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PERSONAL PORTRAITS

Edited by Patric Dickinson and Sheila Shannon

JOHJN MILTON by REX WARNER

REX WARNER

JOHN MILTON

with eight plates in photogravure
six illustrations in line

MAX PARRISH LONDON

1949

MAX PARRISH & CO LTD
Adprint House Rathbone Place London W i
in association with
CHANTICLEER PRESS INC
41 East 50th Street New York 22 N Y
ADPRINT LIMITED LONDON

The text of this book is set in Monotype Garamond 11 on 12 pt
Printed in Great Britain by Eric Bemrosc Limited liverpool

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John Milton. Engraving by William Faitborne

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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The portrait on the wrapper
is from an engraving by George Vertue, 1747

FOREWORD

// is difficult, or impossible, to say anything n
Milton[9]s life and art. Here I have attempted
to give, together with a short biography, a
personal impressions, nearly all proceedin
the great admiration I have always felt for
poet. I have, as any student will see, been
indebted to the modern critical work of Saur
Tillyard, Hanford, Bowra and others, but it
been impossible, for lack of space, to menti
the occasions where my views have been
identical with or different from those expre
these authors. In fact I have attempted rat
record enthusiasm than to further scholars
to promote understanding.

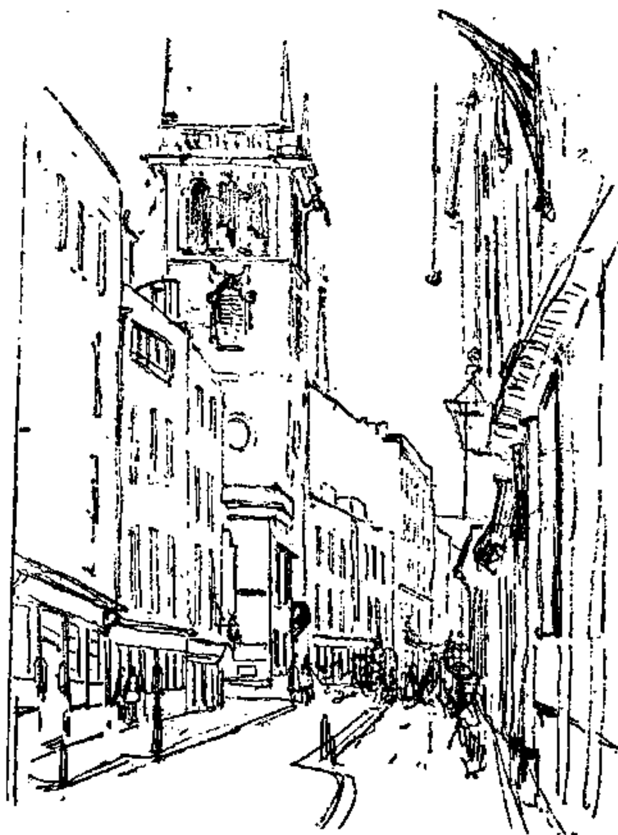
R.W.

INTRODUCTION

John Milton, both in his life and in his work, presents the spectacle of the most diverse tendencies, thoughts, ideals and influences somehow integrated into a thing of power. In all kinds of ways he was exceptional. No English poet has been so learned both in classical and in Hebraic literature. No English poet has devoted so much of his time to practical politics. Few men at all appear to have lived so entirely in accord with their professed convictions. In his life, his style and his achievement he stands out a solitary and mighty figure, forbidding, in a way, as befits a puritan and a revolutionary, yet, in spite of his force, his grandeur and his energy, revealing the most exquisite sensibility and pathos, the most sensuous appreciation of all kinds of pleasure. Like Swift, he might have said of himself that his life was spent in the defence of liberty, and with Swift too he shares the quality of "savage indignation". Those who do not agree with him are immediately dismissed as "Owles and Cuckoes, Asses, Apes and Doggs". Yet Milton's indignation is never unreasonable, never insane. Like Keats, in his writing he "loaded every rift with ore". Unlike Keats, he never overdid it, never strayed into sentimentality or offended by a

vulgarity of decoration. To some minds indeed the most forbidding thing about this great poet is his perfection. What he intends to do he does, according to his own standards, exactly. Yet his perfection is not that of a brilliant writer of Latin verse (which he was) or of a consummate lyric poet (which he also was). Beneath the polish and the exactness of a style influenced by Vergil, by Ovid and by the Greeks move and flash out sometimes the fanatical and Hebraic passions of a reformer, sometimes the frenzy of a disappointed lover, sometimes the languors of the most extreme sensuality, often the pride of genius and often the humility of a man before God. It is a perfection that contains and somehow fuses together the most violent and apparently incongruous elements.

In this ability to control and master his wide and intense experience Milton succeeds in being representative not only of what was best in his own age of revolution but of something that is permanently English and permanently European. He is the poet of the kind of protestantism which, without depending on dogma, has become a part of our atmosphere. It is a faith which, in its extreme form and under suitable conditions, will demand the suppression of despots, kings and priests; but its real impetus comes from its belief in the individual together with its consciousness of how beset with dangers the path of any individual must, in the nature of things, be. It is a faith which somehow manages to combine arrogance with humility, humanism with a sense of duty to mysterious powers. It is above all an assertion of free will, yet of free will which must be exercised in



Bread Street in the City of London, where Milton was born.

the conditions that follow upon "man's first disobedience". It is an energetic and optimistic faith in so far as it insists upon reason, sincerity and responsibility; but it has its tragic or heroic aspect, since it acknowledges the facts of disappointment and defeat. Though again there may be something forbidding in its demand for a perfect integrity, even its intolerance is inspiring—the intolerance of superstition, hypocrisy and authoritarianism.

Occasionally in history a great poet is able to reflect or to state in his own poetical terms what are to be, or have been in the deep levels of the mind, the dominant ideals and convictions of the past or present or future. If he does so, his work will have not only its own poetical importance, but will become itself an important factor in history. Just as Vergil in his story of Aeneas was able to embody the past and future greatness of Rome, so Milton, basing his epic on a few bald verses of Genesis and incorporating in it the vast resources of his learning, his taste and his experience, also created a myth characteristic of the English revolution, of the English character and of much else besides that is, in the fullest sense, European.

Yet, if his great work is, as he wished it to be, "doctrinal to a nation", it is also in itself delightful. Both his thought and the implications of his myth-making are interesting and important; but, political and religious as he was, he is in the first place a poet, and to be enjoyed. One's enjoyment will almost certainly be marred if one thinks of him too exclusively as the blind and defeated patriot, the unflagging scholar, the austere educationist, the anti-

clerical, the prophet of a creed of freedom. One should think too of the brilliant young man who astonished Italy with his wit and learning, of the poet who of all others, with the possible exception of Shakespeare, has written most beautifully of flowers and of everything that strikes the sense in an English landscape, of the vigorous believer in the possible goodness of life, who, so far from denying or belittling pleasure, made angels lovers and included in the wholesome delights of Paradise a "sweet reluctant amorous delay". We should remember him too in his old age when, according to Aubrey, he was "of a very cheerful humour. He would be cheerful even in his gout-fits and sing."

It is not easy to give a satisfactory picture of this great man and great poet, although the main facts of his life are well known and have been discussed both by himself and others. Yet there is always much that does not meet the eye, forces opposite to those which are immediately apparent, held in balance, perhaps, but balanced in a state of tension. His deep and sincere belief in spiritual reality is, in a way, opposed by his vigorous assertion of the natural goodness of what is physical. The obvious sources of his inspiration are also opposed to each other. On the one hand there is the spirit of the Bible, a spirit partly of fanatical intolerance, partly of the purist aspiration towards the One indefinable reality. On the other hand there is the spirit of classical literature, its humanism, its delight in what exists, its pathos and its rationalism, its acceptance of evident contradiction. The existence together of these apparently widely different views of the world, the

tension between them, their different combinations and oppositions from time to time, have, more than anything else, formed and controlled the civilisation of Europe. Milton himself, peculiarly impressed by both views, peculiarly aware of their contradiction, yet combined them, even when he deliberately seems to intend to avoid doing such a thing, in a manner which again makes him a European poet. What single element it was which, out of so much diversity, produced the impression of a rock-like integrity it would be hard to say. Some find it in a gigantic egotism; but it is more than that. Professor Saurat well says: "His high opinion of himself is also a high opinion of man." It is also a high opinion of life as it might be lived on earth. Tenacious as he is of his ideals, there is little in them which can be called rigid or oppressive. Though he would maintain that the highest of relationships and the ultimate one is that of the soul with God, he claimed no self sufficiency and through his life enjoyed the social pleasures. Certainly he claimed much for himself. He was conscious both of his genius and of his originality. When he invokes, partly in the spirit of the Psalmist and partly in the spirit of Homer or Lucretius, his "Heav'nly Muse" he demands her aid for an

> adventurous song
> That with no middle flight intends to soar
> Above th' Aonian Mount, while it pursues
> Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime.

It is a big claim and some will regard the making of it as an instance of arrogance or egotistical self assurance. But what is important is that it is strictly true.

John Milton at the age of twenty-one. This portrait, painted in 1792 for Lord Har court by Van der Gucht, is an exact copy of the original, now lost, which was formerly in the possession of the Onslow family.

LIFE

Milton was at all times anxious not only to justify "the ways of God" but his own as well. Consequently in letters, in pamphlets, particularly in his *Second Defence of the English People^* he himself gives us a full account of his career and of his aims. As he is a character most notably devoid of any kind of hypocrisy, this personal account is the more valuable. It is supplemented by several contemporary biographies, one written by his nephew and pupil, Edward Phillips, and printed in 1694, one, which was discovered in 1889, whose authorship is variously attributed to the younger nephew, John Phillips, or to one or other of Milton's intimate friends. Further contemporary accounts in the form of very credible gossip are supplied by John Aubrey. All this, together with family records, state papers, letters and some later biographies, constitutes full and consistent evidence for the main events of the poet's life. The interpretation of these events is another matter, though, to my mind, we shall not be wrong if, on all questions of literature, religion, politics and early upbringing, we accept as true what Milton says himself. On one event, his first marriage, Milton is, except in the general terms of his divorce

tracts, silent; and it should be remembered that his biographer Edward Phillips was only twelve years old at the time of an experience which was obviously of the very greatest importance to Milton's development. Here indeed there is some room for conjecture, although, I think, the conjecture might well be restrained by the modest reflection that even in the cases of our nearest friends we are usually not only incapable of precisely plumbing depths of feeling but are also unaware of the exact circumstances which gave rise to conflicts or dilemmas the effects of which we observe.

Though Milton's life is very much a part of his literary work, and, in a sense, may even be described as a long preparation for it, it will be convenient to consider the two, as far as possible, separately. His literary work falls quite clearly into three periods, his early poems, his prose work and his later poems. The events of his life connect and explain the changes from one period to another.

Milton was born, died and spent the greater part of his life in London. His family originally came from Oxfordshire, but his father, disinherited for embracing the Protestant faith, had set up business as a scrivener in the capital, where he acquired a comfortable fortune. Nonconformity seems to have been a tradition in the poet's family. The grandfather, Richard Milton, who disinherited his son John, was himself fined £60 twice in one year, 1601, for failing to attend the service of the Established Church. John Milton, father of the poet, appears in every account of him as a man of charm, kindness and integrity, devoted to furthering the career of his

talented son, and from an early age encouraging him in the belief that this career was to be literature. He was a considerable musician, so that we can be certain that his son's evident response to music was fostered during his childhood. Of the poet's mother, whose family came from Wales, we know less. There were three children, Ann, the eldest, John, born in 1608, and Christopher, who was seven years younger than his brother.

Milton himself describes his childhood as follows: "I was born in London, of an honest family; my father was distinguished by the undeviating integrity of his life; my mother, by the esteem in which she was held, and the alms which she bestowed. 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. This primarily led to my loss of sight. My eyes were naturally weak, and I was subject to frequent head-aches; which, however, could not chili the ardour of my curiosity, or retard the progress of my improvement."

The school to which Milton went at the age of eleven was St. Paul's, then under the headmastership of Alexander Gill, one of the great teachers of the age. Both here and at home, where he seems to have received extra tuition, Milton would have been encouraged to admire and enjoy the classics as difficult but living languages. He would also have studied the English poets, particularly Spenser, for whom Gill himself evinced a very great admiration. At school also he made friends with Diodati, for whom

Lincolniensis filius Augustini institutus est in literis Grammaticis primo in schola [illegible] sub auspicijs Mri Bayes, deinde in schola Grantamiensi sub Mro Willinson admissus est pensionarius maior Jan. 11. 1624. anno aetatis 16. sub tutela Mri Chappell. Solvitque pro ingressu

[illegible]iensis filius Roberti in agro praedicto, initiatus est in rudimentis Grammaticae primo sub auspicijs Mri [illegible] schola [illegible] ludimagistri, deinde in schola [illegible]iensi sub Mro Briten. admissus est Sizator Feb. 3. 1624. sub Mro [illegible]. Solvitque pro ingressu

Londinensis filius Johannis institutus fuit in literarum elementis sub Mro Gill Gymnasij Paulini praefecto. admissus est pensionarius minor Feb. 12. 1624. sub Mro Chappell. Solvitque pro ingressu

Milton at Cambridge: the entry in the Admission Book, Christ's College.

later he was to write in Latin what was perhaps **the** most deeply felt of his elegies. At the age of fifteen he wrote the first of his English verses which have survived. These were the paraphrases of Psalms 114 and 136.

In 1625, at the age of sixteen, the year in which Charles I came to the throne, he entered Christ's College, Cambridge. Here he found himself in an atmosphere which was for several reasons antipathetic. He was better educated and more seriously interested in learning than the vast majority of his contemporaries. While at school he seems to have fitted in easily to the discipline and the aims of the authorities, at Cambridge he soon showed the independence and reformatory zeal that were to be characteristic of him throughout his life. He quarrelled with his tutor and was transferred to the care of another one. In the Latin speeches, or "Prolusions", which he made to audiences of undergraduates and dons, and which were part of the system of education, he shows already a contempt for scholastic methods of thought. There are many passages which recall the new educational ideas of Bacon, whose *Advancement of Learning* had appeared just before Milton's birth. The first of these Prolusions shows also that he was unpopular with the undergraduates. Indeed it was only natural that the more "hearty" among them would fight shy of this auburn-haired and fastidious young man, who, because of his fair complexion, was nicknamed "the Lady" and who, as he himself said, showed no inclination to "quafFhuge tankards" or to snore at midday. As for the professed intellectuals, they no doubt would be offended by the young

man's contempt for the barrenness of their achievements. Many of them were destined for the Church. Already in his fourth year at Cambridge, Milton, writing to the son of his old Headmaster, maintains that there are only a handful of these who have any understanding of literature or philosophy. All they can do is to patch up sermons out of other people's ideas. "I fear, therefore," he writes, "lest our clergy should fall back into the monkish ignorance of a former age."

If, however, Milton was at first unpopular and always independent at Cambridge, before he went down he appears to have won the respect both of his contemporaries and of the fellows of his college who, he claims, "showed me uncommon marks of friendship and esteem".

The poetry which he wrote during this period will be considered later. Here, however, it is worth pointing out that the Latin poems which he wrote between the ages of sixteen and twenty, apart from their own merit, show him as one who delighted in the pleasures of the senses and in the idea of love. In the English verses also, written at the age of nineteen, for a Vacation Exercise, we find him already contemplating some gigantic poetical theme which in the future he will make his own. It seems clear that by the time he left the University he had already determined on many things. He had determined that his destiny was to be not only a poet, but a great poet; that, with this aim in view, the most careful and elaborate preparation, not only of the intellect, but of the character, was essential. Of his feelings in youth, Milton wrote later as follows: "And long it

was not after, when I was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem; that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men, or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and practice of all that which is praiseworthy."

This dedication to poetry seems to have been henceforward the dominating influence on Milton's life. Yet for poetry "experience and practice" is to him necessary, and he was consciously to postpone for many years his desired achievement in the service of political and religious ideals which were to him most "praiseworthy".

A deliberate self-dedication to poetry, a growing impatience with what appeared to him as limited or unreal in intellectual affairs or religious organisation, delight in the pleasures of the senses and in the different styles, Latin or English, in which words can be arranged, self-confidence in the future combined with a modesty and diffidence as to the present—all these are to be observed in Milton's career at Cambridge.

A great event occurred in 1629, after his twenty-first birthday. He completed his poemO// *the Morning of Christ's Nativity* and here for the first time revealed clearly a brilliant and original genius. It is a measure of his modesty that two years later, in his sonnet *How soon hath Time,* he can still write:

But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.

Just before this time, in 1632, he had taken his M.A. degree and retired for five years' further study

to his father's estate at Horton. It might well have been expected that he should enter upon some profession, probably the Church. On this question, Milton wrote later that he had perceived "what tyranny had invaded the Church, that he who would take orders must subscribe slave . . ." His father appears to have supported him in his view and to have encouraged him in his plans for a prolonged self-education, of which the poet writes: "I enjoyed an interval of uninterrupted leisure, which I entirely devoted to the perusal of Greek and Latin authors; though I occasionally visited the metropolis, either for the sake of purchasing books, or of learning something new in mathematics or in music, in which I, at that time, found a source of pleasure and amusement. In this manner I spent five years till my mother's death."

In a letter written to an unknown friend shortly after his retirement to Horton, Milton defends himself against the charge that, instead of taking to some profitable employment, he has "given up myself to dream away my years in the arms of studious retirement, like Endymion with the moon". "Studious retirement" to him is something very different from dreaming: it is partly a form of self-sacrifice, because there is against it "a much more potent and inbred inclination which about this time of a man's life solicits most—the desire of house and family of his own". Also the love of learning is no idle curiosity, no "empty and fantastic chase of shadows and notions" but very definitely a means to action and pursuit of the "solid good flowing from due **and** timely obedience to that command in the Gospel

4 page from the family Bible, recording the birth of John Milton, Some of the entries are in his own handwriting.

set out by the terrible seasing of him that hid the talent."

And at the end of this period he writes to Diodati: "Hear me, my Diodati, and suffer me to speak without blushing in a more lofty strain. Do you ask what I am meditating? By the help of Heaven, an immortality of fame. But what am I doing? . . . I am letting my wings grow and preparing to fly; but my Pegasus has not yet feathers enough to soar aloft in the fields of air."

At about the time of this letter he was composing *L/ycidas.* In the preceding years he had written, among other poems, *On Time, At a Solemn Musick U Allegro, Il Penseroso* and *Comus.* If such works can be regarded as examples of "preparing to fly", it is evident that his final ambition is certainly "no middle flight". There can be, I should say, no poem more perfect than *Lycidas.* By this time Milton is the complete master of a sustained style, combining the utmost delicacy and strength, imbued too with some rare magic that, it seems to me, is found elsewhere only in Shakespeare and in William Blake. Yet still much of the strength and pathos of the poem is due to the strong, though partially concealed, personality of the self-conscious and ambitious author. He is still, he feels, not ready for his final work; he dreads for himself "the blind fury with the abhorred shears"; and he consoles himself against that eventuality by the kind of Protestant integrity which much later will mark *Samson Agonistes.* It was not for another eight years that his early poems were published together, and by that time he was deeply engaged in political and religious controversy in

prose. How strange a mixture of modesty and of a kind of arrogance to have behind one, at the age of twenty-eight, much poetry that is immortal, yet to postpone the completion of the great work for still another thirty years!

Even the literary, as apart from the practical, part of his preparation was felt in 1638, the year after *Lycidas,* to be incomplete. In that year, so Milton says, "I then became anxious to visit foreign parts, and particularly Italy. My father gave me his permission, and I left home with one servant".

His travels lasted for more than a year and the record of them shows him as one who was welcome and admired in polite and learned society throughout Europe. In some ways this experience must have been the most pleasing one of the poet's life. In Florence, where he stayed for two periods of about two months, and in Rome he found that his learning, his charm and his abilities in the Italian and Latin languages won him the admiration and friendship of the leading scholars and intellectuals of the day. In Naples he made friends with the old nobleman Manso, once the patron of Tasso, and addressed to him one of his finest Latin poems, a poem in which he clearly states his own intention to write, not in an international language, but in his native tongue, a national epic, the subject of which is to be King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. He had intended to go on to Sicily and Greece, but, to quote his own words, "the melancholy intelligence which I received of the civil commotions in England made me alter my purpose; for I thought it base to be travelling for amusement abroad, while my fellow-

citizens were fighting for liberty at home". In fact the civil war had not yet broken out, but it was clearly imminent. Milton returned by way of Rome, where he was informed that the English Jesuits, because of his freedom of speech on the subject of religion, had formed a plot against him. "It was", he says, "a rule which I laid down to myself in those 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. I, nevertheless, returned to Rome. I took no steps to conceal either my person or my character; and for about the space of two months I again openly defended, as I had done before, the reformed religion in the very metropolis of popery."

Whether the Jesuit plot was real or imagined, Milton did not suffer from it. He returned to Florence for another two months, where, he says, "I was received with as much affection as if I had returned to my native country". He visited Lucca, Bologna and Ferrara, spent a month in Venice, and then proceeded by way of Verona and Milan to Geneva, and thence back to England through France.

There is no doubt that this Italian tour was an interlude of pleasure and of importance in Milton's life. Years afterwards he still speaks of it with an unusual excitement and delight. It was the first time that he was wholly freed from the restraint exercised consciously or unconsciously by parents or preceptors. It was the first time that he had been abroad. Handsome, brilliant, sought-after and comfortably off, he might well have been expected to have had his

head turned by flattery or to have indulged in what may be called either the follies or the experiences of youth. In fact, as is shown in the poem to Manso, he is still, in all the novelty and variety of his travels, "strictly meditating" the work which will make him famous. He will make no concessions to popery. As for sowing wild oats he writes: "in all those places in which vice meets with so little discouragement, and is practised with so little shame, I never once deviated from the paths of integrity and virtue, and perpetually reflected that, though my conduct might escape the notice of men, it could not elude the inspection of God."

In August 1639, now aged thirty, Milton returned to England and, soon after his arrival, composed the last of his Latin elegies, the *Epitaphium Damonis*, in memory of his friend and schoolfellow Diodati, who had died when he was away in Italy. It is a beautiful poem, showing more feeling for a dead friend than appears in *Lycidas.* Yet, characteristically, Milton devotes much space in it to his own future plans. Again he speaks of an Arthuriad to be written. He consciously bids farewell to the Latin language as his literary medium. This may mean, he suggests, giving up an international fame, but he will be content if his songs are learned along the banks of Ouse, Alan, Trent, Thames and Tamar, indeed among the Orcades in the remote waters.

In fact, apart from the sonnets, this was to be his last poem for many years. He was to use the Latin and the English languages vigorously and extensively in prose; but, just at the time when one might have expected from the author of *Lycidas,* refreshed and

stimulated by his contact with the glories of Italy, an outpouring of confident and divinely beautiful verse, just then the stream stops still or dives underground. A revolutionary situation and an unhappy choice in marriage may be regarded as responsible; but it may also be that Milton, for all his evident sincerity in the religious and political battles in which he now engaged, was still, in the course of these, searching for a further and more unique literary equipment. Perhaps he knew that it was impossible, in the same style, to write better poetry than *Lycidas.* He never repeated himself, and when he writes poetry again he has somehow, and possibly by a deliberate use of bitter experience, found a theme much vaster than anything he had imagined up to now, and, without losing the sensuous inspiration of his youth, has strengthened, fortified and raised his style to "the highth of this great Argument".

He did not become immediately involved in politics. First, after moving to a house in London, he began, among other work, to see to the education of his two nephews, John and Edward Phillips, who had been left in his care and who, under his instruction, pursued a course of studies which would terrify most boys of their years. Yet we have Edward Phillips's word for it that they enjoyed it because of "his excellent judgment and way of teaching, far above the pedantry of common public schools". A few years later, in his essay *Of Education,* Milton was to summarise his ideals and the result of his experience. Here, as in everything else, he tends to judge others by himself. Because he himself has

genuinely enjoyed learning, others can and should do the same; nor does he arrogate to himself, what he most certainly had, a far greater ability and resolution than what is normal. To him education is most certainly education for life. He says: "I call therefore a complete and generous education, that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war." It is the ideal of Plato and of Bacon —the ideal too, it is worth pointing out, of English education at its best. But to realise this ideal Milton commends a course of study far beyond the powers of nearly everyone. Not only are his pupils required to possess a thorough knowledge of Latin and Greek ("They may", he says, by the way, "have easily learned, at any odd hour, the Italian tongue"). They must also be instructed, in a practical way, in agriculture, medicine, engineering, anatomy, gardening and much else. Naturally they must be well versed in the Scriptures (for which the Chaldee and Syrian dialects should also be learnt); but they must also study economics, politics, rhetoric and music. They must know "the exact use of their weapon", and, towards the end of a day, "they are, by a sudden alarum or watchword, to be called out to their military motions, under sky or covert".

In this essay *Of Education,* as in his other writings of the time, Milton shows the most extravagant idealism, something indeed doomed to disappointment. Yet here, as elsewhere, his very exaggeration has been effective. Sincerely he feels that all must have an "infinite desire of such a happy nurture", and he is right enough to contrast it with "that

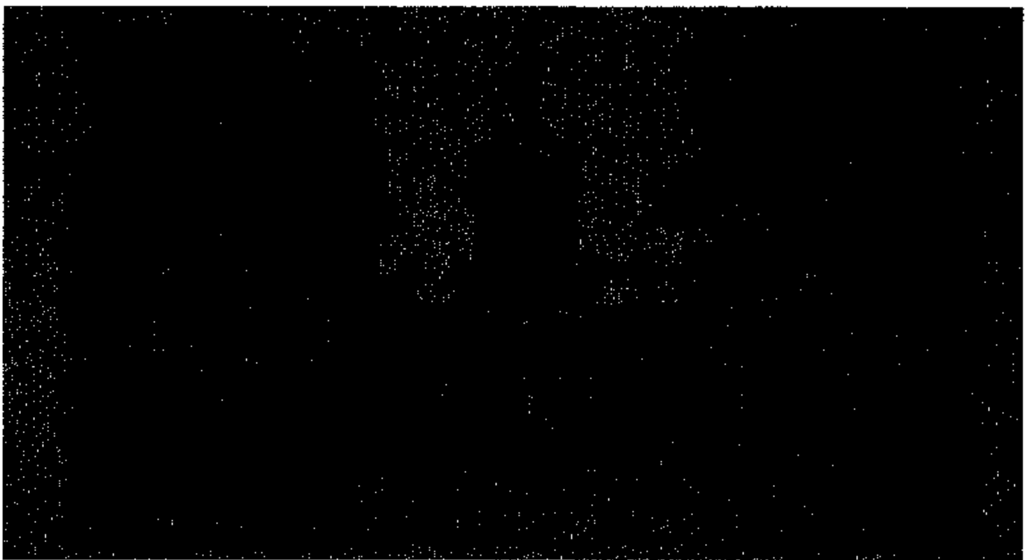
asinine feast of sowthistles and brambles, which is commonly set before them as all the food and entertainment of their tenderest and most docible age".

Education, however, though carried out with the most extreme thoroughness, was far from being Milton's only occupation in the years immediately following his return from Italy. In the summer of 1641, appeared the first of his pamphlets directed against the Bishops, *Of Reformation in England.* This was followed by four other pamphlets in the course of the next year. During this period it must have been evident that the country was moving in the direction of civil war. Milton was in no doubt as to which side he should support, yet there is nothing bigoted or intolerant in his general attitude. As we shall see, he married a Royalist, and received Royalists into his house. Later he was of service to literary men of the opposing party who found themselves in difficulties with the authorities. At this early stage of affairs his main preoccupation was with that liberty of conscience which was threatened by the disciplinary policy of the Bishops. He was not yet a republican. Yet from the very beginning of his political career he was, just as in his views on education, inspired by prodigious and unrealisable hopes. Reformation in England was to be, he considered, the beginning of reformation throughout Europe and the world. His attitude at this time has been rightly compared with that of Wordsworth in the early days of the French Revolution. Yet Milton was more certain of himself and of his hopes than ever Wordsworth was; he was more actively engaged in the struggle than ever were Shelley or Byron. There is enthusiasm,

but no romanticism in his approach to the realisation of his aims. His inspiration is religious and patriotic, but also practical and personal. He has not forgotten his own self-appointed task of writing, at some time, the great national poem. If it is postponed for the moment, it is only because it will in the end become a part of the glorious event of national regeneration. A famous paragraph from the end of his first pamphlet shows the temper of his mind at this time, its vigour and enthusiasm, its ability to wait.

"Then, amidst the hymns and hallelujahs of saints, some one may perhaps be heard offering at high strains in new and lofty measure to sing and celebrate thy divine mercies and marvellous judgments in this land throughout all ages; whereby this great and warlike nation, instructed and inured to the fervent and continual practice of truth and righteousness, and casting far from her the rags of her whole vices, may press on hard to that high and happy emulation to be found the soberest, wisest, and most Christian people at that day, when thou, the eternal and shortly expected King, shalt open the clouds to judge the several kingdoms of the world, and distributing national honours and rewards to religious and just commonwealths, shalt put an end to all earthly tyrannies, proclaiming thy universal and mild monarchy through heaven and earth . . ."

So, at the age, probably, of thirty-four, Milton has already shown himself a supreme poet, a distinguished and effective writer in prose. He has been exactly successful in everything he has planned; he is full of confidence in his own abilities and in the justice and attraction of the cause which he follows.



St. Paul's School. Rebuilt after the Great Fire, it bears Colet's inscription from the original building. Etching by Wenceslaus Hollar or his pupil Richard Gaywood.

His ideals are very high, but he has found a genuine satisfaction, something different from priggishness, in living his own life in conformity with them. It is at this point that his intensely passionate and sensitive nature received a very great shock.

Edward Phillips's account of Milton's first marriage is, briefly, as follows. In May 1643, Milton went to the country, and after a month returned home, having in the meantime married Mary Powell, daughter of a Justice of the Peace in Oxfordshire. Some of his wife's relations accompanied her to Milton's house and then, after a few days' feasting, left her behind "probably not much to her satisfaction". She had been "used to a great house and much company and joviality" and now found life in her husband's household oppressive. After a month of it (the anonymous biographer says "after a few days") she returned to her family, ostensibly for a short visit. Later, however, she refused to come back to her husband at all, being possibly influenced in this decision by her Royalist relations, who at this time regarded the victory of the King as probable.

Milton had already started to write the pamphlets on divorce, and before long began to contemplate marriage with another woman. Two years later, in 1645, after Cromwell's decisive victory at Naseby, Justice Powell's family "set all engines on work" to get Milton to take his wife back. He was unexpectedly confronted with her "making submission and begging pardon on her knees before him". There may have been, says Phillips, "some show of aVersion and rejection; but partly his own generous nature, more inclinable to reconciliation than to perseverance in

anger and revenge, and partly the strong intercession of friends on both sides, soon brought him to an act of oblivion, and a firm league of peace for the future". Later he gave refuge in his house to her parents and several of her brothers and sisters, "which", as Phillips observes, "were in all pretty numerous".

There are some authorities on Milton who believe that 1642, not 1643, was the date of the marriage. The main argument for this view is that, if we accept 1643 as the date, Milton must have been writing his first divorce pamphlet actually during his honeymoon. This, to my mind, is exactly what one would have expected Milton to have done. The marriage was clearly a failure; he had made a great mistake, and he would not be slow to recognise it.

The mistake was very great indeed, and we do not know how he came to make it. Milton's ideals in marriage, as in everything else, were exceptionally high, as can be seen both from his picture of wedded love in *Paradise Lost* and from the divorce tracts themselves. It should be, he thought, a free association where the body and mind of each brings comfort and delight to the other. Yet he himself, at a ripe age, with fully developed intelligence and fixed aims, failed most signally *to* discover what he wanted. What exactly happened between him and Mary Powell we do not know. One imagines that Milton, like Adam and many others, was, against his better judgment, "fondly overcome by Femal charm".

Mary Powell was neither old nor intelligent enough to understand her husband. Her way of life was wholly different, and she was no doubt encouraged by her family to avoid making

concessions to one whose intellectual and spiritual superiority to them all was probably rather overwhelming. An inability or unwillingness to accept or to return the affection which he could offer would be quite enough, one imagines, to drive Milton, with his zeal for perfection, to despair. It is unnecessary to assume, like Saurat, that the marriage was not consummated until after the reconciliation. This seems to me most unlikely. The frustration shown in the divorce tracts is not a physical so much as a spiritual frustration. This, and also the depths of disappointment which Milton felt, is made clear by the following passage: "And yet there follows upon this a worse temptation: for if he be such as hath spent his youth unblamably, and laid up his chiefest earthly comforts in the enjoyments of a contented marriage, nor did neglect that furtherance which was to be obtained therein by constant prayers; when he shall find himself bound fast to an uncomplying discord of nature, or, as it oft happens, to an image of earth and phlegm, with whom he looked to be the copartner of a sweet and gladsome society, and sees withal that his bondage is now inevitable; though he be almost the strongest Christian, he will be ready to despair in virtue, and mutiny against Divine Providence."

These are strong words indeed for Milton to use. And this experience of disappointment in just that quarter where he had looked for most joy and comfort certainly left on Milton's mind an indelible mark. It coloured his conception of the Fall. It breaks out again, in a magnificent fury, when in his old age he composed *Samson Agonistes* and wrote:

What e're it be, to wisest men and best
Seeming at first all heavenly under virgin veil,
Soft, modest, meek, demure,
Once join'd, the contrary she proves, a thorn
Intestin, for within defensive arms
A cleaving mischief, in his way to vertue
Adverse and turbulent, or by her charms
Draws him awry enslav'd
With dotage, and his sense depraved
To folly and shameful deeds which ruin ends.

What is characteristic of the man is that, no sooner did he realise his mistake, than he set out to remedy it. He had discovered that "his way to vertue" had been blocked. It must therefore be reopened. He knew that his experience was shared by others, and regarded his campaign for easy divorce as another blow struck for the general liberties of mankind. His second edition of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* is addressed to Parliament. He is, as usual, completely confident in his own ideas. "Whoso", he writes, "prefers either matrimony or other ordinance before the good of man and the plain exigence of charity, let him profess papist, or protestant, or what he will, he is no better than a pharisee, and understands not the gospel." This, in fact, is his real case, the argument from "the plain exigence of charity", and though, as a controversialist must do, he refers continually to Scripture, one observes that at the back of his mind there is something which, though he hardly admits it to himself, is of greater weight even than Scripture. He writes of the existing rules for divorce as "crossing a

law not only written by Moses, but charactered in us by nature, of more antiquity and deeper ground than marriage itself; which law is to force nothing against the faultless proprieties of nature".

So, with a strange naive confidence, Milton, incidentally breaking the regulations governing publishing, called upon Parliament to redress the unnecessary sufferings of himself and others. "Let not England", he exhorts this assembly, "forget her precedence of teaching nations how to live." The only result apparent was a storm of abuse. Two petitions against Milton for publishing scandalous literature were made by the Stationers' Company. Mr. Herbert Palmer, preaching before Parliament in August, 1644, alluded to this "wicked book". No support for what had seemed to the author such evident truths came from anywhere.

In 1645, having completed the divorce tracts and also written the essay *Of Education* and *Areopagitica,* Milton describes his experience in this controversy in a sonnet the opening lines of which are:

> I did but prompt the age to quit their cloggs
> By the known rules of antient libertie,
> When strait a barbarous noise environs me
> Of Owles and Cuckoes, Asses, Apes and Doggs.

There is something pathetic in this continued faith, already against much evidence, in "the known rules". Yet it was a faith which he never abandoned. *Areopagitica,* which appeared in 1644, at a time when his eyesight was already beginning to fail, contains perhaps the noblest profession of his still enormous

hopes. In the following year there took place his reconciliation with his wife, and shortly after this he published *in* one volume his early poems in English and Latin. At about this time he began work on his *History of Britain,* and on his important compilation of texts and comments which occupied him for many years and was called *De Doctrina Christiana.* In the summer of 1646, with the fall of Oxford, the Parliament was victorious in the first phase of the war. Milton received his wife's family into his house. He was far from content with the way things were going, regarding the now dominant party of Presbyterians as "forcers of conscience" just as dangerous as the Bishops before them. "New Presbyter", he writes, "is but Old Priest writ large."

Consequently he associates himself more and more with the Independents and Cromwell, whose army occupied London *in* 1647. Next year the war was over and Cromwell's party triumphant. Milton, at the age of thirty-nine, is now at the beginning of his most arduous and effective period of political activity. It was not for another ten years that he even began to work on *Paradise Lost.* Charles I was executed in January 1649, and in the following month appeared Milton's *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates.* This work is a vigorous, but by no means fanatical, defence of a peopled rights to dispose of unjust governors. At the time that it appeared, great numbers of the English people had begun to sympathise with what was beginning to appear to them as "the martyred king". To Milton, such feelings are unworthy and sentimental, the result of a failure to have the courage of one's

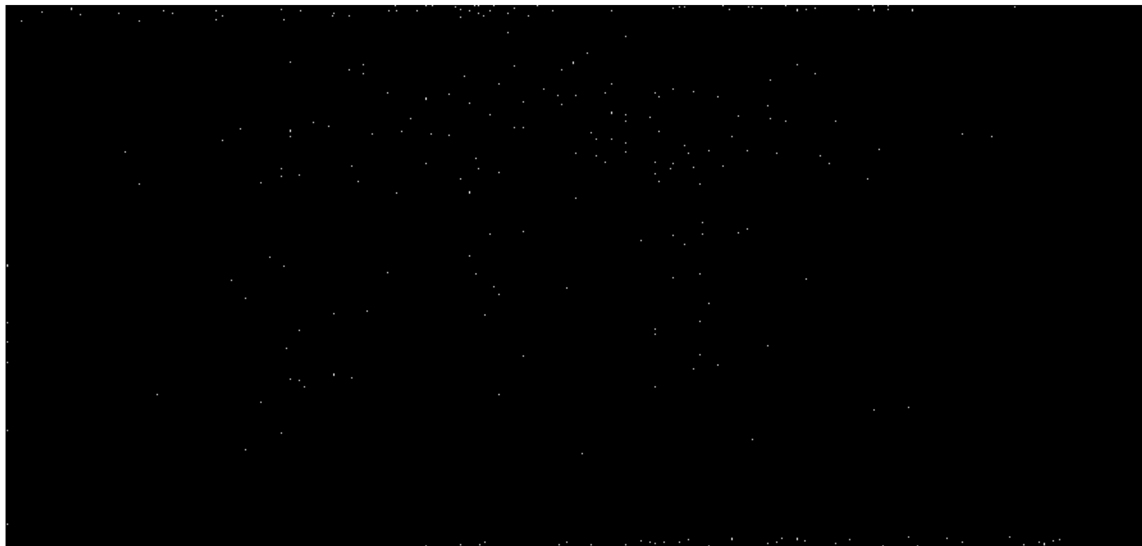
convictions. He is now notably less sure of the native goodness and good sense of his fellow citizens. Indeed, he finds that men "generally give up their understanding to a double tyranny, of custom from without and blind affections within". And, in magnificently effective language, he writes of those "who coming in the course of these affairs to have their share in great actions above the form of law or custom, at least to give their voice and approbation, begin to swerve and almost shiver at the majesty and grandeur of some noble deed, as if they were newly entered into a great sin". He is concerned to show that the Presbyterians, in politics as in religion, have shrunk from the logical consequences of their own creed and actions.

In the following month, Milton was appointed Secretary for Foreign Tongues to the Council of State. In this position, apart from official business, he published important works in Latin, directed not to an English but to a European audience, defending the policy of the Government and of the Reformation. In 1649 appeared his *Eikpnoklastes,* an answer to a Royalist book called *Eikpn Basili^e,* purporting to have been written by King Charles himself. In 1650, he wrote his first *Defence of the English People,* in reply to the great European scholar Salmasius's defence of the English monarchy. About this time, having already lost the sight of one eye, he became totally blind. Next year his wife died after childbirth. She had borne two daughters, and a son who died in infancy.

The *Second Defence of the English People* appeared in 1654, after Cromwell had made himself Protector.

It is in many ways the most important of Milton's political works. In it there flares up again his confidence in the mission of the English and of their reformation. In Cromwell he had evidently more confidence than in any other man or party, and Cromwell's military and political successes encouraged him to believe that, in spite of past disappointments, the cause of liberty will now at last prevail. The whole work is marked by an energy, a solid directness and strength that are indeed amazing when one considers that it was dictated hurriedly, in the heat of controversy, by a blind and lonely man. His opponents had made out that his blindness was a judgment of God on the defender of regicides. Milton writes of it as follows: "There is, as the apostle has remarked, a way to strength through weakness. Let me then be the most feeble creature alive, as long as that feebleness serves to invigorate the energies of my rational and immortal spirit; as long as in that obscurity, in which I am enveloped, the light of the divine presence more clearly shines, then, in proportion as I am weak, I shall be invincibly strong; and in proportion as I am blind, I shall more clearly see. O! that I may thus be perfected by feebleness, and irradiated by obscurity! And, indeed, in my blindness, I enjoy in no inconsiderable degree the favour of the Deity, who regards me with more tenderness and compassion in proportion as I am able to behold nothing but himself."

This is the last of the political tracts in which Milton shows a real confidence in the future, and even in this one the confidence is very different from the lyrical enthusiasm of *Areopagitica.* Cromwell



Prospect of *Cambridge* *from the West. Engraving **from** David Loggatts 'Cantabriga lllustrata', 1690.*

himself is taken to task for his failure to disestablish the Church, and in the last sentences he plainly warns the English people of the judgment of posterity, if they fail to live up to the height and dignity of their opportunities. Posterity, he writes, "will see that the foundations were well laid; that the beginning (nay, it was more than a beginning) was glorious; but with deep emotions of concern will they regret, that those were wanting who might have completed the structure . . . They will see that there was a rich harvest of glory, and an opportunity afforded for the greatest achievements, but that men only were wanting for the execution; while they were not wanting who could rightly counsel, exhort, inspire, and bind an unfading wreath of praise round the brows of the illustrious actors in so glorious a scene."

There is no doubt that Milton himself felt the honest pride in his own work of counselling, exhorting and inspiring. In the sonnet to Cyriack Skinner, written at this time, he says of his blind eyes:

> What supports me, dost thou ask?
> The conscience, Friend, to have lost them overply'd
> In libertyes defence, my noble task,
> Of which all Europe talks from side to side.

From 1655 onwards Milton seems to have enjoyed more leisure. His official duties were less and it seems probable that about this time he began to plan *Paradise Lost.* In 1656, he married his second

wife, Catharine Woodcock, the "late espoused saint" of the sonnet, who, together with the infant daughter whom she had borne him, died in the year 1658.

The same year saw the death of Cromwell. Events now moved rapidly and it must soon have been easy to see that the restoration of the monarchy was either likely or certain. This did not prevent Milton from writing to the very last "the language of that which is not called amiss 'The good old Cause'". After two pamphlets written in favour of the most thorough disestablishment of the Church, he published in March of 1660, two months before the return of the King, a final plea for his old ideals, entitled, characteristically enough, *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth,* Now, at the age of fifty-one, Milton is less confident in his fellow-men; he knows the dangers of "the general defection of a misguided and abused multitude". Yet, if he is not so confident of the immediate success, he is as confident as ever in the justice of his cause, and in his duty to support it. He is even ready, as he was scarcely ready in his youth, to wait. He would say what he has to say, "though what I have spoke should happen (which thou suffer not, who didst create mankind free! nor thou next, who didst redeem us from being servants of men!) to be the last words of our expiring liberty. But", he adds, "I trust I shall have spoken persuasion to abundance of sensible and ingenuous men; to some, perhaps, whom God may raise from these stones to become children of reviving liberty; and may reclaim, though they seem now choosing them a captain back from

Egypt, to bethink themselves a little, and consider whither they are rushing .. ."

Within a month or two of writing these words he was in hiding. As the leading English defender of the regicides, he might well fear for his life. His great work was still far from completed. The cause to which he had devoted his best energies for the past twenty years must have appeared wholly lost. In facing this overwhelming defeat as he now knew how to do, he was able in the next eleven years to complete the great works that had haunted indistinctly his imagination from his earliest youth.

In his immediate danger he was well served by his friends, including Andrew Marvell, who was Member of Parliament for Hull and had earlier, in 1657, been appointed assistant Latin Secretary. He was banned from holding any further office in the state, but otherwise included in the wise Act of Oblivion.

In 1662 he married his third wife, who survived him. According to Aubrey, it was in this year that he completed *Paradise Lost.* Certainly it was completed before the end of 1665, when, during the plague, Milton retired for a short time to the country at Chalfont St. Giles and showed the manuscript to the Quaker Thomas Ellwood.

When the poem was begun is uncertain. According to ^ubrey, quoting what he had heard from Edward Phillips, it was in the spring of 1658. Others believe that the earlier books were written before then. Phillips tells us that throughout the composition of the poem Milton spent only half his time on it

since "his vein never happily flowed but from the autumnal equinoctial to the vernaP\

Paradise Lost was published in 1667. From his publisher Milton received an advance of £5, and a further £5 two years later after the first edition of 1,500 copies had been sold. The second edition appeared in 1674, the year of the poet's death.

His last works, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, appeared together in 1671. Three years later he died in an attack of gout, "but", to quote the anonymous biography, "with so little pain or emotion, that the tide of his expiring was not perceived by those in the room".

His declining years had been, by all accounts, happy and contented. He was honoured by the poets of his day, particularly by Dry den. Never was there the least decline in the vigour of his mind or of his verse. *Samson Agonistes* closes with "calm of mind, all passion spent", but what passion, and often fury, there is on every page !

Yet again it is necessary to correct what would be a false impression if one were to think too exclusively of his force and fervour and integrity. His anonymous biographer, who certainly knew him well, after commenting on his "sharp wit and steady judgment", kept in his mind the following picture of him: "He was of a moderate stature, and well proportioned, of a ruddy complexion, light brown hair, and handsome features; save that his eyes were none of the quickest. But his blindness, which proceeded from a gutta serena, addedno further blemish to them. His deportment was sweet and affable; and his gait erect and manly, bespeaking courage and undaunted-

ness (or a *nil conscire*), on which account he wore a sword while he had his sight, and was skilled in using it. He had an excellent ear, and could bear a part both in vocal and instrumental music."

THE EARLY POEMS

And now, in beginning to discuss the poems, I should prepare the reader for what may be a monotony of eulogy or of anxiety to communicate enthusiasm. I do not enjoy finding fault with the great; indeed I cannot often myself perceive the faults that others tell me they have discovered. If it is true that Milton wrote so powerfully and with such an individual style that he somehow disrupted the main stream of English poetry, I cannot for that reason deplore his least word. Nor can I easily forgive Dr. Johnson for his censure of *Lycidas.*

It is, of course, interesting, and particularly so in Milton's case, to trace the development of thought and style in his work. But one should beware, I think, of that over-critical mood which tends to assume that our author should be, even long after his death, somehow instructed rather than admired. We should remember that we have to do with a supreme genius who, like Mozart, very early in his life achieved a rare kind of perfection in art. This fact is of more importance than can be any discussion of the right uses of the pastoral or the precise relevance of literary allusion.

When, before dawn on Christmas Day, 1629, a week or two after his twenty-first birthday, Milton

sat down to compose the *Nativity Ode,* something began to appear which was new, fresh and powerful. What, one wonders, would a contemporary critic, Diodati, for instance, have thought as he read the work? He would read with increasing amazement, noting, perhaps, at first some echoes of Spenser, mentally applauding the strong simplicity of such a line as:

> Forsook the Courts of everlasting Day

or wondering what new element had been introduced into the Alexandrines that, again in the manner of Spenser, end each verse.

This line, for instance, recalls *The Faerie Queene:*

> And chose with us a darksom House of mortal Clay.

But how to account for the different kind of elevation in the line that ends the next verse?

> And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright.

And then, after proceeding a little further, would not our imaginary critic, would not anyone, begin to open the eyes wider in a delighted surprise? This is a Christmas scene in which all nature takes part. Peace comes down to earth "With Turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing". Kings sit still, their armaments of war unused, "as if they surely knew their sovran Lord was by". Then, in an inspired innocence, the poet writes:

But peacefull was the night
Wherin the Prince of light
His raign of peace upon the earth began:
The Windes with wonder whist,
Smoothly the waters kist,
Whispering new joyes to the milde Ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While Birds of Calm sit brooding on the charmed wave.

In this moment of universal and magic tranquillity, mortal men are as yetunawareof their splendid future.

The Shepherds on the Lawn,
Or ere the point of dawn,
Sate simply chatting in a rustick row;
Full little thought they than,
That the mighty Pan
Was kindly come to live with them below;
Perhaps their loves, or els their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts so busie keep.

As they are awakened to reality, Milton for the first time writes of the pleasures of sound:

When such musick sweet
Their hearts and ears did greet,
As never was by mortall finger strook,
Divinely-warbled voice
Answering the stringed noise,
As all their souls in blisfull rapture took:
The Air such pleasure loth to lose,
With thousand echo's still prolongs each heav'nly close.

Christ's College in the seventeenth century. Engraving from David Loggan's 'Cantabrigia Illustrata', 1690.

And suddenly, a stately and prodigious sight:

The helmed Cherubim
And sworded Seraphim,
Are seen in glittering ranks with wings displaid,
Harping in loud and solemn quire,
With unexpressive notes to Heav'ns new-born Heir.

Here certainly, in the "loud and solemn quire", in the "unexpressive notes" occur phrases which are typically and obviously Miltonic. But how much of what is new and strange has gone before them !

The music of the angels might well be answered by the music of the spheres ushering in the age of gold, with Truth, Justice and Mercy returning to men. But the time is not yet. First must come the Crucifixion and the Day of Judgment. Already however the gods of the past have lost their unreal power. Among them the gods of Greece and Rome, the gods of much of Milton's education.

The lonely mountains o're,
And the resounding shore,
A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament;
From haunted spring, and dale
Edg'd with poplar pale,
The parting Genius is with sighing sent,
With flowre-inwov'n tresses torn
The Nimphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

And there is a note, not of this gentle regret, **but** more of the reforming vigour of a Samson or a Cromwell, when he writes of the dismissal of the

false gods of Israel who later will be his fallen angels.

Peor, and Baalim,
Forsake their Temples dim,
With that twise-batter'd god of Palestine.

So, like ghosts flying before the dawn, the monstrous shapes of terror and superstition disappear. The age of gold is not yet with us, but it is finally promised. The poem closes with the innocence that marked its beginning, yet with an added dignity and hope as though from "new acquist of true experience".

But see the Virgin blest,
Hath laid her Babe to rest.
Time is our tedious Song should here have ending,
Heav'ns youngest teemed Star,
Hath fixt her polisht Car,
Her sleeping Lord with Handmaid Lamp attending:
And all about the Courtly Stable,
Bright-harnest Angels sit in order serviceable.

Thus at the very beginning of his life we find themes and a style which will develop, but remain essentially the same till the end. There is the possibility of the return of Truth and Justice; there is the ambiguous position of Greek divinities, sometimes being exalted, as "the mighty Pan" is equated with Jesus Himself, sometimes being, rather regretfully, assigned to Hell; there is the orderly, serene and majestic company of angels; there is confusion to be

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Title-page of the second edition of the Poems.

dealt out to the enemies of God; there is a higher harmony which, but for sin, would be audible to us all; there is a longing for innocence and for perfection. And in the style there is not only an English magic and a Vergilian grace and pathos; there is also a strange majesty, a virile robustness. This double response, to what is sensuous and to what is supernaturally dignified, can be observed in many of the early poems. It may, for instance, be interesting to compare two more passages which deal with music and with singing. At the end *oiU Allegro* he writes:

> Lap me in soft Lydian Aires,
> Married to immortal verse
> Such as the meeting soul may pierce
> In notes, with many a winding bout
> Of lincked sweetnes long drawn out,
> With wanton heed, and giddy cunning,
> The melting voice through mazes running;
> Untwisting all the chains that ty
> The hidden soul of harmony.

Compare with this the lines from *At a Solemn Mustek,* where the poet summons up:

> That undisturbed Song of pure content,
> Ay sung before the saphire-colour'd throne
> To him that sits thereon
> With Saintly shout, and solemn Jubily,
> Where the bright Seraphim in burning row
> Their loud up-lifted Angel trumpets blow,
> And the Cherubick host in thousand quires
> Touch their immortal Harps of golden wires . . .

It is the same man who writes and feels the two passages, a man who is affected to an unusual degree by the delights of the senses, but one who aims at something beyond "wanton heed and giddy cunning"—at an "undisturbed Song of pure content". Nor is there anything in the least unreal or sentimental about the heavenly performance in which the saints shout and the Angel trumpets are blowing loudly.

The same contradictions or variations in both style and feelings are to be observed in *Comus,* where, indeed, they are so great that, in spite of so much beauty, the whole does not, for once, achieve perfection. As Professor Tillyard has well pointed out, the style is now suited to Elizabethan drama, now to Arcadia, now to a Greek tragedy. There is a corresponding uncertainty in the treatment of the subject.

The subject is the triumph of chastity over all opposition; yet the opposition, as expressed in Comus's fine speeches, breed much more vigorous poetry than does the idea of chastity. Then too, among a wealth of beautiful extravagances, there appears from time to time, and in its present context out of place, the almost desperate moral fervour of the author of *Samson Agonistes:*

> this I hold firm,
> Vertue may be assail'd, but never hurt,
> Surpriz'd by unjust force, but not enthralTd,
> . . . if this fail,
> The pillar'd firmament is rott'nness,
> And earths base built on stubble.

These are lines of an extraordinary power, but it is a power which does not blend exactly well with the imaginary world where people sing:

> Sabrina fair
>   Listen where thou art sitting
> Under the glassie, cool, translucent wave,
>   In twisted braids of Lillies knitting
> The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair . . .

How right was Sir Henry Wotton who, in his charming letter to the young author *oiComus,* writes of "a certain Dorique delicacy in your Songs and Odes, whereunto I must plainly confess to have seen yet nothing parallel in our language: *Ipsa mollifies".*

Nothing indeed could be more ravishing than these songs and odes, nothing more full of life and brilliance and variety than *UAllegro* and *IIPenseroso,* poems in which the skill in exploiting all the possibilities of weight and lightness and infinite variety in a simple metre is so astounding that, if one is not careful, one may, while reading them, be more lost in admiration of the manner than the essence. But still this first period of poetry is unfinished. *Lycidas,* the final work, is, to my mind, with the possible exception of Vergil's *Orpheus and Eurydice,* the most perfect poem of its length that has ever been written. Every line, every passage, fills one with a glad surprise; an unearthly simplicity flows, as in the music of Mozart, from so much intricacy. Effortlessly, yet through depths of feeling and with the divine conjunction of delicacy and strength, the poem moves in and represents "the hidden soul of harmony".

One may well wonder how such a miracle could have proceeded from so antiquated a method and so well-worn a theme. The laurels and myrtles and ivy, the muses and the shepherds, the complaint to the nymphs, the imaginary deification of the dead shepherd—all these are borrowed from Greek and Latin literature. Even the attack on the Church, and the complaint for lost fame can be found in Spenser. How then, with no obvious originality, did Milton come to write a poem which is unique, a poem which equals the beauty and exceeds the power of any Eclogue of Vergil?

It must be remembered that the theme, however old, is splendid. It is the death of youth, the theme of the mourning for Adonis or of the Good Friday processions still to be seen in the Greek church. It is also the theme of deification or resurrection, differently imagined in Greek myth or in Christian religion. Milton has written something which, with all its pastoral beauty, is bigger than a pastoral because his personal feelings have allowed him to rise to a dignity and fervour equal to the grandeur of such a theme and beyond the conventions of the pastoral manner. Indeed these conventions serve him rather as a medium is assumed to serve a spirit, being in themselves almost meaningless, but revealing powers which, without them, would have remained supernatural. Milton, at this time of his life, is himself intensely aware of what might turn out to be a wasted youth. He is forced to think of what, if any, is the meaning of life at all. He too, in spite of all his strict meditation of "the thankles Muse", imy die as his friend died and find the reward

of fame. This is a deeply felt and not an idle question:

> Were it not better don as others use,
> To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
> Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair?

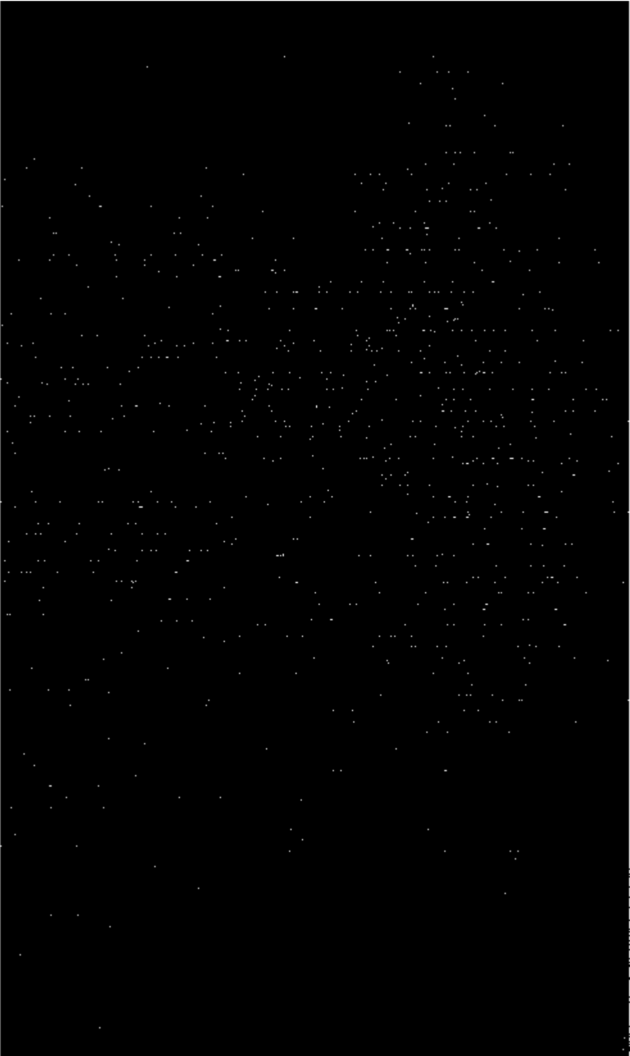
Moreover the Church, to which at one time he felt called, is in a state where

> The hungry Sheep look up and are not fed.

His solution to doubt, fear and disappointment is partly the consciousness of his own integrity, partly his faith and resignation to a higher power. The feelings and the kind of purification of them are both real and intense. In this poem he comes mentally of age and, in a manner which is as inexplicable as are all the processes of the highest art, his own passion fuses with an old theme, making it new, delicate and wonderful. Every transition is both surprising and appropriate. Blended uncannily together are tenderness and majesty, indignation and romance, a Vergilian and a Christian spirit.

Though the whole poem excites wonder and delight, nothing in it is more wonderful than the last sixty lines, with their variation from mood to mood of beauty. First the flower passage where the Sicilian Muse calls for the fresh blossoms of an English meadow:

> Ye valleys low where the milde whispers use
> Of shades and wanton winds, and gushing brooks,
> On whose fresh lap the swart Star sparely looks,



Facsimile extract from Milton's MS. of'Ljcidas'.

Throw hither all your quaint enameld eyes,
That on the green terf suck the honied showres . . .

And, in natural though extraordinary juxtaposition, come at the end the classical and the English names:

> Bid Amaranthus all his beauty shed,
> And Daffadillies fill their cups with tears.

Yet this fantastic invocation is only "false surmise". Changing, with an easy abruptness, the imagery to "the stormy Hebrides" and even "the bottom of the monstrous world", Milton imagines the dead lost body, and again invests it with a different sort of beauty :

> Or whether thou to our moist vows deny'd,
> Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old,
> Where the great vision of the guarded Mount
> Looks toward Namancos and Bayona's hold;
> Look homeward Angel now, and melt with ruth.
> And, O ye Dolphins, waft the haples youth.

And now again another transition from the delicacies of pity and regret to the softness and certainty of final peace, the vision of Lycidas:

> In the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love.
> There entertain him all the Saints above,
> In solemn troops, and sweet Societies
> That sing, and singing in their glory move,
> And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.

Finally, again with a surpassing grace and beauty, Milton withdraws from his tremendous achievement back to the ordinary world :

> Thus sang the uncouth Swain to th'Okes and rills.

And indeed it is true that his normal personality, like that of everyone, is "uncouth" when compared with what he has written.

> At last he rose, and twitch'd his Mantle blew:
> To morrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new.

So, quietly as it began, this great poem ends. It is an elegy on youth; but it is also the triumph of youth. It is the finest flower of culture and of sensibility: it is also the record, in supreme art, of a great mind coming to terms with the world.

THE PROSE

When confronted with so vast and varied a body of work as that which Milton left behind him it is normal, perhaps, to be humanly lazy and either maintain or wish to maintain that certain large sections are barely readable. This, I fear, is often the fate of Milton's prose. Yet it is far from deserving neglect. The prose-writing years were valuable, not only as a preparation for *Paradise Lost,* but in themselves. Milton is one of our very greatest prose-writers, with a tremendous range of style and feeling. He also expresses with more force and more clarity than anyone else some of the ideals of protestantism which have shaped English and European history ever since his times. And if to us now his enormous fervour on the subject of some particular and contemporary reforms seems exaggerated, we should remember that to him the struggle between authoritarianism and liberty of conscience was just as real as are the similar struggles of our own times. He is best of all, I think, when he deals with a wide and general theme, either with liberty of expression, as in *Areopagitica,* or with personal relationships and "the faultless proprieties of nature", as in *The*

Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce. Yet, however general the theme, his own burning integrity fills it with an individual life. He is one who really believes what he says. Nor is there anything out of date in these great works. Indeed, in most respects, they are considerably ahead of the times.

All the prose is stamped by the same undeviating contempt for hypocrisy, the same high idealism which is united with a firm desire to put into practice what has been imagined as admirable. There is indeed always a practical purpose, though this is often served by a kind of poetic prose unlike any that has been written. As in the poetry, it is easy to trace the influence of classical or biblical styles, and, again as in the poetry, it is impossible to discover exactly how these styles have formed so individual and original a blend.

It is impossible to deal here at all adequately with the prose works and their many implications. Perhaps the purpose of this essay will be best served simply by a commentary on one or two passages which seem to me among those that throw most light upon the author himself. To my mind *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* is, in spite of its general theme, the most personal of all Milton's writing. The terms are veiled, but behind them one can easily detect the enormous and lasting wound which came to him with the failure of his first marriage. In the following passages, for instance, he is undoubtedly writing of himself. He is not too proud to admit that his own chaste life has proved, in certain respects, a disadvantage. There is the same almost pathetic note as we find in:

Were it not better don as others use . . .

He writes: "The soberest and best governed men are least practised in these affairs; and who knows not that the bashful muteness of a virgin may ofttimes hide all the unliveliness and natural sloth which is really unfit for conversation? Nor is there that freedom of access granted or presumed, as may suffice to a perfect discerning till too late; and where any indisposition is suspected, what more usual than the persuasion of friends, that acquaintance, as it increases, will amend all? And lastly, it is not strange though many, who have spent their youth chastely, are in some things not so quick-sighted, while they haste too eagerly to light the nuptial torch; nor is it, therefore, that for a modest error a man should forfeit so great a happiness, and no charitable means to release him, since they who have lived most loosely, by reason of their bold accustoming, prove most successful in their matches, because their wild affections unsettling at will, have been as so many divorces to teach them experience. Whenas the sober man honouring the appearance of modesty, and hoping well of every social virtue under that veil, may easily chance to meet, if not with a body impenetrable, yet often with a mind to all other due conversation inaccessible, and to all the more estimable and superior purposes of matrimony useless and almost lifeless; and what a solace, what a fit help such a consort would be through the whole life of a man, is less pain to conjecture than to have experience."

Here, in spite of the painfullness of the subject, one notices the greatest clarity in expression. Milton

admits his mistake, even recognises that, in some respects, his very virtues have betrayed him. He will not admit that any mistake, particularly in a matter of such importance to him, is past remedy. How important this matter was to him, how he longed "to put off an unkindly solitariness" is shown in another passage. Commenting on St. PauPs dictum "It is better to marry than to burn", he asks "but what might this burning mean? Certainly not the mere motion of carnal lust, not the mere goad of a sensitive desire: God does not principally take care for such cattle. What is it then but that desire which God put into Adam in Paradise, before he knew the sin of incontinence; that desire which God saw it was not good that man should be left alone to burn in; the desire and longing to put off an unkindly solitariness by uniting another body, but not without a fit soul to his, in the cheerful society of wedlock? Which if it were so needful before the fall, when man was much more perfect in himself, how much more is it needful now against all the sorrows and casualties of this life, to have an intimate and speaking help, a ready and reviving associate in marriage? Whereof who misses, by chancing on a mute and spiritless mate, remains more alone than before, and in a burning less to be contained than that which is fleshly, and more to be considered; as being more deeply rooted even in the faultless innocence of nature."

Such sentences as these seem to me to reveal the real bed-rock and springs of Milton's thought and character—the longing for perfection, the intolerance of what falls short of it, the faith, against all

kinds of authority, in what to him is "deeply rooted even in the faultless innocence of nature". Certainly he leaves much out of account, but takes account of much more. As he continues one can feel behind the words not only his conviction but his suffering. "Who hath the power to struggle with an intelligible flame, not in Paradise to be resisted, become now more ardent by being failed of what in reason it looked for; and even then most unquenched, when the importunity of a provender burning is well enough appeased; and yet the soul hath obtained nothing of what it justly desires. Certainly such a one forbidden to divorce, is in effect forbidden to marry, and compelled to greater difficulties than in a single life; for if there be not a more humane burning which marriage must satisfy, or else may be dissolved, than that of copulation, marriage cannot be honourable for the meet reducing and terminating lust between two; seeing many beasts in voluntary and chosen couples live together as unadulterously, and are as truly married in that respect. But all ingenuous men will see that the dignity and blessing of marriage is placed rather in the mutual enjoyment of that which the wanting soul needfully seeks, than of that which the plenteous body would joyfully give away".

While still engaged on the divorce tracts Milton found the energy and courage to write *Areopagijtica,* a work filled with a burning faith and confidence in the future of his country and of the cause of liberty. He looks forward to "the reforming of Reformation itself". He demands the completest liberty of expression. Truth, in a fair contest, will always prevail. A famous passage will illustrate not only Milton's

style at its most prophetic and splendid, but also the extent of his hopes for his country at a period when his private life had been so disappointed:

"Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks: methinks I see her as an eagle mewing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam: purging and unsealing her long-abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance; while the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds, with those also that love the twilight, flutter about, amazed at what she means, and in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms."

Sixteen years later he was to write, in his last pamphlet, what he may have felt were to be "the last words of our expiring liberty". His political disappointment came more gradually and was perhaps never so fiercely felt as was his first domestic disappointment. Yet out of this as well, out of experience both sudden and prolonged, came the great poetry of his later years.

Apart from passion, enthusiasm and pathos we find in Milton's prose a masculine roughness, as is shown in the sentence already quoted. "God does not principally take care for such cattle." He is also capable of a sustained irony, less savage, certainly, than that of Swift, but both characteristic and effective. He writes, for instance, as follows, about the clergy who trim their sails to the prevailing currents of opinion:

"For divines if we observe them have their postures, and their motions no less expertly, and with

John Milton. Posthumous drawing by Jonathan Richardson the Elder, 166J-174J.

no less variety, than they that practise feats in the Artillery-ground. Sometimes they seem furiously to march on, and presently march counter; by and by they stand, and then retreat; or if need be, can face about, or wheel in a whole body, with that cunning and dexterity as is almost unperceivable, to wind themselves by shifting ground into places of more advantage . . . At their turns and doublings no men readier, to the right, or to the left; for it is their turns which they serve chiefly; herein only singular that with them there is no certain hand, right or left, but as their own commodity thinks best to call it. But if there come a truth to be defended, which to them and their interest of this world seems not so profitable, straight these nimble motionists can find not even legs to stand upon; and are no more of use to reformation thoroughly performed, and not superficially, or to the advancement of truth, (which among mortal men is always in her progress,) than if on a sudden they were struck maim and crippled."

Truth, as Milton saw it, was, in his later years, to be arrested in her progress. Yet his efforts to further her cause had certainly not gone for nothing. His greatest prose works, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* and *Areopagitica*, fell upon ears that were either wholly or partially deaf; yet to succeeding generations they have never ceased to be an inspiration. Today they are at least as inspiring, at least as much to the point as ever. It may be that Milton seeks both in personal relationships and in the conduct of public affairs a perfection that is beyond the reach of ordinary men and women; yet in the defence of a threatened liberty this attitude is less dangerous

than an acquiescence in what is second-rate or a complacency with what may be as easily corrupted as honoured by time. If our own European liberties are to be retained, it is necessary for us still to follow the example of this great Protestant in his life-long struggle against the "double tyranny, of custom from without and blind affections within".

The subject of *Paradise Lost* is exactly what Milton states it to be. It is "Mans First Disobedience" and the "loss of Eden". It is the loss of that "faultless innocence of nature", which had long been in his mind as a standard or an ideal. In dealing with this irrevocable loss Milton has to explain, first, how it came about, and secondly how an all-loving and all-powerful God could allow it to have come about. The first of these questions involves the nature of man and of woman, their position between the enormous warring powers of Heaven and of Hell. The second question makes it necessary for the poet to make that incredibly bold prayer for an inspiration:

> That to the highth of this great Argument
> I may assert Eternal Providence,
> And justifie the wayes of God to men.

The ways of God are justified partly by the fact of His gift to man of free will, without which man would be lacking in dignity. He must be free to sin, for otherwise he would not be free to love. Partly they are justified by the fact that even man's disobedience serves to afford an opportunity for the

showing of still greater love by God, in the redemption of man by the sacrifice of his own son.

The nature of man is shown to be, even in the innocence of Eden, capable of making irrevocable mistakes when passion takes over the control from reason. Man is guarded by angels and forewarned of what to expect from the machinations of Satan. In spite of this he falls, and for the fall can blame no one but himself. Yet for him too repentance, fortitude and endurance can, if not restore Paradise, at least give dignity to the future, so that, through the intervention of "one greater Man", he will in the end "regain the blissful Seat".

This general theme, a mixture of Hebrew mythology and Christian theology, is treated in the epic method of Homer and of Vergil. There are long narrative passages or forecasts of the future to break up the main story; there are battles and journeys; invocations to the "Heav'nly Muse"; imitations of style and imagery like those that may be noticed in *Lyctdas.* Yet the total effect is of something unique and personal. Far more than in the case of Homer, more also than in the case of Vergil, the poet's own character is visible behind his invention, in many disguises, but always preserving its identity. It is this, I think, which gives an epic unity and passion to what might otherwise have been a mere disquisition on theology or poetical allegory. Milton feels deeply throughout. His mind is exercised not only by the general problem of reconciling sin and evil with the idea of a loving God, but by his own particular and personal disappointments in marriage and in politics. Often, I think, one tends to exagger-

Paradife loft.

POEM

Written in

TEN BOOKS

By *JOHN MILTON*.

Licenced and Entred according to Order.

LONDON

Printed, and arc to be fold by *Pttcr Parker*
under *Creed* Church necr *Aldgate* 5 And by
***Kitirt Btuktr* at the *Tmkj Hiai in Bifhepfottt-Jlntt* j**
And *Mmhim Walfa,* under St. *Vuiljltai* Church.
in *flaijkiet,* 16 *6* 7.

Title-page of the first edition of 'Paradise Lost'.

ate the importance of personal experience on a writer's work; but in the case of Milton I believe that it is hardly possible to exaggerate it. It appears, certainly, in a general framework of prodigious, indeed universal, extent, and under the covering of a sublime and monumental style; yet without this inner and perpetual preoccupation with real and personal experience so vast a scene would have been indistinct, so grand a style have sagged from time to time or become grandiose. Though he aimed at, and succeeded in, making this poem "doctrinal to a nation", there is something in it which poetically is more important than this justification of God and of Milton's own protestantism. One would hesitate to use of Milton the word "inconsistency"; yet, as we shall see, there are some aspects of *Paradise Lost* where something not unlike inconsistency may be observed. And it is at these points that Milton is most moving.

A similar kind of inconsistency gives a peculiar quality to the *Aeneid.* Vergil, like Milton, is deliberately writing in the *Aeneid* a poem "doctrinal to a nation". His aim is to justify the ways of Rome by showing how a divine providence has, through all kinds of hardships, exalted to supremacy a certain type of character in which fortitude, duty and resolution are perhaps the chief elements. Yet he is too great a poet not to realise that the qualities required for victory in the field and for honest administration do not embrace the whole of life. He realises too that, though the ways of God to Rome have certainly resulted in a mighty empire, their operation has also included all kinds of crime, cruelty and deceit. He

is thus particularly moving when he hints at his own dissatisfaction with the ways of heaven, or when his sympathy for Dido leads him into making his own hero in this one instance most notably unheroic.

So in Milton's nature there are forces which are at variance with both the logical and the conventional development of his myth. This contrariety is seen most clearly in his treatment of Satan and in his treatment of the relations between Adam and Eve. Satan ought to be wholly bad, yet Milton is compelled, partly by the need of an epic to have a worthy antagonist for its heroes, partly by his own sympathy for any revolt against absolute authority, to make Satan, at least in the early books, in some ways an admirable and Promethean figure. Then, in his treatment of Adam and Eve, his own belief in the pleasures and the possibilities of a paradise of domestic bliss seems again to weight the scales against Heaven. Rational enjoyment of the world, and in particular a perfect relationship physically and mentally with a woman, seem in this poem to arouse Milton's enthusiasm more than any mystical experience which may lie outside the senses. Matter is good. Even angels eat and drink and make love. There is even, I think, in some part of Milton's mind a kind of sympathy with the desire for the forbidden fruit with its hoped result of raising man to the stature of the gods. Certainly Eve's vanity and fickleness are at fault, but her disobedience to Adam is, in some ways, at least as reprehensible to Milton as is her disobedience to God. And then when Adam, fully knowing the consequences, shares in her fault, his conduct, instead of appearing as the final act of

weak disobedience to the clear commands of Heaven, is marked by a natural and human nobility. One is meant to feel that Adam is "fondly overcome with Femal charm". This is true, but he is also deliberately choosing death rather than to desert a fellow human being, whom he loves. Like Satan, but with a humanity which Satan lacks, he revolts against "our great forbidder". Unlike Satan, he is not beyond the reach of redemption, and, in emphasising this fact, Milton contrives, with the great force of his intellect and his inspiration, to bring back a kind of consistency into his story and his justification of the ways of God. The contradictions of thought and feeling are somehow resolved in the process of his art. Yet the contradictions are indubitably there. They are worth examining *in* further detail.

What Blake said was that Milton was of the devil's party without knowing it. Much has been written to prove, and prove satisfactorily, that he did not know it. It is certainly true that the character of Satan suffers a progressive deterioration throughout the poem, that spite and envy are his common motives, that he views the embraces of Adam and Eve "with jealous leer malign", that his final achievement is greeted with hissing instead of with applause. These are instances of Milton's power to impose what is in the end consistency on his poem. Of course he must consciously and sincerely condemn the adversary of God and men. He must condemn a pride which is not, like the pride of Samson, dependent on submission to a higher power. So he would have condemned Tamberlaine or Cesare Borgia. Still,

however, it seems evident that something in his own character, something in the character of the Renaissance and of the Reformation, makes him feel sympathy for any revolt against "the tyranny of Heaven", and for a resolution which can express itself in such lines as:

> yet not for those
> Nor what the Potent Victor in his rage
> Can else inflict do I repent or change,
> Though chang'd in outward lustre; that fixt mind
> And high disdain, from sence of injur'd merit,
> That with the mightiest rais'd me to contend,
> And to the fierce contention brought along
> Innumerable force of Spirits arm'd
> That durst dislike his reign, and me preferring,
> His utmost power with adverse power oppos'd
> In dubious Battel on the Plains of Heav'n,
> And shook his throne.

It is not only in what Milton says, but also in the speed, excitement and movement of the lines that can be found arguments for Blake's point of view that he wrote in fetters when he wrote of angels and God, and at liberty when of devils and Hell. Even in mere lists of names in these first two books the same excitement can be felt. For instance:

> Next Chemos, th' obscene dread of Moabs Sons,
> From Aroer to Nebo, and the wild
> Of Southmost Abarim; in Hesebon
> And Horonaim, Seons Realm, beyond
> The flowry Dale of Sibma clad with Vines,
> And Eleale to th' Asphaltick Pool.

There is no doubt that Milton believes still in "the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love"; but his imagination is now equally aroused by the real shock of war and particularly by resolution and undeviating defiance in defeat.

The change from Hell to Heaven in Book III is, in spite of the tremendous invocation to Light, a falling off in splendour. More moving indeed than God or the Messiah is God's view from Heaven of

> Our two first Parents, yet the onely two
> Of mankind, in the happie Garden plac't,
> Reaping immortal fruits of joy and love,
> Uninterrupted joy, unrivald love
> In blissful solitude.

It is on them that the blow will fall, and it is only, as a rule, in writing of them, or of himself, that Milton reaches the same pitch of excitement and feeling as that of the first two books. The terrible landscape of Hell is no more forcibly and clearly imagined than are the delights of Paradise, where every sense is gratified, and even at a distance from which

> gentle gales
> Fanning their odoriferous wings dispense
> Native perfumes, and whisper whence they stole
> Those balmie spoils.

None of the innumerable delights of Paradise compares with the love of Adam and Eve. None so moves the envy and hostility of Satan. And Milton is particularly careful to point out, on occasion after

occasion, that this love is, whatever its spiritual excellence, centred in the body. When Adam and Eve retire to their bower, he writes:

nor turnd I weene
Adam from his fair Spouse, nor Eve the Rites
Mysterious of connubial Love refus'd:
Whatever Hypocrites austerely talk
Of puritie and place and innocence,
Defaming as impure what God declares
Pure, and commands to som, leaves free to all.

This is still the Milton of the divorce pamphlets. He still imagines in the relationship between Adam and Eve the perfect union of which he can write:

Here Love his golden shafts imploies, here lights
His constant Lamp, and waves his purple wings,
Reigns here and revels;

In this union there is nothing unusual except its perfection. They are indeed:

the lovliest pair
That ever since in loves imbraces met,

but they are in no sense demi-gods. They are thoroughly and to some tastes over-sensually human. They spend their time in "sweet Gardning labour" which improves their appetites for "the savourie pulp" of the

Nectarine fruits which the compliant boughes
Yielded them.

And, while they eat their supper surrounded by lions dandling lambs, gambolling tigers and bears, and elephants making them mirth, we are told:

> Nor gentle purpose, nor endearing smiles
> Wanted, nor youthful dalliance as beseems
> Fair couple, linckt in happie nuptial League.

Milton's view of the ideal relationship between the sexes is certainly expressed in the line "Hee for God only, shee for God in him", and this view, however psychologically sound, has offended some modern tastes. It is important, however, to remember that however much Milton may have felt that Adam ought to have been immune from the attractions of "Femal charm", in fact he was not. In conversation with the angel he owns:

> when I approach
> Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
> And in herself compleat, so well to know
> Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
> Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;
> All higher knowledge in her presence falls
> Degraded, Wisdom in discourse with her
> Looses discount'nanc't, and like folly shewes;
> Authoritie and Reason on her waite,
> As one intended first, not after made
> Occasionally; and to consummate all,
> Greatness of mind and nobleness thir seat
> Build in her loveliest, and create an awe
> About her, as a guard Angelic plac't.

The Angel, it is true, replies to this "with contracted brow" aiid warns Adam against an excess of feeling for his mate "who sees when thou art seen least wise". Yet he owns that angels themselves love, and not only by looks:

> Easier than Air with Air, if Spirits embrace,
> Total they mix, Union of Pure with Pure
> Desiring.

To me it seems clear that that element in Paradise which to the poet's mind is most paradisal and the loss of which is most deeply felt is this innocent and complete love between the sexes. As the climax approaches the humanity of the pair is more and more stressed. It is ordinary human feeling that causes the fall, not any typical Renaissance ambition, like that of Faustus, to offend God by rivalry with him. That was the role of Satan. The fault of Adam and Eve is more normal, more to be forgiven *scirent si ignoscere manes.* When, knowing the danger that threatens them from some unspecified temptation, Eve decides for once to do her gardening alone and Adam urges her to stay with him for protection, Eve employs the very arguments used by Milton in *Areopagitica* for freedom to face temptation alone and without support. She thus gets the better of the argument and gives the serpent his opportunity. In her fall Eve is actuated by vanity, by curiosity and by "an eager appetite, rais'd by the smell So savourie of that Fruit". Intellectual dishonesty plays its part. She accepts the serpent's specious arguments, and persuades herself that God

did not perhaps really mean what he said. After eating the fruit she bolsters up her confidence in lines of immense pathos and beauty:

And I perhaps am secret; Heav'n is high,
High and remote to see from thence distinct
Each thing on Earth; and other care perhaps
May have diverted from continual watch
Our great Forbidder, safe with all his Spies
About him.

Her next thought is of Adam. If she keeps her guilty secret, she will have an advantage over him. She will be able

the more to draw his Love,
And render me more equal, and perhaps,
A thing not undesirable, sometime
Superior: for inferior who is free.

But it may be that God has seen and that death will follow. Then perhaps Adam will live united with another Eve. It is a thought she cannot bear, and she decides that at all costs Adam must taste the fruit too.

There is certainly a kind of meanness in Eve's logic, a refusal to face the facts. But there is also a human pathos and accuracy. She does not really know what she has done.

Adam knows perfectly well, yet immediately he decides

with thee
Certain my resolution is to Die;

PARADISE LOST.

BOOK I.

F Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
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, that on the secret top
Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
Rose out of *Chaos*: Or if *Sion* Hill 10
Delight thee more, and *Siloa's* Brook that flow'd
Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventrous Song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar

A Above

'Paradise Lost': the first page of the edition of **1667.**

How can I live without thee, how forgoe
Thy sweet Converse and Love so dearly j^yn'd,
To live again in these wilde Woods forlorn ?

She attempts, in her gratitude, to console him with the prospect of "open'd Eyes, new Hopes, new joyes", but the fact is that when he eats the fruit, he eats

Against his better knowledge, not deceav'd,
But fondly overcome with Femal charm.

The immediate effect on them of the fruit is a kind of love-making quite different from that which has been between them hitherto. They awake from it

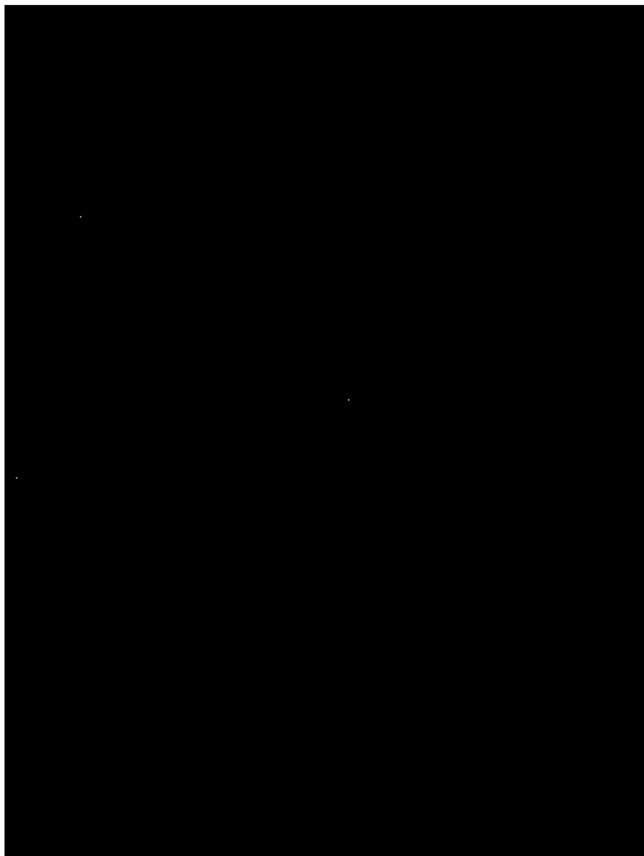
As from unrest, and each the other viewing,
Soon found their Eyes how op'nd, and their minds
How dark'nd.

Then, in place of the easy confidence of the past, come mutual recriminations

but neither self-condemning,
And of thir vain contest appear'd no end.

Only later, in the general collapse of life and peace in Paradise, when the once playful beasts glare at them, do Adam and Eve repent and gradually, with the aid of God and of angels, begin to adapt themselves to a future which, however grim, is not without dignity and hope.

In these closing passages Milton, with his vast power over structure, somehow reconciles and



Milton at the age of sixty-two. This engraving by William Faithorne was used as the Frontispiece to Milton's 'History of Britain', and is claimed to have been 'drawn from life'.

redeems what may have appeared contradictory in the earlier books. The poem is very definitely a whole, and in all its variety stamped by the individual force of one mind. It is the most intellectual of epics, yet it is also, because of ordered and restrained elements which are almost inconsistent with the logic, one of the most human. To read it is a complete experience, and the closing lines conclude in humanity what was begun in the vast lowering and desolate atmosphere of Hell. The gate of what was once Paradise is now

> With dreadful faces throng'd and fierie Armes,

but for Adam and Eve

> The World was all before them, where to choose
> Thir place of rest, and Providence their guide:
> They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
> Through Eden took thir solitarie way.

Like *Lycidas* the poem closes in perfection, but as one looks back over its great events one cannot help feeling that the loss of Heaven for Satan and of Paradise for Adam and Eve symbolise something even greater and wider than what they are intended to do in the successful scheme of the justification of God's ways. Revolt is in the nature of things and so is the violence and enchantment of sexual feeling. Both may lead to disaster, as Milton well knew, yet both are so strong elements in his own character that they command, even against his better judgment, his respect. True, that Satan, whose pride turns

to malignity, is lost beyond redemption; yet the original pride was splendid. True, that ^dam was more moved by feeling than by the strict injunctions of authority; yet his unhesitating acceptance of death rather than to desert his love has its own nobility. There is a sense in which here, as in all Milton's work, it is man rather than God who is justified. The loss of Paradise gives scope certainly for a greater exercise of God's love, but also for a fuller dignity in man. Such qualities as fortitude and endurance were scarcely required in a life devoted to gardening and love-making. Now they are required in a world "to good malignant, to bad men benigne". Also and even more are necessary those original sins in which Milton so profoundly believed and which can now take on the form of virtue—revolt against unjust authority, and the shared love which can both delight and console.

THE LAST POEMS

Since the aim of this essay has not been either scholarship or objectivity, but only to give a personal view of those elements in Milton's life and work which most appeal to one reader, it might be well to say little of *Paradise Regained.* It is not a poem to which I constantly return. It is entirely without the fire and passion of *Paradise Lost.* Indeed there are passages which, to my mind, could actually be called dull. Satan is without grandeur, and the Messiah goes through his temptations with an effortless confidence which, however admirable, is scarcely dramatic. The verse, like the subject, is quiet, slow and deliberate. Occasionally there are lines of overwhelming beauty:

> Fairer than feign'd of old, or fabl'd since
> Of Fairy Damsels met in Forest wide
> By knights of Logres, or of Lyones,
> Lancelot or Pelleas, or Pellenore.

But such lines are very much the exception. It is the least decorated of all Milton's poems.

Yet in its quiet confidence it is also, as the others, though in its own way, perfect. Its theme is **the**

rejection of the pleasures and glories of the world in the service of something higher. In particular are rejected two things which have formed Milton's own life, political power and profane literature. There is a kind of quietism about the poem, a spiritual calm undisturbed by the intellectual force and human pity of *Paradise Lost* or the fierce passions and triumphant vindications of *Samson Agonistes.* The poem is not exciting, nor is it meant to be. In Milton's own thought it seems to represent that "plain heroic magnitude of mind" with which he met and conquered disappointment.

Both Adam and Samson fell through the temptations of sexual passion. Here the temptations are political and intellectual. Jesus, from his earliest years, is represented as one who has been attracted to political action:

> When I was yet a child, no childish play
> To me was pleasing, all my mind was set
> Serious to learn and know, and thence to do
> What might be publick good.

And after this education, so similar to that of Milton himself, Jesus, again like Milton, admits:

> victorious deeds
> Flam'd in my heart, heroic acts, one while
> To rescue Israel from the Roman yoke,
> Then to subdue and quell o're all the earth
> Brute violence and proud Tyrannick pow'r.

That perfect submission to the will of God is more

heroic than the acquisition of temporal power is the conclusion of the poem, but the power itself is also dismissed as unworthy:

> What wise and valiant man would seek to free
> These thus degenerate, by themselves enslav'd.
> Or could of inward slaves make outward free?

So, after the Restoration, Milton's own mind has turned inward and away from political action. It has even turned away, though only temporarily, from the literature of Athens which is contrasted unfavourably with the literature of the Bible. Yet the description of Athens, of

> Plato's retirement, where the Attic Bird
> Trills her thick-warbl'd notes the summer long,

rather belies the severity of the poet's intention, and *Samson Agonistes* was shortly to show how irrevocably the poet's mind was steeped in the literature which he here condemns. Still to me it is not a pleasing thing to imagine Milton writing of one of the main sources of his own inspiration:

> Remove their swelling Epithetes thick laid
> As varnish on a Harlots cheek, the rest,
> Thin sown with aught of profit or delight. . .

Such passages as these seem to show Milton in full retreat from the world into a kind of resignation which was not without its bitterness. As always he imposes order on his emotions, though only here the

form of order is a kind of sobriety, a plain and straightforward justification of a superhuman integrity. And this perfection of sobriety can in itself be very moving, as in the last lines of the poem:

> hee unobserved
> Home to his Mothers house private return'd.

It is a poem of renunciation which is yet full of hope. It is a poem almost without passion, yet a poem that proceeds from great spiritual depths. It is moving because of its certainty and because of its lack of excitement.

In Milton, passion and excitement are provoked more by failure than by success, more by a heroic struggle than by the perfect assurance of superior power. He understands the failure of ambition and understands the acceptance of responsibility for this failure, in the belief that, whatever are the rights and wrongs, God is always right and that a man, gifted with free will, must always declare, as Samson does, "Whom have I to complain of but my self?" In this spirit, Adam and Eve regained their dignity: in this spirit Milton had regained his own. And his final work, *Samson Agonistes,* composed in accordance with the strictest rules of Greek drama, is so full of his own personality that it is more passionate than anything else he wrote. Inside this work of formal perfection, his immensely powerful and sometimes conflicting feelings are amazingly balanced, expressed and reconciled.

The biblical Samson is a character noted chiefly for his great physical strength, his unbridled lusts

Ἀμαθεῖ γεγράφθαι χειρὶ τήνδε μὲν εἰκόνα
Φαίης τάχ' ἄν, πρὸς εἶδος αὐτοφυὲς βλέπων
Τὸν δ' ἐκτυπωτὸν οὐκ ἐπιγνόντες φίλοι
Γελᾶτε φαύλου δυσμίμημα ζωγράφου

W.M. sculp

This engraving by William Marshall appeared in the 1645 edition of Milton*s Poems. Milton's Greek epigram on the portrait has been translated thus:

> ***Wbo9 that my real lineament has scanned***
> ***Will not in this detect a bungler's band?***
> ***My friends; in doubt on whom bis art was tried,***
> ***Tbe idiot limner's vain attempt deride.***

and his inability to keep a secret. His final act is an act of revenge, and there is an epic dignity in his prayer: "O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes." Out of this figure Milton has created a hero as impressive as Œdipus, with a human and intellectual importance far greater than he possessed in the Bible. The result has been achieved partly by translating the Hebrew myth, with its rough grandeur, into the style of Greek drama, and partly by discovering in the story so much that can represent the personal experience of the poet himself. Like Milton, Samson was dedicated from birth to some high exploit. He then, against the advice of his family, married a daughter of the Philistines who "loosly disally'd" her nuptials. He did great deeds against the Philistines, but his prowess was not followed up with appropriate energy by his compatriots. He was betrayed by another Philistine woman and blinded by his enemies, yet in the end miraculously vindicated by God so that "the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life".

No wonder that into such a story the blind revolutionary, so deeply wounded by the failure of his first love, and of his lasting political aims, yet in the depths of his mind somehow reconciled to God's ways, was able to put not only the peace and majesty of his surrender but also the passion springing

> From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm
> Of Hornets arm'd, no sooner found alone,

But rush upon me thronging, and present
Times past, what once I was, and what am now.

It is in the combination of these "restless thoughts" with the final justification both of Samson and of God that the greatness of the poem lies. Here Milton writes like Sophocles, and no less successfully. Moreover, within what might seem to be the constricting limits of the Greek tragic method (and Milton has held to these limits more rigorously almost than the Greeks themselves) he finds a strange freedom and produces a work which is individual and unique, as perfect as *Lycidas* and very much more powerful. In his blindness and old age he seems, from the very beginning of Samson's first speech, so full of energy, variety and strength, to be himself like what he imagined in his youth as a "nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks" or "as an eagle ... kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam".

The pride, weight and pathos of such lines as:

Promise was that I
Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver;
Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves.

are succeeded immediately by the typical refusal to call God's ways in doubt:

Whom have I to complain of but my self?

Then comes the bitterness of admitting how he gave away his secret to a woman, and the long passage on blindness, more personal, more outspoken and, with its varied rhythms, more moving even than the famous passages on the same subject in *Paradise Lost.*

These themes are developed in Samson's conversation with the Chorus. In spite of their sympathy, the Chorus fail to understand either the greatness of his disappointment or the real reasons for it. They deplore his wedding with Philistine women, but Samson replies that, in the case of his first wife, he acted "from intimate impulse". Therefore "what I motioned was of God". Such a wedding gave him opportunities to attack Israel's enemies. As for Dalila, "that specious Monster, my accomplisht snare," the mistake was his own.

She was not the prime cause, but I my self,
Who vanquisht with a peal of words (O weakness !)
Gave up my fort of silence to a Woman.

So for his own fall he accepts full responsibility, but for the fact that, in spite of his efforts, Israel is under the rule of the Philistines he puts the blame fairly and squarely on the Israelites themselves as people who

love Bondage more then Liberty,
Bondage with ease then strenuous liberty.

The first episode closes with the fine chorus

Just are the ways of God,
And justifiable to Men;

God's ways are not Man's ways. It is hinted that even in the present situation God may be concealing a purpose beyond the sight of men.

In the next scene in which the past and present are recalled in greater detail in conversation with Manoah, Samson reaches the depths of despair. When his father complains of his son's fall, Samson again insists on his own responsibility. "Sole Author I, sole cause." He refuses any offer to ransom him, feeling that he must expiate with his life the burden of his guilt, of the time when

swolPn with pride into the snare I fell
Of fair fallacious looks, venereal trains.

At the end ot the episode he feels

my genial spirits droop,
My hopes all flat, nature within me seems
In all her functions weary of herself.

and he returns with a terrible violence of language and imagery to the "restless thoughts".

Thoughts my Tormenters arm'd with deadly stings
Mangle my apprehensive tenderest parts,
Exasperate, exulcerate, and raise
Dire inflammation which no cooling herb
Or medcinal liquor can asswage,
Nor breath of Vernal Air from snowy Alp.

This evident suffering moves the Chorus to a mood less dogmatic than before. There is less argument

and more sympaAthy in their commentary now on the ways of God to man. Their meditations on how great men for no apparent reason fall on evil days are not unlike various passages in Greek tragedy; but only in Greek tragedy and in Milton do these meditations have the real force of direct experience behind them—the experience, for instance, of

> the unjust tribunals, under change of times,
> And condemnation of the ingrateful multitude.

At this point of the play Samson's courage is at its lowest, but from this point onwards it gradually revives. He is forced away from brooding over his misfortunes into a kind of action, first by his interview with Dalila, his wife, and then by his defiance of the giant Harapha of Gath.

Dalik's attempt to become reconciled with her betrayed husband is met by him with a withering fury and contempt. Her pleas that her fault proceeded from weakness; from excessive love or from patriotic feeling are alike dismissed.
As for weakness,

> All wickedness is weakness: that plea therefore
> With God or Man will gain thee no remission.

As for love,

> call it furious rage
> To satisfie thy lust: Love seeks to have Love.

And her final plea that it was her duty to serve the God of her own people is dismissed with the words:

I thought where all thy circling wiles would end;
In feign'd Religion, smooth hypocrisie.

Her offer to secure his release and to tend him in his blindness is met by the plain statement:

Thy fair enchanted cup, and warbling charms
No more on me have power, their force is nulTd.

What sort of life would he have with her now, he wonders:

If in my flower of youth and strength, when all men
Lov'd, honour'd, fear'd me, thou alone could
hate me
Thy Husband, slight me, sell me, and forgo me.

The chorus which ends the episode is a savage attack on women and is appropriate to the development of the action. Samson has clearly shown that now he is immune from his former weakness, nor does he blame anyone for it but himself.

This mixture of arrogance before men and humility before God is again evident in the scene with Harapha of Gath. Samson, though blind and unarmed, can confidently challenge this Philistine hero, relying not on himself but on the power that God, if provoked, will give him. In the same mood Samson refuses the orders of the Philistine officer to appear before his masters to do honour to the feast day of their God. His great strength was not given to him for such a purpose and he will die rather than employ it so.

It is at this point that Samson is strangely transformed. He has been through the depths of despair, but always acknowledged his own responsibility for his fate. In the scenes with his father, with Dalila and with Harapha, he had, in various ways, shown his recovered virtue. Still there is no sign that he is not, as before, separated from and abandoned by the God who twice sent an angel to foretell his birth. Now suddenly, like the aged OEdipus at Colonnus, he begins to become heroic and feel the divine power again upon him, though he is uncertain of what it means. He decides to attend the Philistine feast, because

> I begin to feel
> Some rousing motions in me which dispose
> To something extraordinary my thoughts.

He goes out, and, with exquisite irony, the poet brings on Manoah to say that he has high hopes of persuading the Philistines to accept a suitable ransom for his son. His father's heart is delighted:

> It shall be my delight to tend his eyes,
> And view him sitting in the house . . .

He even hopes that in the end God will restore his eyesight to him, and here he is interrupted by the shouting which is the sign of Samson's final heroic act. The Messenger's speech which describes the action is followed by choruses of triumph and by the extreme beauty of Manoah's final speech where it is made clear that, after all the heroism and revenge,

what "is best and happiest yet" is that this took place:

> With God not parted from him, as was feard,
> But favouring and assisting to the end.
> Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
> Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
> Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
> And what may quiet us in a death so noble.

So in "peace and consolation" the poem ends. Once more, and for the last time, this great poet has imposed a perfect order on the apparently warring and contradictory elements of his character and even of his style. He had accomplished fully and with immense success what his youth had designed, but the manner of accomplishment had been beyond what he could have dreamed. Both the achievement and the manner of it are unparalleled in the history of literature.

He is thus for all time. Is he not particularly valuable for our own time, he with his intolerance of the second-rate and easy solution, his resistance to any kind of organisation that fetters the freedom of the personality, his aristocratic classlessness, his delicacy, his "inward eyes illuminated" and his abrupt strength?