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John Milton's
PARADISE LOST
and OTHER WORKS

Marian Seldin Burkhart

约翰·弥尔顿的

失乐园
及其他著作



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INTRODUCTION

To the student brought up on romantic theories of poets and poetry, the biography of John Milton, like that of the other two greatest poets of the English language—Chaucer and Shakespeare, must be disappointing. For all three men lived lives too ordinary to seem suitable for poets. Chaucer earned his living most of his life as a civil servant, for a while as a customs clerk. Shakespeare retired from his profitable career as a playwright to live out his life peacefully in Stratford and willed his wife his second-best bed. And Milton, in some ways, departs even farther from the picture we cherish of the poet: the man tormented by conflicting passions who cannot live in a world too insensitive to understand him. Not only did Milton never become a beatnik; he never even had any reason to. If he was not a rebel in our sense of the term, however, he was, nonetheless, a man of stern integrity and firm independence.

MILTON'S BIOGRAPHY

MILTON'S BACKGROUND: John Milton was born in 1608 into a Puritan family. His father after whom he was named, was a scrivener, a recorder of property deeds and titles. The family was highly cultured, for Mr. Milton was a fine musician, a composer who attained some recognition among his contemporaries. He was evidently aware of his son's exceptional gifts and provided him not only with an excellent education but also with sympathetic understanding.

Milton attended St. Paul's School in London, one of the best secondary schools of the day. He received additional instruction from a tutor at home, a young dissenting clergyman named Thomas Young, who became one of Milton's good friends. Milton concentrated on Latin and Greek and was taught Hebrew as well. He managed also to learn Italian very well, though no modern languages were taught either at St. Paul's or at Cambridge, which he entered in 1625.

He enrolled in Christ's Church College at that University and became one of its distinguished students, even though he was "rusticated" or suspended for a time because of a sharp disagreement with his tutor, William Chappell. He took his bachelor's degree in 1629, the same year in which he wrote his first really famous English poem, a Christmas ode entitled "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity." It is probable, also, that during his later years at Cambridge he wrote *L'Allegro and Il Penseroso*. These companion poems—"The Cheerful Man" and "The Pensive Man"—are probably the first works of Milton that the American student reads. They contrast two ways of life or, perhaps, two moods. The first celebrates the light-heartedness which seeks innocent pleasure. The second describes the more serious pursuits of the thoughtful man.

MILTON'S VOCATION: In 1632, Milton completed his M. A. and went to live at Horton, his family's country retreat. He remained there for six years, pursuing a diligent course of reading and writing in order to prepare himself to be a great poet. For Milton had decided when he was very young that poetry was the vocation to which he was called. And to the devout son of religious parents, one was called to his vocation, whatever it might be, by God.

In 1638, Milton left Horton to make the "grand tour," the step

which was to complete his elaborate preparation for his career. He traveled principally in France and in Italy. The tour was cut short by rumors of civil war in England. Milton returned to England in 1639, the date of the First Bishop's War and the beginning of the Puritan Revolution.

During all these years Milton had been supported by his understanding and indulgent father. But upon his return from the Continent, both father and son seemed to think that it would be a good idea if the younger John began to earn his own living. He established himself in London as a schoolmaster, with his nephews, John and Edward Phillips, as his first two pupils.

Milton soon became involved in the religious debates of the day. His inclination was toward the Puritan party. The Puritans found the Church of England too broad and too Catholic in using a rich liturgy and vestments. They wished to purify the church from within on the basis of scriptural principles and to do away with bishops and the support of the church by the state. As a Puritan, Milton was opposed to church government by bishops and wrote several pamphlets advocating the abolition of the episcopacy.

MILTON'S MARRIAGES: During the 1630's there was a power struggle between King Charles and his Parliament. After the Long Parliament of 1640, the king was deprived of some of his power, and Parliament undertook church reform along Puritan lines. In 1642 the Parliamentary party demanded control of the army, the privy councilors, and even the education of the king's children. It is curious that Milton, a strong Puritan, in this year married Mary Powell, a member of a Royalist family whose support of the king was in opposition to Milton's support of the Puritan and Parliamentary cause. Mary,

who was younger than he was and used to a large, cheerful household, left him after a very short time to visit her family, a visit that was to continue for three years, partly because Mary wanted to stay with her family and partly because the Civil War, which began August 22, 1642, made it quite difficult for her to return to London.

She did return, though, in 1645, and the two were reconciled. She bore her husband three daughters and a son who died in infancy. She died herself in 1652 in giving birth to the third of the daughters. Milton married again in 1656, this time to Katherine Woodcock, whom he loved very much. She died, also in childbirth, less than fifteen months later, and her child lived only a month. One of Milton's most beautiful sonnets, "On His Deceased Wife," commemorates their brief marriage. Milton's third and last marriage, in 1663, to Elizabeth Minshull, was very frankly a marriage of convenience. The poet, who had been blind by then for 11 years, needed someone to run his household and help rear his three occasionally rebellious daughters.

MILTON'S POLITICAL ACTIVITIES: Milton continued during the early years of the Civil War to write pamphlets on the controversial issues of the day. His first volume of poems was published in 1645. The volume is of major importance because it includes both *Comus* and *Lycidas*, two of Milton's great works. However, the next period of Milton's life was devoted not to the poetry he loved but to a duty he felt to be more immediately pressing: the duty of doing what he could to establish and maintain the Puritan Commonwealth.

The first phase of the Civil War had ended in 1645 with the defeat of Charles I at the Battle of Naseby. But hostilities were renewed in 1648, and in 1649, Charles I was beheaded. In that same year Milton

was engaged as Latin Secretary to the Council of State of the Commonwealth, a Council which Oliver Cromwell headed. Since Latin was the language of diplomacy in the seventeenth century, his office required Milton to write whatever letters were sent to other governments. He was, besides, expected to defend the regime against its numerous enemies in print. As a consequence, he became involved in pamphlet wars which he found sometimes demeaning and always time-consuming. The greatest of his prose works was written against Cromwell's government, rather than in its behalf, and was ignored in Milton's day. That work is *Areopagitica*, Milton's impassioned defense of freedom of the press. The reader of *Paradise Lost* might be interested also in *De Doctrina Christiana* (*On the Christian Doctrine*), a treatise on theology which throws some light on the intellectual background of Milton's greatest poem.

MILTON'S BLINDNESS AND DISILLUSIONMENT: It was during his service to the Commonwealth that Milton became blind. The disability came upon him gradually, but Milton did not allow it to interfere with the heavy reading and writing that his position demanded. By 1652, however, he was totally blind, and it became necessary for others to share in his labors. His blindness occasioned one of the most moving of his sonnets, "When I Consider," written in 1655. It records his fear that he will never be able to use his God-given gift for poetry again. Yet God may demand an accounting from him, for his entry into Heaven will depend upon how well he has used the gifts God gave him. The sonnet ends with Milton's acceptance of the fact that what God wants of him is obedience and resignation. He can, then, serve God even if he can't write poetry, for "they also serve who only stand and wait."

In 1658 Cromwell died and was succeeded by his son, Richard, who

was quite incapable of ruling in his father's stead. Thus, in 1660, Charles II, of the House of Stuart, the son of Charles I, whom Cromwell had beheaded, was restored to the English throne. Milton's life was in very real danger, and he was for a short time imprisoned. After his release he lived in disillusionment and bitterness. The Commonwealth, he had long realized, was not the Utopia for which he had worked. But in restoring the Stuarts to the throne, in no longer trying to live in a republican state, his people, he felt, had turned their backs on freedom. Milton was alienated from the most powerful elements of the society of the time also because the Stuarts and their followers stood for the institutions he had fought against most of his life; the monarchy and the episcopacy. He expresses his sense of being an exile in the beginning of Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, in the invocation to Urania.

This last period of his life was, nonetheless, his most creative. For it was during these years, in which he felt himself to be the prophet who had failed, the man of the Lord to whom no one listened, that he completed his greatest works: *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*.

MILTON'S MINOR POEMS

ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY (1630): Milton wrote his friend Charles Diodati that this poem came to him on the morning of Christmas Day and that it was his "birthday gift to Christ." It was his first finished and serious work. Four stanzas in rhyme royal introduce the hymn itself. This is the birthday of Christ "of wedded maid and virgin mother born," who will atone for man and "with His Father work us a perpetual peace." For us he laid aside heavenly majesty and became mortal. The poet hopes to present his poem before the Wise Men come, for he knows he cannot compete with their treasures. Then begins the hymn itself. The babe lies in the rude manger, while Nature has put off her gaudier dress in sympathy with him. She is clad only in a white robe of snow. Universal peace descends and no sound of war is heard. The night is peaceful when "the Prince of light/His reign of peace upon the earth begins." The stars in amazement gaze steadfastly. The sun hides his head for shame at seeing a greater Sun appear. The shepherds sit "simply chatting in a rustic row," unaware that mighty Pan (Milton uses this classical name for Christ) has come to live on earth. Heavenly music sounds, and cherubim and seraphim sing heavenly music, only made before when the sons of the morning sang while God set the constellations and hung the world in its place. If such music rings out again, time will run back and "fetch the Age of God," when Truth and Justice with Mercy between them may come to earth. But Fate says this is not to be yet—the Babe is still an infant who "on the bitter cross/Must redeem our loss." At "the world's last session," God will come as Judge and The Dragon (Satan) will

swing his tail in fury to see his kingdom fail. The pagan deities do not dare stay, now that the Babe shows his true Godhead. Now the Sun in bed "pillows his chin upon an Orient wave" and night's chariots cross the sky. The "Virgin blest" has laid her Babe to rest. The youngest star is poised in the heavens and bright angels in order sit around the stable.

L'ALLEGRO AND IL PENSEROSO: The date of this delightful pair of poems is uncertain. E. M. W. Tillyard has plausibly suggested that they were written in Cambridge c. 1631 for an academic audience. In this case, the opening lines of *L'Allegro* in particular, previously puzzling because so bombastic and so different in style from the rest of the poem, are explained as deliberate parody of the classical poems which the Cambridge students were obliged to imitate. "Directly they heard of Melancholy being born of Cerberus and blackest Midnight—infamous coupling—they would have a comfortable sense of recognition and begin to grin."

The two poems contrast a gay mood with a serious one. In *L'Allegro*, the dismissal of Melancholy is followed by an invocation to Euphrosyne or Mirth, who brings with her merry companions "Quips and Cranks and wanton Wiles, / Nods and Becks and wreathed Smiles," Sport and Laughter, who is holding his sides with glee. As they trip it "on the light fantastic toe," *L'Allegro* joins them and hears the sounds of morning. The lark sings, the cock crows, the horns of the hunters blow, the plowman whistles, the milkmaid sings, the mower whets his scythe. Around him is the lovely pastoral scene, with the sheep nibbling on the lawn, the clouded mountains, the daisied meadows, and a castle half-hidden in the distant trees. Shepherds eat their mid-day meal by their cottage, bells ring, and rebecks (a form of violin) sound, as youths and maidens

dance until the daylight fails. In the evening over "spicy nut-brown ale" the peasants tell tales of Queen Mab and her doings and of Puck, the "lubber fiend." The peasants go to sleep, but L'Allegro does not, for "Tower'd cities" please him, and "the busy hum of men." He may go to the theatre to see plays by Jonson or Shakespeare (or perhaps he reads these works). Calling on "soft Lydian airs" which will soothe him against care and worry, L'Allegro enjoys music which brings back the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. This song ends his day, and L'Allegro concludes

These delights, if thou canst give,
Mirth, with thee, I mean to live.

In *Il Penseroso*, the poet turns to more somber moods. Though this poem is a little longer, the scenes develop in the same succession as in *L'Allegro*. Dismissing "vain deluding Joys," the speaker hails "divinest Melancholy," born of Vesta and Saturn (this is Milton's invention). The "pensive Nun, devout and pure, /sober, steadfast, and demure," clad all in black, is so still that she looks like a marble statue. Like Euphrosyne, Melancholy has her companions, Peace, Quiet, Fast, Leisure, Contemplation, and Silence. As in *L'Allegro*, there is birdsong, but this time Philomela (the nightingale) sings her even-song. While the poet wanders on the smooth lawn to watch the wandering moon "stooping through a fleecy cloud," he hears "the far-off curfew sound . . . /Swinging low with sullen roar." Inside, "where glowing embers . . . Teach light to counterfeit a gloom," where the cricket chirps and the bellman cries the hours, *Il Penseroso* enjoys his midnight studies. He studies Hermes Trismegistus (the supposed author of books of mingled magic, philosophy, and astrology), and calls down the spirit of Plato to be his companion. As in *L'Allegro*, drama is mentioned (and here it is likely that the

speaker reads rather than sees the plays), but now it is "gorgeous Tragedy" which entralls him, tales of Thebes, or of Pelops' line, or of ancient Troy. He reads also Chaucer's half-told tale "of Cambuscan bold, /of Camball and of Algarsife," i. e., *The Squire's Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales*, one of the more serious chivalric romances. Like *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso* thinks of the music, especially that of Orpheus, such notes as "drew iron tears down Pluto's cheek." At length "civil-suited" (i. e., sober) morning appears, but the speaker does not wish to be exposed to the full rays of the "day's garish eye" but to walk in "arched walks of twilight groves," where he may hear the hum of the bees and the murmur of the waters, dream to their music, and wake to hear harmonies not usually heard by mortals. Then he will "walk the studious cloister's pale," admire the arched roof and the "storied windows richly dight, /Casting a dim religious light," and hear the pealing organ and the singing of the choir. This music will bring heaven itself before his eyes. He hopes that he may ponder the meaning of the stars and the herbs "Till old experience do attain /To something like prophetic strain." (This section, lines 155-174, has no parallel in *L'Allegro*.) The poem closes with a couplet:

These pleasures, Melancholy give,
And I with thee will choose to live.

THE SONNETS (Various dates): Milton wrote twenty-four sonnets of which five are in Italian. Some were conventional addresses to friends or acquaintances, some (such as the one on his blindness and the one to his dead wife) are very personal. Others are addressed to political figures of the day, such as General Fairfax, Cromwell, or Sir Harry Vane, or allude to recent events, such as the slaughter of the Vaudois by the Duke of Savoy in 1653. The sonnets have been care-

fully studied by John Smart, in his *Sonnets of Milton* (Glasgow: Maclehose, Jackson and Co., 1921), which may be referred to for details.

Perhaps the most effective of the personal sonnets is # 15, usually called "On His Blindness." This allusion to his blindness is the first of many in his poetry. "The present poem," says Smart, "composed when the calamity was fresh, and before he had become accustomed to a life in darkness, opens with a mood of discouragement and grief, and closes with quiet resignation." The sonnet is based on the parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30) in which the unprofitable servant was punished for burying, not using, the talent his master had given him. Milton wonders, now that blindness has fallen upon him before half his working life is spent, whether God will still expect him to use his talent; "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" Patience replies that while God does not really need "Either man's work or his own gift," He wants obedience and resignation. Thousands of angels serve Him, but men "also serve who only stand and wait." Milton is thinking that there are angels of contemplation as well as of action; similarly, some men may serve God best who humbly accept His decrees, waiting in faith on His will. Smart quotes many scriptural passages which Milton may have had in mind, such as "Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for him" (Psalm 37:7).

Connected with Milton's service to the State as Latin Secretary is the magnificent sonnet "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont." On April 24, 1655, the Piedmontese, at the order of the Duke of Savoy, had slaughtered about 1712 harmless people living in the Swiss Alps. These were the Vaudois or Waldensians, a medieval sect which rejected the use of good works for the dead and laid great stress on

restoring Gospel simplicity. They had lived for centuries in their isolated community, pursuing their own religion, until suddenly and barbarously attacked by the Piedmontese. Protestants all over Europe, who regarded the Vaudois as true primitive Christians, were shocked. Cromwell took up their cause and official protests were sent, not only to the Duke of Savoy, but also to Protestant governments in Denmark, Sweden, The Netherlands, and the Swiss Protestant cantons. It was Milton's task as Latin Secretary to compose these letters. He also expressed his own personal sense of shock in this sonnet. He calls on God to avenge the slaughtered Vaudois, who had been preserving Christianity in a pure state when our English ancestors had been worshipping "stocks and stones" (i. e., images in the medieval church). The suffering of this true flock of God ("thy sheep") should be recorded in God's book, as "in their ancient fold" they were killed by the savage Piedmontese, who even hurled a mother with an infant in her arms from the rocks. (This is a reference to an actual incident; see Smart, p. 106.) The valleys re-echoed the groans of the sufferers to the hills, who in their turn sent them to heaven. Milton begs that, as the blood of martyrs is truly held to be the seed of the church, the blood and ashes of these martyrs may be sown in Italy, where the Pope ("the triple tyrant"—a reference to the Pope's triple crown) still reigns. From this seed may come a new crop of converts, who, having learned God's true ways "early may fly the Babylonian woe" (i. e., to Milton—the false Catholic church).

MILTON'S MAJOR WORKS

COMUS (1634): When Milton wrote this work at the request of Henry Lawes, a noted musician of the day, he entitled it "A Mask." In 1738, long after Milton's death, it was given the name by which it is now known by one of its printers, Dr. John Dalton.

A mask was a sort of Renaissance musical comedy. Masks were written to be presented in the homes of wealthy patrons of the arts. They were usually pastoral in nature. That is, they imitated the pastoral poetry of the Greeks. They had rural settings and often had as their characters shepherds or shepherdesses with Greek names. According to the tradition of the pastoral, these shepherds could sing and write poetry as well as herd sheep. The masks included songs, dances, and spectacle, but had intellectual content as well. In Milton's mask the intellectual content is far more important than the other elements, though the poetry is lyric and the piece has several graceful songs, for which Henry Lawes wrote the music. *Comus* was written to be presented at Ludlow Castle by the children of the Egerton family, assisted by Henry Lawes. The father of the family, the Earl of Bridgewater, had at that time recently been appointed the President of Wales.

Comus opens with a speech by the Attendant Spirit whose business it is to guard the two sons and the virgin daughter of the family. The three children are approaching the castle through some woods. They may be in danger because of Comus. He is the son of Bacchus, the Greek god of the harvest, and Circe, the sorceress who turned the

followers of Odysseus into pigs. He is himself a magician, and when he gets people in his power, he gives them the heads of beasts. They are unaware of the change they undergo because their bestiality consists of overindulgence in animal pleasures. The Attendant Spirit takes the form of Thyrsis, one of the family's shepherds.

Thyrsis is right about the danger. The two brothers have left their sister, the Lady, as she is called in the mask, while they go to find her something cool and refreshing to drink, for she is very tired. They are gone so long that she starts to look for them. She calls out for them in a lovely song, which Comus overhears. He sends his band of rioters away. Assuming the disguise of a simple shepherd, he approaches the girl. When she tells him why she is alone, he tells her that he has seen her brothers in a nearby cottage. In her trusting innocence, she goes with him.

Meanwhile her brothers have begun to look for her. The younger brother is afraid that she has fallen into some danger. The elder brother says that there is no need to worry because she will be protected from serious moral danger by her chastity. The younger brother feels, nonetheless, that she may suffer from an outside force, even though her virtue protects her soul. As it turns out, both brothers are right.

The Attendant Spirit, Thyrsis, finds the two young men and leads them to where Comus has imprisoned their sister. She is seated on a chair from which she cannot move, and Comus is trying to make her swallow the drink that will place her under his power. She refuses and argues so convincingly that too much self-indulgence is wrong that Comus temporarily sways toward her opinion. He recovers himself, though, and offers her the drink again. Before she can reply, her