

MILTON'S STYLE

I make

034

A guardian spirit, or Daemon

Before the sterner threshold of Fobes court
my mansion is, where those in soft shapes
of bright aerial spirits live in shades
in regions mild of calm & serene air: ~~where they sit~~
amidst the garden's fragrant bowers, ~~on velvet banks~~
~~glad with the~~ ~~celestial songs~~ ~~and~~ ~~grow~~
beside with roses, hyacinth

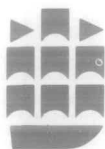
THE SHORTER POEMS PARADISE REGAINED & SAMSON AGONISTES

ARCHIE BURNETT

Milton's Style:

The Shorter Poems, *Paradise Regained*, and 'Samson Agonistes'

Archie Burnett



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For David Cunningham

Preface

Milton's style has been both a celebrated and highly controversial subject. Discussion has concentrated hitherto on *Paradise Lost* – understandably. But though the rest, or other half, of the poetry has hardly been neglected (nothing goes neglected in Milton studies), there has to date been no detailed and wide-ranging study of Milton's stylistic achievement from 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' to *Paradise Regained* and 'Samson Agonistes'. (This is perhaps strange, for the twentieth-century debate about Milton has shown a marked concern with allegations that his style lacks delicacy and flexibility.)

This book has various aims: to give close readings of Milton's poems other than *Paradise Lost*; to take into account the criticism on these poems, focusing on major issues; and to investigate the variety and consistency of their style. Detailed analyses of the styles of 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', the 'Nativity Ode', 'Comus', 'Lycidas', *Paradise Regained*, and 'Samson Agonistes', as well as of some psalms and sonnets and other minor poems, are included; and the review of the criticism is undertaken on the basis of these analyses. The result is a kind of compact critical variorum.

The decision not to write on *Paradise Lost* – in this book, anyway – is a purely practical one. The main consideration is the almost unmanageable bulk and complexity of Milton scholarship. In the real world it would be highly improbable that anyone could locate, read, digest, and evaluate all of it, and write on all of the poetry as well. The proliferation of scholarship, much of it superb, and to the serious reader indispensable, is one of the problems of our age. In 1969 John Gross said of the scholarship on Alexander Pope:

A generation or so ago very little of real note had been added to what the eighteenth-century critics had to say. Today there are, I suppose, at least half-a-dozen full-length critical studies which are worth reading, while a leading American

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scholar has edited an anthology entitled *44 Essential Articles on Pope*. None of this represents wasted labour. But what are we all going to do when there are forty-four essential books?

(*The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* (1969; rpt., 1973), p. 319)

The state of affairs envisaged in that last sentence is fast becoming a reality in Milton scholarship (and, no doubt, such as Milton is will Pope be). In fact, the volume of publication on Milton has even increased dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s. And if specialists find it difficult to keep up to date, their problem is slight in comparison with that of students and teachers in general, whose time available for any one author is necessarily limited. Accordingly, it seemed best to do what could reasonably be done (and done reasonably) in one book.

Each of Milton's poems discussed is taken on its own terms. The significance of any feature of a poet's style is by no means constant in every poem, and strict adherence to any single principle of analysis can resemble eating soup with a fork. It is important that attention should be given to whatever is emphasized in the individual poem, irrespective of the means whereby it is emphasized. However, it has often proved useful, both for discovering some of the significant patterns in the language of each poem, and for outlining Milton's stylistic development, to consider his adjective usage. Figures are given for this, and should be referred to the complete table at the end of the book. The more technical and theoretical problems of analytical procedure are discussed in an appendix. However, no particular technical knowledge should be necessary for understanding the readings of the poems.

At Milton's style in *Paradise Lost* Marvell exclaimed:

Where couldst thou Words of such a compass find?

Whence furnish such a vast expense of Mind?

('On Mr. Milton's *Paradise lost*', ll. 41-2)

His phrase 'Words of such a compass' could be applied aptly to the rest of the poetry, and even to the style within the structure of individual poems. It is this book's concern to find the measure of that stylistic compass.

Acknowledgements

Many people have given help in the course of this study. I thank all of them most heartily, and take full responsibility for any errors that may remain. As this is a first book, I should like to acknowledge my first university tutor of English, Ruth Mateer, whom it was my good fortune to meet at Edinburgh, and who has remained a constant source of encouragement ever since. So, too, has my student contemporary, John McGavin, now at Southampton University. In an earlier phase this work took the form of an Oxford D.Phil. thesis. It was supervised in a manner that I consider ideal by Professor John Carey, and without his vigilance, liveliness, and kindness it would never have come to much. The examiners of the thesis, Dennis Burden and Colin Williamson, made useful suggestions about content and format. The President and Fellows of St John's College elected me to a Junior Research Fellowship, and generously extended it for a fourth year – and all without insurance regarding a refund! Without this award this work would not have been possible. The staffs of St John's College Library, the English Faculty Library, the Taylorian Institute, and the Bodleian provided cheerful and efficient service at all times. I should also like to place on record the exemplary cooperation received from Longman. My last acknowledgement is of my greatest debt of all, to my wife Lesley. It was Burns who exclaimed, 'Ah, gentle dames, it gars me greet, / To think how monie counsels sweet, / How monie lengthen'd sage advices / The husband frae the wife despises!' He could have spoken with less irony and shed fewer tears on my score; but, then, I have had the constant advice of an expert lexicographer as well as tolerance when I have been intolerable.

Archie Burnett,
Oxford,
May, 1980.

Abbreviations

'Another'	– 'Another on the Same' (the second poem on the University Carrier)
Carey and Fowler	– <i>The Poems of John Milton</i> , ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (1968)
CE	– <i>College English</i>
'Circumcision'	– 'Upon the Circumcision'
CL	– <i>Comparative Literature</i>
CQ	– <i>Critical Quarterly</i>
'Cromwell'	– 'To the Lord General Cromwell'
'Cyriack Skinner'	– 'To Mr Cyriack Skinner upon his Blindness'
EC	– <i>Essays in Criticism</i>
ELH	– <i>A Journal of English Literary History</i>
ES	– <i>English Studies</i>
ESEA	– <i>Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association</i>
'Fairfax'	– 'On the Lord General Fairfax at the siege of Colchester'
'Fair Infant'	– 'On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough'
FQ	– <i>The Faerie Queene</i>
HLQ	– <i>Huntington Library Quarterly</i>
JEGP	– <i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
JHI	– <i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>
'May Morning'	– 'Song. On May Morning'
MLN	– <i>Modern Language Notes</i>
MLQ	– <i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
MLR	– <i>Modern Language Review</i>
MP	– <i>Modern Philology</i>
MQ	– <i>Milton Quarterly</i> (Milton Newsletter till 1970)
MS	– <i>Milton Studies</i>

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N & Q	– Notes and Queries
'Nativity Ode'	– 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity'
'New Forcers'	– 'On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament'
NM	– <i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
OED	– <i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i>
PL	– <i>Paradise Lost</i>
PMLA	– <i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
PQ	– <i>Philological Quarterly</i>
PR	– <i>Paradise Regained</i>
RES	– <i>Review of English Studies</i>
SAMLA	– <i>South Atlantic Modern Language Association</i>
'Samson'	– 'Samson Agonistes'
SEL	– <i>Studies in English Literature</i>
'Solemn Music'	– 'At a Solemn Music'
SP	– <i>Studies in Philology</i>
SQ	– <i>Shakespeare Quarterly</i>
TLS	– <i>The Times Literary Supplement</i>
TSLI	– <i>Texas Studies in Literature and Language</i>
'Univ. Carrier'	– 'On the University Carrier'
UTQ	– <i>University of Toronto Quarterly</i>
'Vac. Ex.'	– 'At a Vacation Exercise in the College'
'Vane'	– 'To Sir Henry Vane the Younger'
<i>Variorum Commentary</i>	– <i>A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton</i> , ed. Merritt Y. Hughes et al. (1970–)
'Winchester'	– 'An Epitaph on the Marchioness of Winchester'

NOTES

1. All quotations from Milton's poetry, apart from those used by other writers, are from the text of *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (1968).
2. Archaic spellings with 'u' and 'v' have been normalized to accord with modern convention.
3. Some standard linguistic abbreviations have been used: 'adj.' for adjective, 'advb.' for adverb, 'N.' for noun, 'Vb.' for verb, 'sg.' for singular, 'part.' for participle, and 'pl.' for plural. Two oblique markers enclosing a letter denote a phoneme: thus, the line 'Swinging slow with sullen roar' alliterates on the sound '/s/'.

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'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso'

Anyone who has carried out a survey of the scholarly and critical writing on 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' is likely to be impressed by the sheer bulk of what has been done on, or in some cases to, the poems, the wide variety of approaches taken, and, happily, the way that these two early works of Milton emerge, rather like fresh grass from an overlay of solid concrete, persistently appealing. It has generally been the case, as Rosemond Tuve says, that 'no willing student of these poems has been able to resist them';¹ but as commentary, of varying quality, proliferates, it is hard not to feel one's delight that the poems have proved so attractive change to dismay that so many students have been so willing. As controversy develops, or even as opinions multiply and tend to diverge, it becomes increasingly important to reread the poems themselves with care, so that the merits both of poems and commentary can be assessed. The poems have certainly been found charming, but it is hardly sufficient to say, as Christopher Ricks (astonishingly) does, that 'there is little to be said about charm':² to do this is, in effect, to disdain to analyse poetic effects and to overlook just how much has been said already. With the conviction that charm is worthy of examination, I propose in this chapter to offer a close reading of 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso'. I shall also use the information acquired through analysing the style of the poems in an appraisal of the existing criticism.

The poems have not pleased everyone. Rosemond Tuve's statement about the irresistibility of the poems may be taken to represent the prevailing consensus of critical opinion, but for a few readers the poems have held only a very limited appeal. Not unpredictably, perhaps, these readers have been T. S. Eliot, Robert Graves, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis. Eliot's criticism is concerned with one short passage in 'L'Allegro' that he was willing to resist, and will be discussed fully below. Graves regards the whole of 'L'Allegro' as 'a dreadful muddle' that sacrifices 'commonsense'

to 'cunning verbal music'.³ But the dreadful muddle is very much the result of Graves's own theories (which are not supported by any reliable biographical or textual evidence) about the composition of the poem. He substantiates his speculations only with displays of what might be called close misreading; and as he is concerned, therefore, with the details of specific passages, his criticisms will also be considered below. What must be questioned at once is Graves's critical manner:

In *Il Penseroso* [Milton] had sown Classical allusions with the sack; but apart from Hebe's cheek and a reference at the end to Orpheus and Eurydice, *L'Allegro* might have been written by any poetic bumpkin (Shakespeare, poor fellow, for example – 'father lost his money in the meat trade and couldn't send young Will to college') . . . Here's a Miltonic discovery for the scholars to toss about – if they want something to toss about . . .⁴

This banter soon stales as imitation of Milton's allegedly hack-like ways, to become sterile and irresponsible. It also reduces the credibility of Graves's more precise criticisms of the poems. By comparison, the seriousness of Leavis's manner is welcome. Leavis does not resist the poems, but he does resist disclosing why he thinks they possess little merit: 'I do not myself rank *L'Allegro* (or *Il Penseroso*) very high among Milton's works',⁵ he declares, apparently confident that his opinion is self-validating. Of course, it hardly bends the mind to infer from Leavis's other pronouncements on Milton that he must truly despise '*L'Allegro*' and '*Il Penseroso*'. But his judgement must remain unchallengeable only because his criteria are so obscure. Empson's criticism of the poems resembles Leavis's in that it is short and unsupported by evidence. Unlike Leavis's, however, it is flip-pant: "'*L'Allegro*' and "'*Il Penseroso*'" seem to me ponderous trifles with a few good lines in them, so that they are a bad place to look for profound symbols.'⁶ Does Empson's oxymoronic phrase 'ponderous trifles' commend a 'gravity and ease' in the style of the poems, or dismiss alleged pedantry? And is the meaning of 'profound symbols' clear enough for the alleged absence of such symbols to be so automatically a fault?

Clearly, if a stalemate of contradictory critical opinions is to be avoided, Graves, Empson, and Leavis cannot be answered in their own kind of critical language: their curt dismissal of the poems needs to be countered by something more substantial than curt approval. Ironically, the critical procedure which seems to promise the best answer to their criticisms is the one that they themselves have followed frequently, though by no means uniformly: inspecting the details of the poetic language. By doing this it will be possible to test the more precise criticisms made by Eliot and Graves, and to show that Milton's stylistic achievement is generally of a higher order than they, or Leavis and Empson, would have us believe.

An impression shared by many readers provides a useful starting point. It has often been remarked that 'L'Allegro' seems to be more extrovert and less exclusively cerebral in disposition than 'Il Penseroso', and that 'Il Penseroso' celebrates a comparatively personalized, even private, experience.⁷ Evidence for this difference between the poems can be found in the distribution of first-person pronouns in each:

	<i>I</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>my</i>	<i>mine</i>	<i>us</i>	<i>our</i>	<i>Total</i>
'L'Allegro'	2	2	1	1	1		7
'Il Penseroso'	6	4	4	2		1	17

'Il Penseroso' reminds the reader of its *persona* at least once in every 10 lines; 'L'Allegro', once in every 22 lines.⁸ This difference may be highlighted by considering the single occurrence of the plural form of the first-person pronoun in each poem. In 'Il Penseroso' 'our' is found in the first address to Melancholy:

But hail thou goddess, sage and holy,
Hail divinest Melancholy,
Whose saintly visage is too bright
To hit the sense of human sight;
And therefore to our weaker view,
O'erlaid with black staid wisdom's hue. (ll. 11–16)

'Our weaker view', equated with 'the sense of human sight', generalizes impersonally. By contrast, 'us' occurs in a typical social context in 'L'Allegro', where the speaker even assumes that the reader shares his predilections:

Towered cities please us then,
And the busy hum of men. (ll. 117–18)

The change from the single to the plural form of the first-person pronoun is made almost imperceptibly in 'L'Allegro'. One has to look back to line 69 before finding the singular form that is nearest to the plural in line 117:

Straight mine eye hath caught new pleasures
Whilst the landscape round it measures.

The eye, not strictly the speaker, catches the pleasures, and 'it' in the couplet's second line further depersonalizes the perception. It would seem, on the evidence of the pronouns throughout 'L'Allegro', that the happy man

is effaced by the experiences into which he so heartily throws himself. His disposition is to move out of himself and into social experiences that he can share with the reader. As David Miller has noted, the pensive man turns 'inward for meditation', whereas the happy man turns 'outward for observation'.⁹ 'L'Allegro' stresses what is perceived rather than who perceives; 'Il Penseroso' follows a process of perceiving in the mind of its *persona*.

The different relationship between the speaker and the reader subtly established in the poems may be explored further through verbs. After the imperatives that banish Melancholy and welcome Mirth, the speaker in 'L'Allegro' moves quietly behind the infinitives 'to live', 'to hear', and 'to come' (ll. 39, 41, 45). He thus makes his experiences public by not emphasizing them as his own. Thereafter in the poem his activities are represented by present participles ('list'ning', 'walking', ll. 53, 57), which, John Carey notes, are 'only hazily connected with any specific agent'.¹⁰ The reader is not told to whom the happy man bids good morrow, or whom the upland hamlets will invite (ll. 46, 92). The words 'loathèd', 'yclept', 'unreprovèd', 'not unseen', 'told', 'pinched', 'pulled', 'set', and 'well-trod' (ll. 1, 12, 40, 57, 101, 103, 103, 106, 131) appear without expressed agents. Highly generalized subjects abound: 'men' (ll. 13, 118), 'some sager' (l. 17), 'young and old' (l. 97), 'they' (l. 115), 'throngs of knights and barons bold' (l. 119), and 'store of ladies' (l. 121). Subject and verb together are omitted twice, in the lines 'Then to the spicy nut-brown ale' and 'Then to the well-trod stage anon' (ll. 100, 131). Only with the returning imperative in 'Lap me in soft Lydian airs' (l. 136) does the speaker reappear, and his previous self-withdrawal is such that his request has the force of 'as for me, lap me in soft Lydian airs'. Throughout 'L'Allegro', then, grammar operates in a way that makes the speaker's experiences the common property of the reader. Hospitable sharing is singled out stylistically as one of the speaker's chief delights.

Already, the language of 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' manifests a degree of precision and subtlety that has too readily been overlooked or ignored by critics. And yet the arrangement of the first-person pronouns and verbs in 'L'Allegro' is of central importance to one of the cruxes in the poem: in the lines 'Then to come in spite of sorrow, / And at my window bid good morrow' (ll. 45-6), is the subject of the verb 'come' the happy man or the lark?¹¹ It is necessary to place the lines in context when considering the question:

Come, and trip it as you go
On the light fantastic toe,
And in thy right hand lead with thee,
The mountain nymph, sweet Liberty;
And if I give thee honour due,

Mirth, admit me of thy crew
To live with her, and live with thee,
In unreprieved pleasures free; 40
To hear the lark begin his flight,
And singing startle the dull night,
From his watch-tower in the skies,
Till the dappled dawn doth rise;
Then to come in spite of sorrow, 45
And at my window bid good morrow,
Through the sweet-briar, or the vine,
Or the twisted eglantine.

In this passage, as elsewhere, the grammar of 'L'Allegro' allows the reader to substitute for the happy man by keeping the *persona* obscured. But an obscured *persona* is not a nonexistent one, and the syntax of the request 'Mirth, admit me . . . to live . . . to hear . . . then to come' signifies that he, the happy man, is the subject of the verb 'come'.

This solution of the problem seems straightforward enough. But to the most recent contributor to the debate over the subject of 'come', Stanley E. Fish, it will seem crudely straightforward. He supports his general contention that '*L'Allegro* is easier to read than *Il Penseroso*'¹² by arguing that, in the passage about the lark:

the ambiguity is so complete that unless someone asks us to, we do not worry about it, and we do not worry about it (or even notice it) because while no subject is specified for 'come', any number of subjects – lark, poet, Mirth, Dawn, Night – are available. What is *not* available is the connecting word or sustained syntactical unit which would pressure us to decide between them, and in the absence of that pressure, we are not obliged to decide.¹³

In saying that 'we do not worry about it (or even notice it)' Fish blithely overlooks the very existence of the debate. But the truth remains that the subject of 'come' must be the happy man because any alternative can be chosen only at the expense of the sustained syntactic unit comprising the imperative 'admit me' and its three complementary infinitives. The subject cannot be the lark, for no clear indication is given that the lark is at some point to be substituted for the speaker who says 'Mirth, admit me . . . to live . . . to hear . . . then to come'. And no amount of learned commentary about the habits of larks, or citation of passages in other poems where birds come to windows, can argue this away. For the subject to be the lark or the dawn 'then to come' would have to be replaced by '[and then] come'; but Milton writes 'then to come'. The subject cannot be Mirth: the speaker's request is addressed *to* Mirth, and part of his request is that he should be able to come to his window in spite of sorrow. And the subject can hardly

be 'the dull night', for the dawn has risen. Clearly, any number of subjects is *not* available, and four of those proposed by Stanley Fish – lark, Mirth, Dawn, Night – possess little syntactic credibility.

To reason, as some have done, that the speaker would say 'go' rather than 'come' if he were speaking about himself (on the assumption that he does not approach his own window from the outside, but 'goes' to it from the inside) is to miss the significance of Milton's choice of verb. 'Come' suggests that someone is waiting outside the window for the happy man to 'come' and greet him. That is to say, the verb is orientated in place and time towards another person. Thus it endorses, and is endorsed by, the social implications of the consistently omitted agents and objects throughout the poem. It is a detail that reveals the happy man's self-effacing sociability.

Robert Graves is alone in finding a different difficulty in the lines about the lark and those that follow them, but his difficulty also concerns syntax. Of the speaker Graves says:

While distractedly bidding good-morrow, at the window, to Mirth . . . he sometimes . . . goes '*walking, not unseen, by hedgerow elms, on hillocks green.*' Either Milton had forgotten that he is still supposedly standing naked at the open window – the Jacobeans always slept raw – or else the subject of 'walking' is the cock who escapes from the barn-yard, deserts his dames, ceases to strut and, anxiously aware of the distant hunt, trudges far afield among ploughmen and shepherds in the dale. But why should Milton give twenty lines to the adventures of the neighbour's wandering cock? And why '*walking, not unseen*'? Not unseen by whom?¹⁴

Stanley Fish argues that Graves's last question might well be supplemented by others, such as 'What sees?' (l. 77) or 'Hard by what?' (l. 81), since 'it is Milton's wish to liberate us from care, and the nonsequiturs that bother Graves are meant to prevent us from searching after the kind of sense he wants to make'.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the fact that Fish's questions are easily answered must damage his case: it is the 'eye' in line 69, twice referred to as 'it' (ll. 70, 77), that 'sees'; and the cottage chimney smokes 'hard by' the 'towers, and battlements . . . bosomed high in tufted trees' (ll. 77–82). 'L'Allegro' may liberate the reader from care, but surely not by making a careless reader of him? Nevertheless, Fish is right in implicitly criticizing Graves's improvisations on Milton's text. Why is Graves so sure that the happy man bids good morrow to Mirth? And where in the poem is there a figure standing 'naked' at the window? Indeed, though the issue is irrelevant to what Milton has written, where is the evidence for stating, with such easy familiarity, that 'the Jacobeans always slept raw'? (If our own knowledge of our contemporaries in this matter is anything to judge

by, collecting the evidence would require at least a certain furtive dexterity.) In Graves's version of the poem the happy man bids good morrow 'distractedly', and the 'neighbour's' cock, 'anxiously aware' of the hunt as it 'escapes' from the barn-yard, 'trudges' far across the countryside. Graves seems to wish to turn Milton's poem into a novel.

Though Graves proves unpromisingly inaccurate in these particulars, some of his confusions over Milton's syntax can be instructive. His muddling of the time distinctions in 'L'Allegro' is especially so. Graves argues that Milton has created confusion by having the happy man bid good morrow at the window at the same time as he is supposedly walking about the countryside. The muddle, once more, is Graves's, for these activities do not take place simultaneously in the poem. The speaker pictures himself 'oft list'ning' to the sounds of the hunt and 'sometime walking' across the land; the adverbs signal that he listens frequently and walks at an unspecified time, and not that he does these things while also bidding good morrow at his window. Graves's attempt to impose time restrictions on 'L'Allegro' only reveals how unrestricted the poem is. It is partly by not observing the treatment of time in the poem that Graves also thinks that the subject of 'list'ning' and 'walking' is the cock rather than the speaker in the poem. Only at first sight does this seem plausible:

While the cock with lively din,
Scatters the rear of darkness thin,
And to the stack, or the barn door
Stoutly struts his dames before,
Oft list'ning . . .

(ll. 49–53)

The syntax, in the immediate context, is potentially ambiguous, and the cock appears to be 'list'ning'. But, in the wider context, through which this passage is approached, it is the *speaker* who has asked Mirth to let him come to the window while the cock routs the darkness and struts before his dames who is 'oft list'ning'. And notice that Milton writes 'Oft list'ning how the hounds and horn / Cheerly rouse the slumb'ring morn'; not 'list'ning to'. Is the implied power of mind not more likely to be attributed to the speaker than to a cock? Indeed, is it not ridiculous for the cock to be taken from its barn-yard and dames, to set off 'walking' far across the countryside, and for twenty or so lines to function as the perceiver in the poem? In lines 69–70 the speaker says, 'Straight mine eye hath caught new pleasures / Whilst the landscape round it measures', implying that in the immediately preceding context his eye has already caught some pleasures. It is very likely, therefore, that in that same context the speaker, not the cock, has been walking across the land. Graves's confusions only draw attention