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The Collected Poems of John Milton

John Milton

The Works of
John Milton

with an Introduction and Bibliography

The Wordsworth Poetry Library

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INTRODUCTION

IN 1638 Cardinal Francesco Barberini, councillor to his uncle, Pope Urban VIII and the most powerful man in Rome, waited for one of his guests at the door of his palace. This signal honour was bestowed on a young scholar and poet, who could write with equal grace and facility in Latin, Italian and English. At Cambridge, at the age of sixteen, he had been known as 'the Lady of Christ's' because of his delicately fair complexion and his remoteness. He was loved by his friends and indulged by his father, who patiently allowed him to further his studies without taking on a profession, and who had funded this Grand Tour during which the young man visited Rome, Florence, Naples and Venice (where he bought music by Gesualdo and Monteverdi), and met numerous aristocrats and scholars. Among these were the aged Galileo and the Neapolitan Manso, Marquis de Villa, who was a friend of the poet Tasso, and who wrote, 'If with your mind, your looks, your grace, your bearing, you also had the true faith then truly you would be no Angle but an angel'. For perhaps the most surprising thing about this sprig of the High Renaissance, this thirty-year-old John Milton, was that he was a Protestant.

The monumental figure of the blind, powerful Puritan (his eyesight finally failed in 1652) who wrote the only English epic, *Paradise Lost* and its lucid codicil, *Paradise Regained*, has come to overshadow the brilliant young intellectual of the early years. Milton seems always to have felt that his vocation was to be a great poet, and the single-minded passionate studiousness which he exhibited from at least the age of thirteen was a conscious preparation for this calling. He was twenty-one when he wrote his first palpably 'Miltonic' poem. 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity'. Using an elaborate form of Italian *canzona* (stanzas of varying line lengths) he brings a baroque perspective to the usually rather cosier view of the birth of Christ. Here it is the Incarnation, God made flesh, which is the cosmic event he celebrates, the dawning of the light of truth on the shadowed pagan world. Instead of a meek ox by the manger we have the bull-headed Egyptian god, Osiris, fleeing 'the dreaded infant'. In a passage of youthful bravura (stanzas XIXX-XXV) we see the young poet indulging in the passion for strange sonorous names which colours so much of *Paradise Lost*, as he pictures pagan deities and prophets of Syria, Egypt and

ancient Greece retreating before the conquering light of Christian truth. This great poem is beautiful, though with a kind of cosmic coldness:

> Ring out, ye crystal spheres
> 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 bass of heav'n's deep organ blow.

Here as elsewhere Milton employs the already obsolete Ptolemaic cosmology, in which Earth is seen at the centre of the universe, with the sun, moon, planets and fixed stars revolving in a series of nine concentric spheres, whose transcendental harmony could not be heard by sin-polluted humankind.

Milton wrote his charming and lighthearted pair of poems 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' in 1631-2. These invoke, successively, Mirth and Melancholy, making each sound the more attractive choice. Although Milton was temperamentally more inclined to pensiveness, these poems should be seen as constituting a whole, the one being as necessary to the other as day is to night.

In 1634 Milton's friend, the musician Henry Lawes, who was tutor to the Earl of Bridgewater's children, asked him to write a masque to celebrate the Earl's installation as Lord President of Wales. Lady Alice Egerton, at fifteen, and her brothers, aged eleven and nine, were to perform before their parents. And in *Comus* Milton experimented with youthful profligacy. Poetry of an overflowing natural sensuousness, inspired by the writings of Spenser and Shakespeare, is brought to a form which combines attempts at Shakesperean drama with high-flown pastoral and what can only be perceived as preaching. The Lady, separated from her brothers in the archetypal 'dark wood', is tempted, in the most ravishing poetry, by the wicked and sensual enchanter, Comus. She replies – at great length – that her chastity is so powerful that he cannot prevail, and is eventually rescued by her brothers, aided by the Attendant Spirit, disguised as a shepherd and played by Lawes himself, who had set much of the text to music. As in *Paradise Lost* the devil has all the best tunes, and in informed understanding of Milton's eclectic philosophy and often pretty unorthodox theology is required to see that Virtue does eventually win the argument. Immediately accessible, however, are the beauty of the language, the jewelled lyricism of the sings to Echo and Sabrina and the grave warmth which the occasion seems to have brought out in Milton.

In 1637 he was to write his last poem for twenty years. 'Lycidas'

is an elegy to a young contemporary, drowned at sea. In fact, though, the poem is about Milton himself. Ostensibly a pastoral (the poet sees himself as a mourning shepherd), it soars into anxiety about his own surviving fame ('the spur that the clear spirit doth raise'), into furious polemic against the corruption of the Church of England, and a meditation upon death. With its mixture of lyricism, philosophy, theology and personal ambition, 'Lycidas' breathes such strong emotion and handles its Italianate prosody with such assurance that it speaks powerfully even when we fail to understand all its arcane reference and symbolism.

Now the world intruded on Milton's quiet life. The political upheavals which were to culminate in the Civil War, the execution of Charles I and the Commonwealth called forth Milton's skills as a polemicist. He was to write thundering treatises on the current preoccupations and controversies, such as the reformation of the church or the nature of kingship, and most memorably, in his great essay *Areopagitica*, against the censorship of books. 'A good book', he cried, 'is the precious life-blood of a master spirit'. And in 1643 he published an astonishing, and unorthodox, defence of divorce. As so often with Milton's writing, this arose from his own concerns. In 1642 he had married in haste. His much younger, and Royalist, wife returned to her parents almost immediately, and three years passed before they were reconciled. She was to die in 1652, leaving two surviving daughters. And by now, Milton's sight had gone completely, though this seems to have furnished no obstacle to his faithful work on the Commonwealth's Council of State. However, his noble and poignant sonnet, 'On His Blindness' tells us of his pain and frustration: 'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?' Centring his argument on the Parable of the Talents, he thinks of himself as wasting what he has been given. The conclusion, as with so many of his orotund and ambitious poems, is of limpid simplicity: 'They also serve, who only stand and wait'.

In 1656 he married again, but his wife died in childbirth two years later. He was to marry for the last time in 1663. And, as the Commonwealth foundered, he mounted another attack on republicanism, which ensured his arrest when Charles II came to the throne. Intercession by friends released him with only a fine, and now he settled to what he had always thought of as his *magnum opus*, an epic poem in English. Having decided on the theme of man's fall, and his redemption by Christ (he tells us that he had toyed with the idea of an Arthurian epic) Milton had embarked on *Adam Unparadised* soon after his return from Italy. This seems to have been planned as a mixture of Greek tragedy and the kind of opera (itself based on the Greek model) favoured by Monteverdi.

But, undeceived as to his capacity for such a soaring theme, he had soon abandoned it, as he had abandoned an ambitious early poem on Christ's Passion.

Paradise Lost is a daunting undertaking for the new reader. Milton's Latinate constructions, his paragraph-long sentences, his abstruse allusions and his (very idiosyncratic) theology can bemuse readers brought up without the classical and religious framework which Milton demands of his audience, which he himself recognised would be 'select and few'. Nevertheless, if one is prepared to abandon oneself to what de Quincy called 'the slow, planetary wheelings' of the poem, as well as to enjoy what is in fact a ripping yarn, there are vast pleasures to be gained from it. Many of the abstruse references, one suspects, arise from Milton's enduring delight in sonorous proper names, while the long similes explain themselves in the action described. Even Milton's convoluted syntax can serve his complex sense. The poem opens with a statement of its epic intent:

> Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
> With loss of Eden, till one greater man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
> Sing, Heav'nly Muse . . .

Thirty-eight words elapse before we reach the main, imperative verb, but those words summarise the whole theme of the poem – disobedience, fruit, 'mortal taste', death, woe, Eden and the Redemption.

What has seduced so many readers, particularly in the Romantic era, is the towering figure of Satan. Majestic in his fall, eloquent, daring and intellectual, he is so complex and attractive that we are inclined to feel, as William Blake did, that Milton 'was of Satan's party and did not know it'. The evocation of Pandemonium, the darkly glittering new home of the fallen angels, and the terrifying portraits of Sin and Death have awe-inspiring force. Yet the appealing nature-imagery which surrounds Adam and Eve also has a powerful beauty, while Milton's complex narrative and chronology maintain a surprisingly gripping pace. Although we know that mankind will be redeemed by Christ, our last glimpse is of Adam and Eve expelled from Paradise. Once again, Milton eschews his orotundities for an ending of incomparable simplicity:

> They hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way.

Milton's last great work, *Samson Agonistes*, has a similarly quiet

ending. The story, treated as a Greek tragedy, with its scenes separated by choruses, and with all the action taking place offstage, comes from the Bible. Samson, the strong hero of the Israelites, has been captured and blinded by their Philistine enemies, and is now 'Eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves'. 'O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon', he laments, and it is impossible not to see the blind, impotent hero as a self-portrait of the poet and statesman, now in a sort of internal exile among his royalist enemies. A series of searching temptations and encounters leads up to Samson's bringing down the temple on the Philistines and his own death. Milton died in 1674, and it is not too far-fetched to see in this last rugged work an appropriate epitaph. Samson's father, Manoa, speaks:

> Nothing is here for tears . . .
> . . . nothing but well and fair,
> And what may quiet us in death so noble.

And the chorus ends on one of Milton's heartrendingly quiet notes:

> His servants he, with new acquist
> Of true experience, from this great event,
> With peace and consolation hath dismissed,
> And calm of mind, all passion spent.

Antonia Till, 1994

FURTHER READING

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MISCELLANEOUS POEMS

ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY

Composed 1629

I

This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heaven's eternal King,
Of wedded Maid and Virgin Mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That He our deadly forfeit should release,
And with His Father work us a perpetual peace.

II

That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,
Wherewith He wont at Heaven's high council-table
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
He laid aside; and here with us to be
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

III

Say, Heavenly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein
Afford a present to the Infant God?
Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,
To welcome Him to this His new abode,
Now while the Heaven, by the Sun's team untrod,
Hath took no print of the approaching light,
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

IV

See how from far upon the eastern road
The star-led wizards haste with odours sweet!
O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,
And lay it lowly at His blessed feet;
Have thou the honour first thy Lord to greet,
And join thy voice unto the angel quire,
From out His secret altar touched with hallowed fire.

THE HYMN

I

It was the winter wild,
While the Heaven-born Child
All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies;
Nature in awe to Him
Had doffed her gaudy trim,
With her great Master so to sympathize:
It was no season then for her
To wanton with the sun her lusty paramour.

II

Only with speeches fair
She woos the gentle air
To hide her guilty front with innocent snow,
And on her naked shame,
Pollute with sinful blame,
The saintly veil of maiden white to throw,
Confounded, that her Maker's eyes
Should look so near upon her foul deformities.

III

But He, her fears to cease,
Sent down the meek-eyed Peace;
She crowned with olive green came softly sliding
Down through the turning sphere,
His ready harbinger,
With turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing,
And waving wide her myrtle wand,
She strikes a universal peace through sea and land.

IV

No war or battle's sound
Was heard the world around,
  The idle spear and shield were high up-hung:
The hooked chariot stood
Unstained with hostile blood,
  The trumpet spake not to the armed throng,
And kings sat still with awful eye,
As if they surely knew their sovran Lord was by.

V

But peaceful was the night
Wherein the Prince of Light
  His reign of peace upon the earth began:
The winds with wonder whist,
Smoothly the waters kissed,
  Whispering new joys to the mild Ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave.

VI

The stars with deep amaze
Stand fixed in steadfast gaze,
  Bending one way their precious influence,
And will not take their flight,
For all the morning light,
  Or Lucifer that often warned them thence;
But in their glimmering orbs did glow,
Until their Lord Himself bespake, and bid them go.

VII

And though the shady gloom
Had given day her room,
  The sun himself withheld his wonted speed,
And hid his head for shame,
As his inferior flame
  The new-enlightened world no more should need;
He saw a greater Sun appear
Than his bright throne or burning axle-tree could bear.

VIII

The shepherds on the lawn,
Or ere the point of dawn,
  Sat simply chatting in a rustic row;
Full little thought they then
That the mighty Pan
  Was kindly come to live with them below;
Perhaps their loves or else their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts so busy keep.

IX

When such music sweet
Their hearts and ears did greet,
  As never was by mortal finger strook,
Divinely warbled voice
Answering the stringed noise,
  As all their souls in blissful rapture took:
The air such pleasure loth to lose,
With thousand echoes still prolongs each heavenly close.

X

Nature that heard such sound
Beneath the hollow round
  Of Cynthia's seat, the airy region thrilling,
Now was almost won
To think her part was done,
  And that her reign had here its last fulfilling;
She knew such harmony alone
Could hold all Heaven and Earth in happier union.

XI

At last surrounds their sight
A globe of circular light,
  That with long beams the shame-faced night arrayed,
The helmed cherubim
And sworded seraphim
  Are seen in glittering ranks with wings displayed,
Harping in loud and solemn quire,
With unexpressive notes to Heaven's new-born Heir.

XII

Such music (as 'tis said)
Before was never made,
But when of old the sons of morning sung,
While the Creator great
His constellations set,
And the well-balanced world on hinges hung,
And cast the dark foundations deep,
And bid the welt'ring waves their oozy channel keep.

XIII

Ring out, ye crystal spheres,
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 Heaven's deep organ blow;
And with your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort to th' angelic symphony.

XIV

For if such holy song
Enwrap our fancy long,
Time will run back and fetch the age of gold,
And speckled vanity
Will sicken soon, and die,
And lep'rous sin will melt from earthly mould,
And Hell itself will pass away
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

XV

Yea, Truth and Justice then
Will down return to men,
Orbed in a rainbow; and, like glories wearing,
Mercy will sit between,
Throned in celestial sheen,
With radiant feet the tissued clouds down-steering,
And Heaven, as at some festival,
Will open wide the gates of her high palace-hall.

XVI

But wisest Fate says No,
This must not yet be so,
  The Babe lies yet in smiling infancy,
That on the bitter cross
Must redeem our loss,
  So both Himself and us to glorify:
Yet first to those ychained in sleep,
The wakeful trump of doom must thunder through the deep,

XVII

With such a horrid clang
As on Mount Sinai rang,
  While the red fire and smould'ring clouds out-brake:
The aged Earth aghast
With terror of that blast
  Shall from the surface to the centre shake;
When at the world's last session,
The dreadful Judge in middle air shall spread His throne.

XVIII

And then at last our bliss
Full and perfect is,
  But now begins; for from this happy day
Th' old Dragon under-ground
In straiter limits bound,
  Not half so far casts his usurped sway,
And, wroth to see his kingdom fail,
Swinges the scaly horror of his folded tail.

XIX

The oracles are dumb,
No voice or hideous hum
  Runs through the arched roof in words deceiving.
Apollo from his shrine
Can no more divine,
  With hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving.
No nightly trance or breathed spell
Inspires the pale-eyed priest from the prophetic cell.

XX

The lonely mountains o'er,
And the resounding shore,
A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament;
From haunted spring and dale,
Edged with poplar pale,
The parting Genius is with sighing sent,
With flower-inwoven tresses torn
The nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

XXI

In consecrated earth,
And on the holy hearth,
The Lars and Lemures moan with midnight plaint;
In urns and altars round,
A drear and dying sound
Affrights the Flamens at their service quaint;
And the chill marble seems to sweat,
While each peculiar power forgoes his wonted seat.

XXII

Peor and Baalim
Forsake their temples dim,
With that twice-battered god of Palestine;
And mooned Ashtaroth,
Heaven's queen and mother both,
Now sits not girt with tapers' holy shrine;
The Libyc Hammon shrinks his horn,
In vain the Tyrian maids their wounded Thammuz mourn.

XXIII

And sullen Moloch fled,
Hath left in shadows dread
His burning idol all of blackest hue;
In vain with cymbals' ring
They call the grisly king,
In dismal dance about the furnace blue;
The brutish gods of Nile as fast,
Isis and Orus, and the dog Anubis, haste.