed') continues into the sestet, which is otherwise unusually distinct from the octave and a development from praise to what is really exhortation. The country will not be truly at peace until public morality is unquestionable. The enforced assessment and sales of Royalist properties led to bribery and extortion; Milton's hatred of this shameful state of affairs is frequently expressed in his prose writings. The strength of his condemnation and the undoubted sincerity of his admiration for Fairfax combine in the final sentence: 'In vain doth Valour bleed / While Avarice, and Rapine share the land.'

## '*Cromwell*, our cheif of men, who through a cloud'

This sonnet obviously follows the pattern of the sonnet to Fairfax, of congratulation on the achievements of war, followed by exhortation to the victories of peace; yet the effect is different, more violent. Whereas in the Fairfax sonnet the exhortatory sestet balances the octave which expresses the actual occasion of the poem, giving it poise and gravity, here the exhortation is definitely the purpose of the poem. The climax is in the vehemence of the final couplet; the main verb does not appear until the thirteenth line.

In 1652, fifteen ministers had put before the new Committee

for the Propagation of the Gospel 'humble proposals', which if accepted would have led to the foundation of a new state church, with wide powers of censorship. Milton deplored the union of the spiritual and the secular, and the payment of ministers, and feared for freedom of conscience should these proposals be accepted. Cromwell was known to support religious toleration among Protestants and was certainly 'our cheif of men' in the year before he became Protector. Thus Milton appeals to him as a man of 'faith and matchless Fortitude' who has with great effort made his way to 'peace and truth'. These words are carefully chosen: they are the final words of the Solemn League and Covenant with Scotland and are also depicted on the coins issued in honour of the victories of Worcester, Preston and Dunbar against the Scots, who were noted for religious intolerance.

However, it is as a conqueror that Milton next appeals to Cromwell, and he does not hide the bloodshed behind his conquests. There is an allusion to the execution of the King in 'on the neck of crowned Fortune proud / Hast reard Gods Trophies', as well as the biblical reminiscence ('Come near, put your feet upon the necks of these Kings', Joshua x, 24). There is also a reference to Cromwell's victory at Preston ('*Darwen* stream with blood of Scotts imbru'd'). Milton obviously feels that it is a man of Cromwell's force and power who is needed to 'save free Conscience'. The use of the final couplet is unique among Milton's sonnets; the obviousness of the rhyme underlines the contempt he feels for the 'hireling Wolves'; and so does the crudity of the monosyllabic rhyme-words (compare 'cloggs', 'doggs', 'froggs', 'hoggs' in the second *Tetrachordon* sonnet). The biblical connection between hireling priests and wolves is one Milton uses several times. In PL XII, 508–11, he was to write 'Wolves shall succeed for teachers, grievous Wolves / Who all the sacred mysteries of

Heav'n / To their own vile advantages shall turne / Of lucre and ambition'; and see also PL IV, 192–3, and 'Lycidas' 118–31. Again, 'maw' — usually an animal's stomach — is a word he uses with distaste and loathing: 'So Death / Shall be deceav'd his glut, and with us two / Be forc't to satisfie his Rav'nous Maw' (PL X, 989–91).

## '*Vane*, young in yeares, but in sage counsell old'

In this sonnet it seems that Milton is pointing out with pride a parallel between the Republic of England and the Roman Republic. Vane is 'in sage counsell old', surely a Roman virtue; and he is as wise as those statesmen who conquered Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, and Hannibal, 'the *African* bold', by wisdom rather than by force: *cedant arma togae* (Cicero, *De Officiis*, I, xxii, 76).

Sir Henry Vane, a foremost member of the Council of State, was primarily concerned with foreign affairs and naval administration (which perhaps is why Milton writes of the 'helme of *Rome*', though it is a common enough metaphor). The sonnet was sent to Vane three days after the Dutch ambassadors in England had been finally dismissed over a shipping dispute which had been simmering for several months. There were suspicions that the ambassadors had drawn out the negotiations so that they could gather information about the strength and stability of the English government. Thus their negotiations are 'hard to be spelld'. The imprecision of expression in this line, 'drift' ... 'hollow' ... 'hard to be spelld', parallels the obscurity of the ambassadors' intentions. There is surely a pun of sorts in 'hollow states': Holland is hollow in the sense of being empty and insincere. The octet, that part of the sonnet concerned with Vane's foreign concerns, seems held fast together by the two rhymes, which are themselves half-rhymes.

The last lines deal with a nearer matter, religious toleration. Vane had declared his wholehearted support for freedom of conscience at the Westminster Assembly of Divines; he had experienced the difficulties of uniting the secular and spiritual authorities when he was Governor of Massachusetts in 1636, and he believed that these should be separate. Milton uses the word 'severs' to express the complete separation he feels should exist between the two. 'The bounds of either sword', the limits of each authority, should be clearly defined and recognised.

The sonnet ends on what may be again a Roman note, with an image of religion, a noble mother, supported by her noble eldest son.

## 'Avenge O Lord thy slaughter'd Saints, whose bones'

At the time of the massacre of the Vaudois in Piedmont, Milton was Secretary to the Committee for Foreign Affairs. The massacre caused great public concern in England, and was talked and written about for a long time. It seems that Milton, as Secretary to the Committee, wrote to the heads of a number of Protestant states, asking them to join with the English Commonwealth in making representations on behalf of the persecuted sect.

The Vaudois were considered by other Protestants to be the earliest Protestant Church, and were therefore held in great esteem. So Milton refers to 'them who kept thy truth so pure of old / When all our Fathers worship't Stocks and Stones' — the 'Stocks and Stones' being of course the images and statues of Roman Catholicism, which Milton thought idolatrous. Apparently they began as a movement for reform within the Church, but were excommunicated in 1215. Nevertheless they gained many adherents in Provence and Dauphiné, and also in Lombardy, Germany and Bohemia.

Later, they declined in numbers, and were chiefly to be found among the peasantry in the valleys of the Alps. After the Reformation, they entered into relation with the Swiss Protestants, and eventually became an organised Protestant Church.

The Dukes of Savoy attempted to repress the Vaudois, who became a warlike people under the impact of persecution. In 1561, the then Duke granted toleration to those Vaudois who lived within certain territorial limits. However, nearly a century afterwards, there were still Vaudois living outside the limits. In 1655, these were commanded, upon pain of death, to withdraw within the limits before three days had elapsed. Some refused, or were unable to leave their homes quickly enough. Most of these fled, however, at the approach of the hostile army.

The treaty of 1561 had been enforced, and if the matter had rested there, the outside world would have heard little of the affair. But a decision was taken that the Vaudois should be eradicated from the territory of Savoy, and so occurred the terrible massacre of which Milton writes in this, one of his most famous sonnets.

Some of the Vaudois reached France, where they were safe, for the Edict of Nantes, which guaranteed tolerance to Protestants, had not yet been revoked. Their leaders went to Paris, made known what their people had suffered, and requested the protection of the Protestant states.

In the subsequent war, the Vaudois resisted the Piedmontese so successfully that their right to live peacefully inside their limited territory was restored to them. The military efforts of the Vaudois were supported by diplomatic pressures from other Protestant states, including England.

The syntactical structure of this sonnet is firm and clear in outline. There is no reason for tentativeness, ambiguity.

Milton is not considering an unresolved personal problem, but speaking out loudly on an issue, not personal to him, about which the morality is in no doubt. So it begins firmly, with an imperative verb ('Avenge') and is structured around three requests: 'Avenge', 'Forget not', 'sow'. The firmness with which the poem is built around these imperatives is mirrored by the 'time-scheme': the first half of the octave recalls the history of the Vaudois, the second half concerns the present, or rather the immediate past, while the sestet looks to the future, as Milton sees a hundred converted to Protestantism to take the place of each martyr.

The succession of personal pronouns, 'thy . . . Saints', 'them', 'thy truth', 'thy book', 'their groanes', 'thy Sheep', 'their . . . Fold', serves to suggest the bond between God and the Vaudois. The impersonality of 'the' in 'the bloody *Piemontese*' cuts sharply across this scheme, and suggests that the *Piemontese* are 'outsiders', shut off from the bond of communion.

The rhyming of the sonnet, with its emphasis on 'o' sounds, contributes powerfully to create an effect of restrained lamentation: it is like the tolling of a passing-bell.

## 'When I consider how my light is spent'

This sonnet may be compared with the earlier 'How soon hath time'. Both are personal meditations. In both Milton is concerned with his use of the special talents God had given him. This one is more explicitly biblical in language. For this reason it recalls the letter which had accompanied the earlier sonnet rather than the earlier sonnet itself. In that letter Milton explained his apparent failure, up to that time, to realise his talents. He said that he was steadily preparing himself for his life's work. The argument of the letter is based on three

biblical passages, John ix, Matthew xx and xxv. The first of these concerns the man who was born blind and restored to sight by Christ; the second is the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, the third the parable of the talents.

References to these three passages are woven into the octet of this sonnet. The question in John ix, of whether the blind man had sinned, and Jesus's reply, recalls that Milton's blindness was to be held by his political opponents to be a sign of God's disfavour. Jesus replied, 'Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him. I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'

The relevance of this quotation, in which *work* and *light* are connected, is obvious. In the letter accompanying the earlier sonnet Milton had greeted his friend as 'a good watch man to admonish that the howres of the night pass on (for so I call my life as yet obscure, and unserviceable to mankind) and that the day with me is at hand wherein Christ commands all to labour while there is light'.

The similarity of imagery between this poem and the letter written so long before suggests that as his sight began to fail him, Milton poignantly recalled the confidence of the earlier sonnet. It is usually assumed that the sonnet was written when Milton became completely blind. But that was in 1652, when he was 44 The reference to 'ere half my days' (suggesting the biblical notion of 'three score years and ten') makes it possible that the sonnet was written long before Milton's blindness was total. At the time of the earlier sonnet he had been on the borderline between preparation and achievement; but what achievement could he hope for now? This sonnet, then,

represents the contemplation, and resolution, of the problem of Milton's personal destiny as a Christian. He faces, and accepts, the facts at their worst, and finds that for the Christian hope nevertheless remains. The last three lines are best glossed by a passage from PL III, 649, where the angels, God's messengers, are described. They 'Stand ready at command, and are his Eyes / That run through all the Heav'ns, or down to th'Earth / Bear his swift errands over moist and dry, / Ore Sea and Land'. The comparison implicit in the last line of the sonnet is, as Smart explains, between 'angels who serve God in heaven, and bear his errands throughout the world, and devout men upon earth who approve themselves in the sight of God only by the humble and submissive acceptance of his decrees, and by waiting with quiet endurance for the fulfilment of his purposes'.

This sonnet has a basically simple 'skeleton'. 'When I consider . . . I ask; patience replies.' It may be thought of, then, as representing a dialogue between two protagonists, both of them aspects of Milton himself The turbulence of emotion underlying the complaint is expressed through the tangled syntax and metrical irregularities of the octet, whereas the final line, 'They also serve who only stand and waite', is metrically simple and brings us beautifully to a point of rest.

Considering the poem as a 'dialogue', one notices that 'patience' has given an *adequate* answer by line eleven· 'they serve him best'. To discern what is superadded is to understand why the ending of the sonnet is triumphant rather than resigned. When one comes to the words 'his State / Is Kingly', the pulse quickens with excitement: it is like that moment in an anthem when the trumpets ring out. It is as if Milton (and the reader) is *identifying* with the kingliness of God, enjoying, and sharing, His splendour.

## '*Lawrence* of vertuous Father vertuous Son'

This sonnet is addressed to one of the sons of Henry Lawrence, who was Lord President of the Council at the time of the Commonwealth. John Smart argues that Milton is more likely to have addressed Edward, the elder brother, who died at the age of 24 soon after the sonnet was written, rather than Henry, but the evidence is inconclusive, and in any case it is not vital to our understanding of the poem. This sonnet shows Milton enjoying the ordinary pleasures of life, the fireside on a grey day, a 'neat repast', and music. He writes of the discomforts of winter in suitably bleak words, 'dank', 'mire', and 'sullen', spring is honoured with a greater elegance and less realism 'till *Favonius* re-inspire / The frozen earth; and cloath in fresh attire / The Lillie and Rose'.

The last two lines of this poem have caused disagreement among critics Many editors and commentators have taken the words 'spare / To interpose them oft' to mean 'refrain from interposing them oft'. This interpretation was supported by a widely held view of Milton's character, namely that he was a rigid, unsociable 'puritan', who *could* only have meant to recommend moderation in festive indulgence, rather than the seeking of opportunities for it. The 'philological' argument is that the Latin *parcere* followed by an infinitive verb is an idiom meaning 'refrain from', and that 'spare' was used in a similar way in the seventeenth century. However, the word 'spare' could also mean 'afford', 'spare time for'; if Milton was using it in this sense, then he was saying that a wise man would frequently indulge in the kind of entertainment indicated in his poem.

John Smart comments, 'This passage has sometimes been taken as equivalent to 'spare time to interpose them oft', that is indulge in them freely; but this is a forced construction, and

contradicts the Horatian sentiment of moderation which we should look for in so Horatian a poem'

I disagree with Smart here. Surely, just because the meal contemplated is 'neat', 'light and choice', 'of Attick tast' (that is, frugal and simple), it would hardly be excessive to indulge in such a meal frequently. Smart, who follows Masson and many others, is making Milton say. 'Let us have a frugal meal, but not too often'. This would be an odd way to frame an invitation, and such a view can only rest on the assumption that Milton was an unsociable man. The early biographers (that is, those before Dr Johnson) make it clear that he was not If, as I think we should, we interpret these lines in a sense opposite to that favoured by Smart, they make very good sense, consonant with the rest of the sonnet, with what we know of Milton's habits, and with the other 'invitation' poem, '*Cyriack*, whose Grandsire on the Royal Bench', where Milton writes that 'mild Heav'n ... disapproves that care, though wise in show, / That with superfluous burden loads the day, / And when God sends a cheerful hour, refrains.'

There are other considerations

(1) Milton writes 'He who of those delights can judge, and spare'. As Elizabeth Jackson pointed out (*Pubns. of the Mod. Language Assoc.*, vol. 65 (1950), 328–9): 'The conjunction *and* indicates continuance of thought in the same direction. It would normally link "appreciate" and "find time to enjoy". If the second idea is contrasted — "refrain from enjoying" — the logical connective would have been *but* or *yet*.'

(2) Milton uses the litotes 'not unwise' rather than a straightforward declaration Litotes is frequently used to make a stronger impression than a direct statement, while disarming criticism. 'Some may think differently, but I venture to aver'. The words 'though wise in show' in the first *Cyriack* sonnet are suggestive in this connection.

(3) The odes of Horace which are echoed in the poem recommend the enjoyment of social pleasures Milton is hardly likely to have tacked on to his 'imitation' of Horace a grimly Puritan 'caveat'.

## '*Cyriack*, whose Grandsire on the Royal Bench'

Cyriack Skinner was the grandson of Sir Edward Coke, who had been the Chief Justice of the King's Bench in his day and was the author of various legal treatises. Cyriack himself had been a pupil of Milton's and was to be one of those who helped the poet at the time of the Restoration A lawyer himself, he took a deep interest in political affairs, and was a prominent member of The Rota, a republican debating club. The other sonnet which Milton addressed to Cyriack Skinner, on his blindness, is evidence that he was both personally and politically in sympathy with Milton. In these lines however Milton is writing as a former teacher as well as a friend. The imperatives which knit the sonnet, 'resolve with me', 'Let *Euclid* rest', 'learn thou betimes', 'know', emphasise this tutelary vein as does the mild rebuke implied in the last three lines

Milton's habit was to have an evening of pleasure and recreation once a month, 'a gaudy day'. Both this sonnet and that addressed to Lawrence are invitations to share with him this time of relaxation. However, the tone here is graver than in the Lawrence sonnet, possibly because Cyriack was a more sober man: the dignity of his grandfather is rehearsed at some length, and the weight of Cyriack's interests are shown, Euclid, Archimedes, and 'what the *Swede* intends, and what the *French*'. The refreshing pleasures are spoken of in the chastest terms: 'deep thoughts' are to be drenched, not in drink, but in

mirth that brings 'no repenting' in its train; 'mild Heav'n' has ordained a time for ease; 'a cheerful hour' is God-sent.

## '*Cyriack*, this three years day these eys, though clear'

The tone of this sonnet is decorous; the emotional pressure of 'When I consider how my light is spent' would have been inappropriate to a familiar letter, which is what the sonnet is. Nevertheless there is a certain gravity of tone, which saves the poem from seeming egotistic or boastful.

The sonnet was probably written in 1655, since Milton had lost his eyesight three years earlier. 'This three years day' is an idiomatic expression meaning 'for three years', and there is no reason to believe that the sonnet was written exactly on the third anniversary of Milton's loss of eyesight.

Milton went blind gradually. His left eye was blind by the beginning of 1650, when he was asked to write a defence of the English republicans against the attack of Salmasius, who had been commissioned by the Royalists. Milton's reply, the *Defensio pro Populo Anglicano*, cost him the complete loss of his eyesight. He was warned that if he persisted in the writing of this work, he might become totally blind; and he decided that he must do his duty at whatever cost. He finished the *Defensio*, and by 1652 was totally blind.

The *Defensio* is one of the most carefully reasoned and objective of all Milton's political writings, and Milton is right in saying that it was widely talked of in Europe. However, it is a mistake to assume that Milton had a general fame as an apologist for the Republicans. We read his prose works nowadays because of his great fame as a poet, and because they often rise above immediate political aims to the expression of a great ideal vision; but for his own age he was merely one among

scores of participants in the ideological warfare between the Royalists and the Republicans.

## 'Methought I saw my late espoused Saint'

This, one of Milton's most famous sonnets, was for a long time accepted without question as being about his second wife, Katharine Woodcock. In 1945 W. R Parker, in *The Review of English Studies*, published an interesting argument for the view that it might have referred to Milton's first wife, Mary Powell, and there has been much discussion on this subject since. A good deal of the argument turns upon the lines 'Mine as whom washt from spot of child-bed taint, / Purification in the old Law did save'. The reference is to Leviticus xii, 2–5, which lays down laws concerning women after childbirth. Parker's argument rests partly on the fact that the lines seem to refer to a woman who died in childbirth, and that this could only apply to Mary Powell and not to Katharine Woodcock, who died more than three months after she had given birth. Fitzroy Pyle, who defended the traditional assumption, retorted that in fact the lines seem to prove conclusively the case for Katharine Woodcock, who died on 3 February, the day after the Feast of the Purification, which celebrates the ritual purification of Mary after she had given birth to Jesus. The suggestion is that in the fifth and sixth lines of the poem Milton is (in the dream, and as it were by wish-fulfilment), comparing his dead wife with Mary. For Mary recovered from the dangers of childbirth; Katharine lived long enough for the eighty days of 'purification in the old Law' to have been accomplished, but did not recover. Though she survived quite a long time, she died of the effects of childbirth.

However, Leo Spitzer suggests that the sonnet ought not to be treated biographically. In his view Milton was not writing

about any particular real woman at all, but about a *donna angelicata* of his imagination (see *Essays on English and American Literature*, Princeton 1962). I sympathise with the feeling that 'biography' should not be our controlling interest when we read the poem, but it seems to me probable that this, like most of Milton's other sonnets, has a close relation to a particular factual occasion. To conclude that Milton was not writing about a real woman at all does not help us, for example, to decide how to read the words 'my late espoused Saint'. Do they mean 'the saint (that is, the saintly person), to whom I was recently married'? Or 'my former wife, who is now a saint in heaven'?

The emotional movement of this sonnet is, as it were, the reverse of that in 'When I consider how my light is spent'. In that poem Milton moves from a troubled to a deeply serene state, here the movement is from restrained emotion to the deep pathos of Milton's waking from his dream: 'I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night.'

The *control* which we sense through most of the poem is the result partly of the strong pauses on most of the line-endings; metrically we do not have a sense of turbulence within the lines, as we do elsewhere in Milton. The *emotion* which is just below the surface is expressed by the 'disturbed' syntax of the second quatrain. The repetition — 'Mine as whom', 'Such, as yet' — suggests a troubled mind. We are not sure of the syntactical structure of the sentence which begins at line five until we reach line nine, when we are given the verb — 'Came vested all in white, pure as her mind'. The reader's 'vagueness', caused by the syntax (the delayed verb) and by the vagueness of reference in 'Mine' and 'such', suggests the state of a man awoken from sleep who struggles to recapture the clarity of a dream, a clarity which is powerfully conveyed in the line 'Came vested all in white, pure as her mind'.

In the latter part of the poem, there is an emphasis on light, on seeing, which prepares for the powerful pathos of the conclusion: 'sight', 'white', 'sight', make a pattern which is, so to speak, brutally demolished in the final line. For the poet is blind; his wife is dead and can only visit him in his dream: daylight is his darkest time.

## 'Because you have thrown of your Prelate Lord'

This is a *caudate* sonnet, from the Italian *sonetto caudato*, meaning a sonnet with a *coda*, or tail. The tail is composed of a half-line and a couplet, and any number of tails may be added. The form is reserved, as here, for humorous and satirical pieces.

In this poem Milton attacks the Presbyterian clergymen who attended the Westminster Assembly. In 1643 the Long Parliament abolished church government by bishops and archbishops, and decided to substitute a form of government like that of the Church of Scotland. This is the 'classic Hierarchy' of the poem, the Presbytery of the Scottish church being sometimes known as a *classis*. Parliament set up an Assembly of Divines to prepare a new constitution; the Rutherford of the sonnet was one of four Scots in the Assembly.

The majority opinion was in favour of a Presbyterian settlement; but this was opposed by a number of Independents, the forerunners of our modern Congregationalists. These desired autonomy for particular congregations: as Milton says, in the Preface to *Defensio Populi*, 'They that we call Independents . . . hold, that no classes or synods have a superiority over any particular church'. When the Independents saw that their system of local autonomy would not be adopted as the state system, they pressed for their right to set up congregations freely outside the state system. The Presbyterians however refused to grant them this liberty, thinking it better that

everyone should conform to the state system. Hence the bitterness of Milton in this sonnet He felt that one tyrannical system had merely been replaced by another

Discussion between the Presbyterians and the Independents was not confined to the Assembly, the years 1644–6 saw a great many pamphlets on the question. The end of the sonnet makes it clear that Milton hoped that Parliament would favour toleration for Independency.

The pun in the final line neatly enforces Milton's point that the Presbyterians were no better than the church leaders who had been ousted *presbyter* and *priest* have a common Greek ancestor, *priest* merely being a contracted form through the French. Presumably there is also a pun in the first line, with 'your Prelate Lord'. Archbishop Laud was executed by the Parliamentarians in 1645.

This sonnet is, deliberately I am sure, cruder in tone than any others excepting perhaps the two sonnets on the reception of Milton's divorce tracts Judged as political comment, it is an effective piece, and it is inappropriate to invoke any higher standard. Those who have looked into some of the controversial pamphlets of the Civil War and Commonwealth period will agree that Milton adopts their tone very well Its vehement, hard-hitting, witty and pungent style is very suitable to its occasion.

# *Questions for Discussion*

1. Write an appreciation of the 'Nativity Ode', showing how Milton weaves the various 'ideas' upon which he draws into a unity.
2. 'All that short compositions can usually attain is neatness and elegance' (Johnson). Do you find the 'Nativity Ode' a more significant poem than this judgement would imply?
3. With special reference to the 'Nativity Ode', discuss Milton's treatment of material from the Bible.
4. 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' have been thought to represent meditations by the young Milton about the kind of life he ought to lead Do you regard them as having this particular kind of seriousness?
5. Write on the variety in Milton's handling of the octosyllabic line in 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso'.
6. Compare 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' with any other poems you know on the subject of 'the happy life'.
7. It is sometimes said that Milton handles language in a more Shakespearean way in *Comus* than anywhere else in his work Do you find the verse in *Comus* at all like that of Shakespeare, and if so, how?
8 In what ways do you find that *Comus* may usefully be compared with Milton's major poems, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*?
9 Write on the various ways in which Milton contrived to make *Comus* pleasing to the Earl of Bridgewater and his family.
10. Write an essay on the water and resurrection images of 'Lycidas'.

11. Some commentators believe that it is Lycidas rather than St Michael who is asked to 'Look homeward' in line 163 of 'Lycidas'. What do you think are the relevant arguments on either side of the question?
12. Attempt a detailed comparison of 'Lycidas' with any other pastoral elegy that you have read.
13. Write on Milton's handling of the sonnet form, comparing his work with that of any earlier sonnet writer that you know.
14. 'They are simple but majestic records of the feelings of the poet; as little tricked out for the public eye as his diary would have been' (Macaulay). Do you agree with this judgement about the sonnets?
15. Take any one of Milton's sonnets which you think successful, and analyse it in order to show how syntax, structure, rhyme and so on are appropriate to its particular theme.

# *Further Reading*

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