

JOHN MILTON

H. J. DAVIS

FEW among even the greatest poets of the world so triumphantly achieved a conscious purpose as did John Milton. Here is a life's work beautiful in its final perfection—the result of a single definite faith, and a constant unerring aim. Here is poetry that is the conscious creation of one who knew that he had been called to be a poet, who had accepted the office without hesitation or doubt, and who performed the duties of his office with supreme confidence and never-failing self-satisfaction.

There is little that is merely experimental, little that is fragmentary or unfinished even in his earliest work. Shaped though it was according to the fashion of the time, or as the occasion demanded, and regarded by himself as the work of his minority, nevertheless he looked upon it and saw that it was good after its kind. In 1645, when he had reached the mature age of thirty-six and might well feel that his minority was over, he published these early poems in a volume, as the badge of his calling, and a pledge of what was to follow—indicating this plainly by the motto which he chose for the title-page from Virgil's Seventh Eclogue:

—Baccare frontem
Cingite; ne vati noceat mala lingua futuro.

Later, when he added in a second edition—published only a year before his death—all that remained unprinted, he certainly still believed what he had written proudly in the *Defensio Secunda*, and his confidence and serenity raise it above common boasting:

as to what I have at any time written, I call God likewise to witness that I never wrote anything of which I was not at the time persuaded, and of which I am not still persuaded, that it was right, true, and pleasing to God, and that I did it not from any prompting of ambition, gain, or glory, but solely for reasons of duty, honour and loyalty to my country. . .

That was written primarily of his controversial work, but it is equally true of the spirit in which he wrote all his poetry. It is hardly conjecture to imagine Milton in 1673, contemplating with much satisfaction among the additional poems for that second edition, those lines which he had written for a College exercise, which show that from his nineteenth year he had begun quite clearly to realize his special task in poetry. Not even then had he been

ambitious to compete with the "sons of Ben" in witty conceits or light lyrical verses, such as can be "raised from the heat of youth or the vapours of wine", but would choose rather some graver subject—

Such where the deep transported mind may soare
Above the wheeling poles, and at Heav'ns dore
Look in, and see each blissful Deitie
How he before the thunderous throne doth lie,
Listening to what unshorn *Apollo* sings
To the touch of golden wires, while *Hebe* brings
Immortal Nectar to her Kingly Sire:
Then passing through the Spheres of watchful fire,
And mistie Regions of wide air next under,
And hills of Snow and lofts of piled Thunder,
May tell at length how green-ey'd *Neptune* raves,
In Heav'ns defiance mustering all his waves;
Then sing of secret things that came to pass
When Beldam Nature in her cradle was;
And last of Kings and Queens and *Hero's* old. . . .

No work of Milton's can be found in any of those volumes of verse—many-coloured wreaths of magnificent sentiments in Latin and Greek, in English, French and Italian—which the University of Cambridge offered regularly to their Royal Patron whenever a birth or death in the Royal Family provided a suitable opportunity. He was intolerant of such tricks to gain favour or perferment "and thought it ever fond disdain to make pelf or Ambition the reward of his Studies, it being the greatest Honour, the greatest Fruit and Proficiency of learned Studies to despise these things". But at the age of twenty-one, on the occasion of a festival which has real significance for him,—the nativity of the Prince of Peace,—he would duly perform his office of praise, mingling his voice with the Angel-choir, taking his place "in the courtly stable", "Where Bright-harnest Angels sit in order serviceable".

Have thou the honour first, thy Lord to greet,
And joyn thy voice unto the Angel Quire,
From out his secret Altar toucht with hallow'd fire.

Otherwise he was content to wait, devoting himself to a life of strenuous toil, that by "industrious and select reading, steady observation, and insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs" he might be prepared for the great task that was awaiting him. But once and again we see him wakened by circumstance to a sense of the passing of time, with little to show for it:]

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

Yet such momentary questionings do but serve to bring forth a more emphatic expression of his absolute belief that his life is being guided towards the fulfilment of a definite purpose—

To that same lot, however mean or high,
Towards which Time leads me, and the will of Heav'n;

And meantime he does not remain unexercised in his art, but as the occasion arises is ready with a Masque, or a pastoral Elegy, or a sonnet. And though in his ardent romantic mood, the young poet feels that this is but the plucking of untimely fruit "before the mellowing year", he was not unconscious of his success in taking these well-used forms, and lifting them up to fresh heights of beauty. Had not Sir Henry Wotton himself, an arbiter of taste whom Milton would know how to appreciate, declared himself "ravished" with the Lyrical part of *Comus*—"a certain Dorique delicacy in your Songs and Odes, whereunto I must plainly confess to have seen yet nothing parallel in our Language: *Ipsa mollities*"?

And if further confirmation was needed of his own inner confidence that he "might perhaps leave something written to after times as they should not willingly let it die", that also was forthcoming when during his visit to France and Italy in 1639 he found himself accepted as a scholar and poet according to the best traditions of the Renaissance, introduced to men like Grotius and Galileo and Manso, and honoured in the academies of Florence.

It is not difficult to understand the elevated mood in which Milton returned to England, with the compliments of these new friends fresh in his memory, ready to take his place worthily in the great struggle for liberty which he now ardently anticipated. Dr. Johnson was amused at the contrast between Milton's heroic dreams at this time and the actual events of his life during the months that immediately followed his return, when he settled "in a spacious house" in London, and devoted himself to school-mastering. But Milton himself was conscious only of the glory of the moment, and his own readiness—not to do heroic deeds in the field or in the council-chamber—but to be the poet, chosen to chronicle heroic deeds, nobly and elegantly, and by his poetry to inspire the nation and people, whom God had chosen for the work of reformation, with wisdom and courage for their further enterprises.

This is the moment when Milton reveals fully and completely his own conception of the meaning of his life and art. To his expectant gaze it seemed already that the heavens were opened and the Lord of Hosts about to issue forth to establish his kingdom

on the earth, and then *he* would be found ready—none other than he, John Milton, the Englishman, to declare the glory of those days—but it is better to hear Milton's own words:

. . . when thou the Eternal and shortly-expected King shalt open the Clouds to judge the several Kingdoms of the World, and. . . shalt put an end to all earthly Tyrannies, proclaiming Thy universal and mild Monarchy through Heaven and Earth. . . then amidst the Hymns and Hallelujahs of Saints some one may perhaps be heard offering at high strains in new and lofty Measures to sing and celebrate thy divine Mercies and marvelous Judgements in this land throughout all Ages.

It is now too that Milton puts forward what must I think be accepted as his final and unchanged conception of the real office of a poet in the state, and his belief in divine inspiration as the only source of great poetry:

The abilities (of a poet) wheresoever they be found, are the inspired gift of God rarely bestowed, but yet to some (though most abuse) in every Nation: and are of power, beside the Office of a Pulpit, to imbreed and cherish in a great People the seeds of Virtue and Public Civility, to allay the Perturbations of the Mind, and set the affections in right tune. . . teaching over the whole book of Sanctity and Virtue. . . with such delight to those especially of soft and delicious Temper, who will not so much as look upon Truth herself, unless they see her elegantly dressed. . .

And in spite of the disappointments of every kind that were to follow, nothing could touch Milton's faith in himself and his work. This faith carried him unperturbed through all the miseries of domestic unhappiness, and enabled him to face undismayed the affliction of blindness, which threatened to cripple even his poetic powers—nay, rather it enabled him to accept it triumphantly and receive it almost as the very medium of a fuller inspiration:

not so much by the dulling of the eyesight as by the shade of heavenly wings does God seem to have made this darkness for us; and having made it, He is not seldom wont to illuminate it again by an inner and far more excelling light.

And when at the Restoration, all his hopes for the establishment of a Christian Republic in England, which should be the home of true liberty, were finally destroyed, and instead of the Hymns and Hallelujahs of the Saints he heard around him only the

barbarous dissonance
Of Bacchus and his Revellers.

yet still that should not prevent his voice being heard alone
 "Offering at high strains in new and lofty measures"

To justify the ways of God to men.

And again and again in *Paradise Lost*, in *Paradise Regained* and in *Samson Agonistes* we hear the same lofty faith, expressed in ever more and more glorious poetry. Still will he sing

with mortal voice, unchang'd
 To hoarce or mute, though fall'n on evil dayes,
 On evil dayes though fall'n and evil tongues;
 In darkness, and with dangers compast round,
 And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
 Visit'st my slumbers Nightly, or when Morn
 Purples the East; still govern thou my Song,
Urania, and fit audience find, though few.

And once more in his last great tragic poem, echoing through the words of Samson, we hear again the proud confident vindication of his life's work. He had not failed to instruct his countrymen, as his duty was; though they had given no heed to his words.

I was no private but a person rais'd
 With strength sufficient and command from Heav'n
 To free my Countrey; if their servile minds
 Me their Deliverer sent would not receive,
 But to thir Masters gave me up for nought,
 Th'unworthier they; whence to this day they serve.

Thus to the close of his life Milton remains Milton—proud, confident, satisfied, conscious that he had performed the work which had been given him to do:

Samson hath quit himself
 Like *Samson*, and heroicly hath finish'd
 A life Heroic.

This attitude, which Milton maintained constantly throughout his life has naturally been responsible for the general tone of much later criticism. Dr. Johnson, who did not like Milton, and had no ear for the delicacies of his art, nevertheless recognizes him as "the supreme poet of the sublime," with a professed "moral purpose of the most useful and arduous kind." And he has described what seemed to him the essential quality of Milton's epic in language which would have been more acceptable to Milton than much of the praise of his less critical admirers.

The characteristick quality of his poem is sublimity. He sometimes descends to the elegant, but his element is the great. He can occasionally invest himself with grace; but his natural

port is gigantick loftiness. He can please when pleasure is required; but it is his peculiar power to astonish. . . His great works were performed under discountenance, and in blindness, but difficulties vanished at his touch; he was born for whatever is arduous; and his work is not the greatest of heroick poems, only because it is not the first.

Wordsworth too in his magnificent response to his great master emphasizes again this almost superhuman elevation of Milton's mind and work, this unsullied grandeur of his spirit.

Thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way. . .

And others have followed in the same tradition, and have given us fuller studies of Milton as an austere, almost forbidding figure, the very genius of Puritan England. And thus the name of Milton has come to be associated with a conception of greatness and austerity, remote, beyond the reach of ordinary men, and calling forth a distant and respectful admiration, rather than affection and ready sympathy.

That may be, it probably was, true of Milton's character. But it is after all only one aspect of Milton, and unless we look further we shall not realize the full splendour and beauty of his poetry. For although Milton was such a conscious artist, in life and in poetry, the sources of his greatness in both go farther back, and reach down to the unconscious depths of his being. Milton's conscious conception of himself is too much like Mestrovic's magnificent bronze study of Moses—that colossal, awe-inspiring head and the one raised prophetic hand. No more is required of course as a symbol of the prophet returning from the Presence of the Lord to declare his commandments to the people. It is indeed a splendid symbol of the moment of prophetic inspiration, but not of poetic creation. And the two, even in Milton, are not the same. For great poetry never was written, and never can be written by the head and the hand alone. It is the life-blood of a master spirit, to use Milton's own phrase; it is "truth carried alive into the heart by passion" as Wordsworth said; it is the life-blood and the passion of the whole man—shaped and formed indeed by the powers of the mind, by conscious preparation and by conscious effort, but drawing upon the whole life, intellectual and sensuous, conscious and unconscious for its material and for its final beauty.

And what I wish to emphasize is that whenever Milton writes great poetry, he writes out of the full, passionate experience of his

whole being; and the voice is the voice of a man, rich and varied in tone, ranging through the whole gamut of human emotion; and even the grandeur and sublimity of his poetry is the height of human splendour, not the sublimity of a star, remote, out of our reach, lighting the distant heavens.

It is indeed a common experience to discover, when reading *Paradise Lost*, that Milton is not at his best when he stands in the courts of heaven mingling his voice with the praises of angels and the hallelujahs of the saints. But on the other hand in all the scenes where the sublime figure of Satan plays his heroic part, Milton never fails to reveal his finest powers and achieves that grandeur of majestic passion for which there is no other name than Miltonic.

All the speeches of Satan ring with it:

What though the field be lost?
 All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,
 And study of revenge, immortal hate,
 And courage never to submit or yield:
 And what is else not to be overcome.
 That glory never shall his wrath or might
 Extort from me. To bow and sue for grace
 With suppliant knee, and deifie his power
 Who from the terrour of this Arm so late
 Doubted his Empire, that were low indeed,
 That were an ignominy and shame beneath
 This downfall;
 to be weak is miserable
 Doing or suffering: . . .

Or again:

Here at least
 We shall be free; . . .
 Here we may reign secure, and in my choyce
 To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:
 Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heav'n.

There is no mistaking the author of lines such as these. This is Milton; to create poetry like this he had but to look into his own heart and write.

Blake felt this difference, and suggests an explanation in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.

By this, of course, Blake means that Milton's poetry was not the work of that faculty of reason, served as chief—according to Milton's

psychology—by all the lesser faculties in the soul, nor was it alone the vision revealed by that “Celestial light” “offspring of Heav’n first-born,” shining inward and irradiating the mind through all her powers; but it was the full expression of what Blake would call the *Energy* and *Desire*, the very flame of life burning at the centre of his being. But it is dangerous to play with a phrase of Blake’s, or to borrow his language for ordinary terrestrial concerns. It is better to go back to the poems, and try to discover there by an examination of the actual qualities of the poetry, the real sources of its beauty.

First of all I should like to try and show that Milton’s poetry suffers just in so far as the unconscious activity is lacking, and the faculty of reason left in sole charge. There are for instance in *Paradise Lost*, even in those parts of the poem, where “Standing on Earth, not rapt above the Pole, More safe he sings”—many passages which are indeed most reasonable and most edifying, the fruit of his long conscious preparation by select reading and constant toil, and the work of a careful craftsman whose critical faculty rarely sleeps,—which are yet not the work of a poet.

In the Seventh Book, devoted to an account of the Creation, Milton is often content to take his prose original—Genesis, i—and arrange it in lines of blank verse with the same facility as Shakespeare showed in handling the prose of Florio and North. In describing the events of the fourth day, he uses every word of the original passage, only twisting its phrases backwards and forwards to fit his lines and padding them where necessary with empty phrases. Even worse is the uninspired elaboration in Book viii of the beautiful directness of his original, Genesis ii, 16-20. “And the Lord God commanded the man saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayst freely eat; But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

Of every Tree that in the Garden growes
Eate freely with glad heart; fear here no dearth:
But of the Tree whose operation brings
Knowledge of good and ill, which I have set
The Pledge of thy Obedience and thy Faith,
Amid the Garden by the Tree of Life,
Remember what I warne thee, shun to taste,
And shun the bitter consequence: for know,
The day thou eat’st thereof, my sole command
Transcrest, inevitably thou shalt dye; . . .

And then follows an account of the animals being brought to Adam that he might name them, and here we see Milton’s Reason handling

the poetry of his original in a way which compares only with Bentley's treatment of Milton. The writer of Genesis, perhaps realizing the difficulty, does not introduce the fish to Adam. Milton notes this and explains why they could not come, and pay their fealty with the rest:

understand the same
Of Fish within thir watry residence,
Not hither summond, since they cannot change
Thir Element to drawe the thinner Aire.

It was of course perfectly *reasonable* for this explanation to be added, since Adam had to receive instruction in all these things—but not even Milton could make poetry out of such stuff. And not only in these particular passages, where Milton may have felt tied to his original, but throughout the greater part of Book viii there is a good deal of what has been aptly called “joiner's work.” This phrase is used by Professor Lowes, who in his recent magnificent study of the ways of the imagination, *The Road to Xanadu*, applies it to such writing as Coleridge's “Destiny of Nations,” and analyses its weakness in a manner very apt for our purpose.

There is wanting the descent into the flux and reflux of the twilight realms of consciousness, and the melting into one another of the elements, and the flash, and the rising of new shapes from the abyss. . . For at the zenith of its power the creative energy is both conscious and unconscious in one and the same exercise—controlling consciously the throng of images which in the reservoir (i.e. the depths of the unconscious) have undergone unconscious metamorphosis.

Milton is never wanting in the conscious parts of the creative process, and when his work is uninspired, it is because it is the product only of consciousness, because it has never known what Coleridge called “that shadowy half-being, that state of nascent existence in the twilight of imagination,” where there is nothing

But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange,

—nothing that remains untouched by enchantment, transforming a few dull words into sheer poetry.

Furthermore it will, I think, not be difficult to show that this very quality which is lacking in his uninspired writing is always present in the great passages, where we find such perfection, such magic beauty and richness, as is almost unsurpassed in English poetry. For when Milton is stirred to the depths by some great

theme, (to quote Professor Lowes again), when "the imagination creatrix is moving in all its plenary power" over the vast chaos of his unconscious mind, packed with all the stores of his boundless reading gathered by the insatiable curiosity of a Renaissance scholar, and mingled with a multitude of "sleeping images"—those aerie shapes formed by Fancy

of all external things
Which the five watchful senses represent—

then we get poetry in which is mingled a thousand blended notes, the harmonies of a rich human experience. For Milton was an adventurous spirit, despising from the depths of his soul "a cloistered and fugitive virtue," hating all bonds imposed by law or custom out of timidity and fear, unrestrained in his desire for knowledge of good and evil; and moreover an extraordinarily romantic poet and dreamer, glorying in all the pomp and splendour of man's life and the delight and beauty of the world of the senses. And the astonishing quality of his poetry is not its austerity or even its sublimity, but rather a beauty, springing up out of the rich magnificence of his passionate and emotional nature.

In his art Milton reveals himself not as the priest of Reason, but as the priest of Beauty. That is always his real inspiration. To Beauty he has dedicated the service of his right hand. In the role of a prophet, exhorting to repentance and declaring the judgements of God, or as a politician and controversialist, he feels awkward, left-handed. But in the service of Beauty he is at once himself, a "poet soaring in the high regions of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him." For Milton was clearly among those "of soft and delicious Temper, who will not so much as look upon Truth herself, unless they see her elegantly dressed." It was the beauty of poetry and song, the beauty of the prophet's passion which had always found response in him. It was "Gorgeous Tragedy. . . sweeping by," or the sound "of Service high and Anthems cleer" that "dissolved him into extasies" and "brought all Heaven before his eyes." He emphasized even the poetic quality of the great books of the Bible that stirred him so profoundly:

The Scripture also affords us a divine pastoral Drama in the Song of Solomon consisting of two persons and a double *Chorus*, as Origen rightly judges. And the Apocalypse of St. John is the majestic image of a high and stately Tragedy, shutting up and intermingling her solemn scenes and Acts with a seven-fold *Chorus* of hallelujahs and harping symphonies.

Poetry was to him no academic pleasure, but a supreme joy which made him scornful of lesser delights—the joy of an exquisitely sensuous nature, living in a world of wonder and enchantment. For Milton was in certain respects as sensuous as Keats. It is true that his eye is not keen, and his mind is not full of visual images, but he is extremely susceptible to all emotional impressions associated with the other senses; in the later work after his blindness we should expect this, but it is striking to find in the very early poems exactly the same difference. All that delights him and stirs his emotions seems to be treasured in the “well of the unconscious” not as sleeping images, but as silent forms, shapes of melody and phrase waiting to be transformed into music.

I am not thinking now, of course, of the simple fact that in the poems there are frequent references to his pleasure in music and the song of birds and the sounds of the country-side. What is really significant is that when he is in ecstasy and struggling to express fully and completely the whole of his emotion, the sense images he draws upon are not those of sight, but those of touch and smell and hearing. In that strange mingling and association that takes place in the full liberty of the unconscious, it is these sense impressions that in Milton are most often fused together:

At last a soft and solemn breathing sound
Rose like a steam of rich distill'd Perfumes
And stole upon the Air.

Or, the same theme again, the *raptures* of the Lady's song in *Comus*:

How sweetly did they float upon the wings
Of silence, through the empty-vaulted night
At every fall smoothing the raven doune
Of darkness till it smil'd.

Was ever the immediate, direct influence of music more subtly more superbly suggested than by these images, which cannot be visualized without confusion, which can only be heard and felt—the fall of the song, “smoothing the raven doune of darkness.”

There is the same blending of the sense-images—of hearing and smell—in those lines of Shakespeare the very rhythm of which Milton seems to echo and then draw out in varied shapes here:

That strain again! it had a dying fall
O! it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets
Stealing and giving odour.

“Breathes upon a bank of violets”—“float upon the wings of silence”—exactly parallel; the last phrase “stealing and giving

odour" becoming—"with a bout of lincked sweetness long drawn out"—"smoothing. . .till it smiled". And who shall say whether that remembered phrase had not associated itself in Milton's mind with the actual experience of sensuous delight in the ravishment of song?

And it is not only in such moods and for such purposes, but at the greatest moments in his epic, when his imagination is stretched to the uttermost to compass the height of heaven and shadow forth the glory of the Creator, triumphant after the six days work of creation, that Milton—like so many mystics and saints before him—finds nothing high enough for the ecstasy of the moment but music.

Up he rode
Follow'd with acclamation and the sound
Symphonious of ten thousand Harpes that tun'd
Angelic harmonies: the Earth, the Aire
Resounded, (thou remember'st for thou heardst)
The Heav'ns and all the Constellations rung,
The Planets in thir stations list'ning stood,
While the bright Pomp ascended jubilant.

"There are sounds more sublime than any sight *can* be," wrote Coleridge once—though he was himself abnormally sensitive to visual images; and perhaps it is not too much to suggest that it is this musical element at the very centre of the creative process that gives a particular emotional quality to Milton's poetry, which is the secret of its real sublimity.

I do not forget that Milton was a poet, not a musician; and I do not wish to suggest that his actual skill in music had anything whatever to do with his poetry. After all, his greatest passion was his love of poetry, and the highest moments of his life were undoubtedly when he felt nearest the seers and poets whose very means become lyrical on his lips:

Blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides,
And Tiresias and Phineus, prophets old.

and his works are so full of reminiscences of his vast reading, not out of any pedantic or scholarly affectation—which he loathed—but because he constantly lived in a world of poetry, and all his experiences, whether in the world of reality or in that of imagination, in so far as they stirred him to emotion are alike and inextricably interwoven. Moreover the literary reminiscence that always colours his language is not—when he is really himself and writing great poetry—mere ornament, but is the expression of an emotion as passionate as any arising out of direct sensuous experience.

It is nonsense, for instance, to say that Milton is aware of Nature only through books, nor is there anything borrowed or secondhand in his work even when the immediate direct expression of his feeling may at first sight seem obscured by a whole train of literary associations.

For instance there is obviously nothing academic or artificial in those repeated images which spring to his mind when he wishes to describe the Legions of Satan, "Angel Forms who lay intrans't on the Beach of that inflamèd Sea in Hell." There is first a simple comparison

Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks

and that immediately calls up to his remembrance a particular scene, which he had beheld with emotion, not merely because of its autumnal beauty, but because of all the reminiscences which would crowd his mind as he found himself for the first time in the centre of Etruria, and surely too because of the valley's lovely name:

In *Vallombrosa*, where th' *Etrurian* shades
High overarch't imbrow;

And now follows a second comparison from nature, "or scattered sedge Afloat" after a storm, and this suggests that stroke of genius—a mere literary reminiscence, but charged with the very emotion with which Milton wishes to invest the scene in Hell—the comparison with the waters of the Red Sea, so thick bestrown with "the floating carkases and broken Chariot Wheels" of Pharaoh and his host.

. . . . when with fierce Winds *Orion* arm'd
Hath vext the Red-Sea Coast, whose waves orethrew
Busiris and his *Memphian* Chivalrie.

And it does not in the least spoil the effect of the passage to know that the phrase *Orion armed* is an echo from Petrarch who had caught it from Virgil, and that the vivid detail of the broken chariot wheels among the floating carcasses and the very phrases "*Busiris* and his *Memphian* chivalrie," and "*sojourners of Goshen*" are not just elaborate Miltonic diction, but really very accurate compressed phrases in which Milton may have preserved—perhaps unconsciously—his recollection of the account of the Exodus given by Sir Walter Raleigh in his *History of the World*.

Without going into any further detail, it should be sufficient just to indicate how Milton's poetry rings with all the varied harmonies of the world's greatest poetry, which he has gathered

up into his own very life and, with the mark of himself upon them, has poured out richly into his own native language. Sometimes as in the greatest of the sonnets when Milton was burning with indignation at the news of the Piedmontese Massacre, we hear the tones of the Hebrew poets in those great solemn psalms and chants, when they lifted up their voices and cried out for vengeance upon their oppressors. Somtimes in that very different mood, which is not always remembered as characteristic of Milton, though it prompted his loveliest writing, he seems to gather up into an enchanting melody all the idyllic sweetness of the pastoral, and pour into it a deeper emotion, a sadness and wistful melancholy peculiarly English, that elegiac strain never wholly absent from our native poetry. It occurs again and again but never purer than in the opening of the Third Book of *Paradise Lost*.

Thus with the Year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summers Rose,
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;

And the same strain is taken up again and repeated in Book IV, in that most beautiful love-lyric which is given to Eve, but which I cannot help reading as an expression—even more poignant than the Sonnet—of his love for “his late espoused Saint”, who died in 1658, about the time when *Paradise Lost* was probably begun.

With thee conversing I forget all time,
All seasons and thir change, all please alike.
Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
With charm of earliest Birds; pleasant the Sun
When first on this delightful Land he spreads
His orient Beams, on herb, tree, fruit and flour,
Glistening with dew; fragrant the fertile earth
After soft showers; and sweet the coming on
Of grateful Evening milde, then silent Night
With this her solemn Bird and this fair Moon,
And these the Gemms of Heav'n, her starrie train:
But neither breath of Morn when she ascends
With charm of earliest Birds, nor rising Sun
On this delightful land, nor herb, fruit, floure,
Glistring with dew, nor fragrance after showers,
Nor grateful Evening mild, not silent Night
With this her solemn Bird, nor walk by Moon,
Or glittering Starr-light without thee is sweet.

It is perhaps worth noting that two of Milton's favourite words are “sweetness” and “light”; and I do not think there is any English

poet to whom could be more fittingly applied Swift's charming description of the Ancients in the allegory of the bee and the spider. "Like the bee, they visit all the flowers and blossoms of the field and the garden, and by a universal range, with long search, much study, true judgment, and distinction of things. . . fill their hives with honey and wax, thus furnishing mankind with the two noblest of things, sweetness and light."

And although Milton later on in *Paradise Regained* seems almost to condemn his passion for poetry, or at least to find solace only in

. . . *Sion's* songs, to all true tastes excelling,
Where God is prais'd aright, and Godlike men
The Holiest of Holies and his Saints;

yet that is evidently due to a mood, much tempered by the time he came to write *Samson Agonistes*, his last and in some ways his greatest work. For here his model was Greek Tragedy, and Tragedy—he remarks in his note to the poem—"as it was anciently compos'd hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems".

Here is fused together in a perfect unity Milton's own passionate life-experience and his passionate sense of beauty in its noblest form as seen by him in the poetry of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, "the three tragic poets unequall'd yet by any and the best rule of all who endeavour to write Tragedy" and in the great heroic dramas of the Old Testament from which he chose the splendid figure of Samson, so fitting to his purpose. When he began the poem he had in mind Aristotle's definition of tragedy "to be of power by raising pity and fear and terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight." And what does that mean for the poet himself but to burn up all the passions that are left in his soul, transforming them by the alchemy of his art into beauty. And here in this last poem the energy and desire and passion at the centre of Milton's being flame up

As in a fiery column charioting
His Godlike Presence.

All his anguish and disappointment, all his rage and bitterness which had been gathered within his own breast are now flung loose. He who had justified the ways of God to men, now challenges his rule, and demands to know the reason of the evil that is man's portion in this life.

God of our Fathers, what is man! ||
 That thou towards him with hand so various,
 Or might I say contrarious,
 Temperst thy providence through his short course,
 Not evenly, as thou rul'st
 The Angelic orders and inferiour creatures mute,
 Irrational and brute.

Just or unjust, alike seem miserable, ||
 For oft alike, both come to evil end.

Here too is the expression of his fullest contempt for the race of men:

the common rout ||
 That wandring loose about
 Grow up and perish, as the summer flie,
 Heads without name or more remembered,

and his bitterest disgust for the traitorous charms of woman, and his own weak susceptibility to them:

Seeming at first all heavenly under virgin veil,
 Soft, modest, meek, demure,
 Once join'd, the contrary she proves, a thorn
 Intestin, far within defensive arms
 A cleaving mischief, in his way to vertue
 Adverse and turbulent, or by her charms
 Draws him away enslav'd
 With dotage, and his sense deprav'd ||
 To folly and shameful deeds which ruin ends.

Even the old thrasonical boasting is indulged here once more in lines that echo loudly the boasts of heroes on the Elizabethan stage. It is Samson's challenge to Harapha, the giant:

Then put on all thy gorgeous arms, thy Helmet
 And Brigandine of Brass, thy broad Habergeon
 Vant-brass and Greves, and Gauntlet, add thy Spear
 A Weavers beam, and seven-times-folded shield,
 I only with an oaken staff will meet thee,
 And raise such out-cries on thy clatter'd Iron,
 Which long shall not with-hold mee from thy head,
 That in a little time while breath remains thee,
 Thou oft shall wish theyself at *Gath* to boast
 Again in safety what thou wouldst have done
 To *Samson*, but shall never see *Gath* more.

And then profounder than all, greater than all those noble lines of resignation that Milton had at various times written on his blindness, is heard throughout the poem that music, drawn from the depths of his own misery:

but chief of all
 O loss of sight, of thee I most complain.

All Milton's work—it has been truly said—is lyrical, his whole life went to the building of his poetry; but here in this great speech of Samson with its infinite variety of tone, and shade of passion, we seem to look into the very glowing centre of Milton's genius. What pitiless directness, what sincerity, what a human cry!

—the vilest here excel me
 They creep, yet see, I dark in light expos'd
 To daily fraud, contempt, abuse and wrong,
 Within doors, or without, still as a fool,
 In power of others, never in my own;
 Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half.
 O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
 Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse
 Without all hope of day!

That too is now purged from the mind, tempered and reduced to just measure with a kind of delight. It is now become beauty, "all passion spent." And that last phrase of the poem is not merely a seal affixed to the whole work as a sign that it is completed. It is a real symbol of all Milton's poetry. For his was a passionate nature, and he spent himself utterly to create beauty, and to leave behind him to after ages poetry that is indeed "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge, the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science."