

A
STUDENT'S EDITION
OF
MILTON

Lu Peixian
(Bei-Yei Loh)

Life of Milton
Volume II: Milton's Syntax
Notes to the Poems

THE COMMERCIAL PRESS

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Such where the deep transported mind may soar
Above the wheeling poles, and at Heaven's door
Look in

— *Vacation Exercise*

Anno Aetatis 19

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JOHN MILTON, POET AND MAN

John Milton is the only English poet we can think of who not only lived through one of the most turbulent ages in England's history, but also threw the best years of his life into its maelstrom, to defend, even at the cost of eyesight, the noble cause of civil and religious freedom of the English people, — only to meet defeat in the end. He lived in an age when a king, doggedly bent on absolute sovereignty in an era of irresistible ascendancy of the parliamentary bourgeois republicans, was defeated in battle, imprisoned, charged with treason to the state and finally beheaded, an era when the subsequent Lord Protector of a Commonwealth seemed to rule, while he lived, with all the power coveted formerly by the dead king, so much so that at his death, it was thought more convenient to recall the son of the dead king back to London to be constitutional monarch again than to persist longer with the Commonwealth. To add drama to history, all these events from the first battle between king and parliament to the exposure on the gallows of the exhumed body of the Lord Protector, buried scarcely 25 months, took place within a period of less than two decades, 1642-61. Such was the age that Milton was fated to live through, and, by his own choice, in active participation.

The life of Milton falls conveniently into 3 parts: Education and Cultural Preparations, leading to the formation of the Miltonic character; Public Service, as the ideological defender of the freedom of the English people; and Political Downfall and Retirement, ushering in the period of epic creations.

I. EDUCATION AND OTHER CULTURAL PREPARATIONS:

THE DEDICATED SCHOLAR-POET, 1608—39,

(1) Childhood

John Milton was born in London on December 9, 1608, nine years after the death of Spenser, and eight years before Shakespeare was to die. His father, John Milton, was a scrivener, i.e. a minor lawyer making a living

on the fringes of the legal profession, combining the work of a broker, solicitor, notary, and, as some suggested, the not so reputable business of a money-lender. He was said to have been disinherited by his father Richard, keeper of the Forest of Shotover in Oxfordshire, and a staunch Roman Catholic, because he embraced Protestantism and read the Bible in English. He came to London and prospered, until he was wealthy enough to own a country estate in Horton, about 15 miles to the west of the city, and to provide the best possible education then available for his two sons John and Christopher. The elder Milton was a man of independent thinking, a Puritan who held to his principle that faith must be built on wisdom derived from knowledge and reason. His success in life would put him among the thriving London mercantile middle class who believed in God, liberty and their own spirit of enterprise. He had also a talent for music, and some of his compositions are still extant. As a baby, Milton must have often listened to his father playing on the chamber organ which he was later to inherit and play himself down to his last days. The child was therefore brought up in a household where the Puritan love for moral and spiritual discipline was tempered by a taste for the beautiful and artistic.

Milton showed early precocity which his father was not slow to detect. Before he was sent to St. Paul's School at 12, he was put under the private tutorship of Thomas Young, a Scotsman of fervent Protestant faith, whom Milton later thanked gratefully in his *Elegia Quarta* 1627 for the knowledge he gave him. When Young left for Hamburg to be chaplain to the English population there, Milton was put to study in St. Paul's School, adjacent to the great cathedral of the same name, which must have afforded the sensitive boy colourful spectacle for the eye, rolling peals of the organ for the ear, and heavenly fancy for the mind.

In his *Defensio Secunda Pro Populo Anglicano* 1654 (i.e. Second Defence for the English People), Milton wrote about his studious childhood: 'My father destined me from a child to the pursuits of literature; and my appetite for knowledge was so voracious that from twelve years of age, I hardly ever left my studies or went to bed before midnight.' And indeed, by 1624 and before he finished St. Paul's School, he had made metrical paraphrases of two psalms and written Latin stanzas.

(2) Cambridge

At 16, Milton, who by then 'had acquired a proficiency in various langu-

ages and had made a considerable progress in philosophy' was admitted to Christ's College, Cambridge, where he was to stay for seven years as a pensioner, i.e. a paying student. Upon entrance, he did not get along well with William Chappel his tutor, and was rusticated, i.e. suspended from regular attendance for a term as punishment. When he returned, he was placed under another tutor, an unusual practice in the University, and probably an indication of its recognition of the youth's calibre. In the long years at Cambridge, Milton was known for his proficiency in the languages, for his ability in composing orations and in all academic exercises. But he himself did not like the method and content of the formalized learning inculcated in that institution, as can be seen in his playful banter on the Aristotelian categories in the *Vacation Exercise*, lines 65-90. Probably for his seriousness and reserve, and certainly for his complexion and looks, he came to be nicknamed 'Lady of Christ's College', for which he remonstrated in his Latin *Prolusion VI*: 'Is it because I have never been able to quaff huge tankards lustily ... or because I have never proved my manhood in the same way as those debauched blackguards?'

That young Milton had gained some recognition as a student in Cambridge could be evidenced by the fact that his encomiastic *On Shakespeare* written in 1630, was published though anonymously among the prefatory commendations of the 1632 *Second Folio of Shakespeare*. Much of his writing during the Cambridge years was in Latin. But three poems in English, *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* provided ample proof that their young author was not without parts.

To a letter to an unknown friend, (probably his former tutor Thomas Young) who admonished that 'the day with me (i.e. Milton) is at hand', he appended his *Sonnet VII: On His Being Arrived to the Age of 23*. He humbly acknowledged that compared with other 'timely-happy spirits', spring did come to him late, but added with modest pride that

... be it less or more, or soon or slow,

It shall be still in strictest measure even

To that same lot, however mean or high,

Toward which time leads me, and the will of heaven.

This sonnet is not so much a lyrical effusion of sentiment as a solemn promise that he would be worthy of the task that Time and the Will of Heaven would eventually place on him.

(3) Horton

In 1632, Milton took his M.A. in Cambridge. His father had intended him for the ministry, and indeed all these long years of assiduous preparation seemed to lead logically in that direction. However, Milton did not stay on to be a Fellow of Christ's College, because to qualify himself for that position, he had to be ordained minister of the Established Church of England. In *The Reason of Church Government* 1642, Milton remarked that to the service of the church³ he

was destined of a child, and in mine own resolutions, till coming to some maturity of years and perceiving what tyranny had invaded the church, that he who would take Orders must subscribe slave and take an oath withal which unless he took with a conscience that would retch, he must either straight perjure or split his faith, I thought it better to prefer a blameless silence before the sacred office of speaking, bought and begun with servitude and forswearing.

Thus he left Cambridge — to retreat to his father's country house at Horton, to plunge himself into six more years of secluded self-study of the Greek and Latin authors, including the most abstruse.

At about this time, he also wrote a Latin poem *Ad Patrem* (i.e. To my Father), thanking him for the education given him and expressing his firm desire to serve the Muse:

... ihou hatest not the gentle muse
My father. For thou never bad'st me tread
The beaten path and broad, that leads right on
To opulence, nor didst condemn thy son
To the insipid clamours of the bar,
To laws voluminous and ill-observed;
But wishing to enrich me more, to fill
My mind with treasure, led'st me far away
From city din to deep retreats, to banks
And streams Aonian, and, with free consent,
Did'st place me happy at Apollo's side. (English translation by
Wm. Cowper.)

So Milton in his early twenties declared solemnly that he had chosen to serve 'the gentle muse'. Poetry was to be his sacred mission in life, and he spared no effort to further qualify himself for that task by assiduous study and cultivation. In *The Reason of Church Government*, he spoke of

an inward prompting ... that by labour and intent study ... joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to aftertimes as they should not willingly let it die. This deep sense of dedication is most characteristic in Milton even as a young man, and no professional had perhaps worked harder than he in preparation for the best and highest fulfilment of that duty.

(A) Works during the Horton years

Comus

By sheer chance, young Milton became known to the Countess Dowager of Derby, then an old lady noble enough to have entertained Queen Elizabeth at her Harefield estate, only 12 miles north of Horton. She was the patron of Spenser forty years before. At this time she had employed Henry Lawes, a musician of note at the court and member of the King's Music, as the music teacher to her grand-children, the sons and daughter of John Egerton, Earl of Bridgewater, step-son and son-in-law of the Countess. The elder Milton, himself a musician and a good player, was well acquainted with Lawes who must have recommended Milton to the task of writing some musical entertainment upon the order of the Countess. Thus it came about that Milton who, at this time of his life, was reluctant to 'pluck harsh and crude berries ... before the mellowing year' (*Lycidas* 3-5) set about writing the masques *Arcades* in honour of the Countess, and *Comus* to celebrate the inauguration of John Egerton as President of the Council and Lord Lieutenant of Wales. Milton never meant masque-writing to be his poetic mission, but he knew very well that poetry-writing had never been a paying job and that all poets from Chaucer to Ben Jonson had to look for patrons. The two works are a technical proof that Milton was as good as any in writing poetry in the Elizabethan vein (and indeed the influence of Spenser and Shakespeare is heavy in these poems). However, one point needs to be brought out. While *Comus* was lively with song and dance, and answering the purpose of courtly amusement, the theme was absolutely serious, it being the victory of maidenly virtue over Bacchanalian temptation. Patronage, however, did not come to Milton. The Countess Dowager died early in 1637, nor did the Earl of Bridgewater think of giving Milton some office in his household. Instead, the writing of *Comus* helped indirectly to make Milton's projected continental tour more fruitful. Milton sent a copy of this pastoral drama to Sir Henry Wotton, distinguished diplomat, man of affairs and poet, and now

at 70, Provost of Eton College, at no great distance from Horton. The old scholar said that he 'must plainly confess to have seen nothing parallel in our language', and gave Milton introductions to illustrious people on the continent.

Lycidas

The accidental drowning in 1637 of Edward King, a Fellow of Christ's College, prompted the writing of *Lycidas*. King was the son of Sir John King, Secretary for Ireland under Queen Elizabeth, James I and Charles I. He was evidently loved by Cambridge. When Oxford decided to issue a commemorative volume for Ben Jonson, Cambridge did the same for King, and Milton contributed his share.

Lycidas has provoked widely diverging criticisms, from Samuel Johnson's total censure to Hilaire Belloc's unreserved praise. Its literary excellence is indeed open to debate, and much depends on the temperament of the reader himself. To me, the poem is a much stronger expression of Milton's views on two things, fame and the Anglican Church than of genuine sorrow for a dear friend lost at sea. If King had been the author of some Latin poems on the births of princes and princesses and on the king's recovery from small pox and had taken, as many Cambridge graduates had done before him, orders in the Anglican Church, with a relatively snug ecclesiastical career ahead of him, we wonder if he could really be 'spurred' 70 on by the desire for fame. Much more truly, it was Milton himself who was 'scorning delights and living laborious days' 72 to seek fame, 'that last infirmity of noble mind' 71. Aside from the imputation of King's untimely death to the working of 'the blind Fury with the abhorred shears' 75, the passage has little bearing on the elegy itself. It is a confession of Milton's own mind, and we see this fact even more clearly when he elaborates by making Phœbus lecture to 'my (Mind here! not King's, but Milton's own) trembling ears' 77 that

Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
Nor in the glistening foil
Set off to the world, nor in broad rumour lies,
But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes
And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;
As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed. (78-84)

Indeed, all the 'glistening foil' that Milton was to receive from the printer

Samuel Symons for the 12 (or originally 10) books of *Paradise Lost* amounted to twice £5 while he lived, and another £8 to his widow Elizabeth Minshull Milton as a final settlement of the copyright! Milton expected his meed of so much fame in heaven only.

The other passage that I want to refer to is the well-known invective directed against the 'corrupted clergy' of the Anglican and Roman Churches. Here Milton had to make St. Peter (or even Christ) shake 'his mitred locks and stern bespeak' with 'dread voice' 132. Milton seems to be too entirely carried away by his vehemence at the moment to realize that the three lines

How well could I have spared for thee, young swain,
Enow of such as for their bellies' sake,
Creep and intrude and climb into the fold. (113—5)

do not stand close reasoning. Alas, is death God's reward to the young swain for his purity untarnished, or is it a punishment — punishment for his having already crept 'into the fold'? The word 'Enow' is terrific, and Milton had already said that 'tyranny had invaded the church' and that an honest man 'must either straight perjure or split the faith' (quoted in (3) Horton) when he took the required oath at ordination. Of course, Milton never meant to insinuate so darkly and wickedly. He was too much of an honest young scholar to play such a trick. He was writing a 'monody' in the truest sense of the word. But in a moment of holy anger at something he deemed evil, he had no time to entertain the thought of any possible implication or extension in meaning. He considered the three lines sufficiently smooth and natural to link his anti-prelatical preoccupation to the death of King. He had not been writing anything for three years since *Comus*, what could be more natural for him than to vent his pent-up sentiments as soon as an occasion for expression seemed to present itself?

As a pastoral elegy, *Lycidas* is as good as any in the English language that follows the line of Theocritus and Virgil. But as we are now more concerned about his life than about his works, we say that the poem is very significant in that it marks the completion of the formation of the man in Milton. His dedication to a cause, his eagerness for 'fame in heaven', his devout self-preparation toward that end, his hatred of religious tyranny, his love of liberty, his faith in the perfectibility of humanity through education and self-discipline, these lofty ideals were all in him by then. He was about 30 at that time.

(5) Grand Tour

His father being wealthy enough to stand the expenses, Milton now planned to consummate his long years of education by a grand tour on the continent, and especially to Italy, the cradle of the Renaissance and Mecca of all European scholars, poets, philosophers, historians and artists. Milton learned the language long before. His bosom friend since St. Paul's days was Charles Diodati of Italian extraction, and he was certainly steeped in Dante and Petrarch, Tasso and Ariosto. He started the trip in May 1638. Furnished with recommendations from Sir Henry Wotton, Milton was received in Paris with civilities by Lord Scudamore, English ambassador to France, who introduced Milton to Hugo Grotius, eminent Dutch scholar and humanist of European fame and authority on international law. He was also author of a play in Latin, *Adamus Exul*, i.e. Adam Expelled. Milton was kindly received and entertained by Grotius, and it was likely that the meeting put Milton in contemplation of the writing of 'Adam Unparadised'.

From Paris Milton followed the route suggested by Sir Henry and went to Florence where he was immediately accepted into the learned societies whose literary meetings tended 'so much to the diffusion of knowledge and the preservation of friendship'. (*Second Defence for the English People*) He made many friends among the polite Florentine literati. The meetings of these Platonic academic societies like the Svogliati and the Apatisti took the form of readings by authors of works on literature, philosophy, art or theology, followed by discussions among the participants. Young Milton, who was hitherto not much recognized in London, (and whose *Paradise Lost* was not to be known until a few years before his death) found himself almost lionized by the Tuscan men of letters who were impressed by his knowledge of languages, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Spanish, French, Italian, even Syriac, and depth of classical learning. Some of the members were even Catholic priests, yet they remained his friends. Milton says:

In the private academies of Italy, whither I was favoured to resort, perceiving that some trifles which I had in memory, composed at under twenty or there about ... there met with some acceptance above what was looked for, and other things which I had shifted in scarcity of books and conveniences to patch up amongst them were received with written encomiums which the Italian is not forward to bestow on men of this side of the Alps. (*Reason of Church Government*)

Evidently, the young poet found Florence most congenial to his intellectual development.

Aside from attending such scholastic parties, he went to concerts, to the galleries and churches to see paintings and sculptures, and probably saw the Italian playwright Andreini's *Adamo*, a comedy. Milton must have seen through the gorgeous but coarse superficiality of this Italian play to penetrate into the tragic depth of his own future work.

After about two months in Florence, Milton went to Rome, at once the seat of popery and the home of art and learning.

It was a rule which I laid down to myself in these places, never to be the first to begin any conversation on religion; but if any questions were put to me concerning my faith, to declare it without any reserve or fear. (*Second Defence for the English People*)

If his reception in Rome was less cordial, it was more ceremonious. Through the introduction of Lucas Holstenius, a German from Hamburg, whom Thomas Young knew and who was converted to Catholicism to be secretary to Cardinal Francesco Barberini and Vatican librarian, Milton became the honoured guest at the Cardinal's palazzo to hear the immortal Leonora Baroni sing. (Three short epigrams were addressed to this artist by Milton.) Barberini was Pope Urban VIII's nephew, and next to the Pope, the most influential man in Rome at the time. The next day, Milton was honoured with a private audience by the Cardinal and the interview lasted much longer than Milton expected. Milton was also feted at the English College, the seminary for English papist priests in exile and the records in the traveller's book showed that the dinner was a success.

From Rome Milton went to Naples where he met Giovanni Battista Manso, eminent figure in Italian letters and patron of two great Italian poets, Torquato Tasso and Giambattista Marini. He was the man Spenser would have dreamed of meeting. He was then 78, and Milton states:

During my stay, he gave me singular proofs of his regard: he himself conducted me round the city, and to the palace of the viceroy; and more than once paid me a visit at my lodgings. On my departure, he gravely apologised for not having shown me more civility, which he said he had been restrained from doing, because I had spoken with so little reserve on matters of religion. (*Second Defence for the*

English People)

The last sentence implies that had Milton been more pliable or astute and

swerved a little from his principles, the illustrious old man would have arranged for Milton to be received by the King of Naples himself. For the kindness of Manso, Milton addressed to him his Latin poem *Mansus*.

Leaving Manso and Naples, Milton would have planned to visit Sicily and Greece if affairs in England had not developed in a way as to make him think

it base to be travelling for amusement abroad, while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home. (*Second Defence*)

So Milton traced his steps back northward to Rome again where he stayed for two months, and then back to Florence where he stayed for another two months, once more revelling among his old literary friends of Tuscany. Records show that he was present at the Svogliati Academy meetings on three consecutive weeks. But the memorable event during his second stay in Florence was a meeting with the great scientist Galileo Galilei, then 75 and blind, and newly released from confinement by the Inquisition. He was the man who proved on the leaning tower of Pisa that the acceleration of all falling bodies is equal and independent of their masses. He was tortured and imprisoned merely because he believed, after scientific investigation, that the Copernican theory of a heliocentric universe is objectively truer to fact than the Ptolemaic or geocentric conception. He was imprisoned by his old friend Maffeo Barberini, now turned Pope Urban VIII. He saved himself from the stake only by abjuring what he knew was truth. The persecution suffered by this revered old scientist must have struck Milton deeply and awakened in him the consciousness of what would happen to his native country if ecclesiastical tyranny represented by William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, were to prevail in England.

From Florence, Milton went to Venice. Staying there a month, he shipped home his collection of books, including many music books of current Italian masters. He took his homeward journey through Geneva, home of the Reformation, in order to meet the learned uncle of his bosom friend Charles Diodati. Charles was Milton's schoolmate at St Paul's School. The two boys became fast friends though Charles was later sent to Trinity College, Oxford, to study medicine. Charles's father, a well-known physician, was from an Italian Protestant family exiled to England. Milton was shocked to hear, from Charles's uncle Giovanni Diodati, of the death of Charles during his absence from London. It was as great a loss to Milton as the death of Arthur Hallam was to Tennyson. His first composition upon

arrival in London was the Latin *Epitaphium Damonis*, i.e. Damon's Epitaph, lamenting the death of Charles, and wishing that he had not left England so that he could hold Charles's hand and close his dying eyes. It is altogether a better *elegy* than *Lycidas*.

Milton was back in London in July 1639. This grand tour of 15 months was a valuable cultural experience. When he returned, he was a riper man. Every Miltonic ideal conceived during youth was becoming more firmly planted in the man. The travel heightened his republican tendencies and made his Protestantism more militant. No more the cloistered scholar of Horton, he was now ready to play the part as his 'great Task-master's eye' saw fit. He was now to embark on his poetic career, for which he had been preparing these twenty long years.

II. PUBLIC SERVICE: DEFENDER OF ENGLISH LIBERTY. 1640—60.

Records show that within the year and a half following his writing of *Epitaphium Damonis*, Milton was in serious contemplation of starting his epic poems, drawing themes from ancient British legend and history and from the Bible. Among the Trinity College MSS are four drafts, written about 1640, of an outline for a tragedy *Adam Unparadised*, or *Paradise Lost*. Edward Phillips, Milton's nephew and biographer, said he was actually shown Satan's speech in *Paradise Lost* IV 33-41, as the beginning lines of *Adam Unparadised*.

But wisest Fate says no

This must not yet be so. (*Nativity Ode* 149—50)

A theme as solemn as the Fall of Man was not to be tackled by a young idealist just stepping off a long flowery, though energetic, path of peaceful cultivation, under the aegis of a wealthy father. Just imagine how much *Paradise Lost*, to say nothing of *Samson Agonistes*, would have suffered, shorn of the lyrical outbursts of the poet's own heroic afflictions. Epical immortality is not to be attained without tribulations.

(1) Private teaching

Milton did not return to Horton where his father was living in retirement, but took up lodgings in London. His sister had been widowed with two sons, and then married again. But she soon died. Milton took the two nephews Edward and John Phillips to live with him and began tutoring them