

ODE ON THE THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTIETH  
MORNING OF MILTON'S NATIVITY

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*On December 9, 1958, in the Lord Nelson Hotel in Halifax, a banquet was held by members of the Department of English of Dalhousie University to celebrate the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of John Milton. After the professors had dined—*

food alike those pure  
Intelligential substances require—

*they heard a poem that had been written for the occasion. It is now printed to commemorate the three hundredth anniversary of the publication of Paradise Lost.*

Across the cobbles, third door down,  
from Johnson's\* well-lit Mermaid inn,

youthful John Milton's four-floor frown  
sat at his midnight lamp like Sin,  
while an old woman chucked a chin.

What the son scrubbed the glad sire said—  
for masters search if pupils quit—  
one hand spread on his sopping head:  
by late hours God makes staid boys fit,  
whom mothers preen too delicate.

John's words were then his person's drill.  
He failed the Cam shore's weedier edge,  
turned home to verses from a chill,  
plucked back his plume through the church hedge,  
and mother-lorn, pecked Naples' ledge.

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\*Will Johnson, the vintner, not Ben Jonson his customer.

In London he resumed of choice  
 the triumphs of his soul's own school,  
 and loudly wet his precious voice,  
 though not his sword, if then a gruel  
 of wives debladed one sharp tool.

Self-ordered, he defrocked a church,  
 divorced a rent, turned out his mind  
 from bolt to day in plain words' search,  
 fetched office while poems flagged behind,  
 and sprang to flesh the morning—blind!

For low-browed frowning was he blamed  
 where that tall Bishop's hands should bless?  
 The midnight oil within reflamed  
 as an old maid in weaving dress  
 across his eyes snipped one more tress.

All great poems come of solitude.  
 The customs man wrote up at night,  
 from head with pain (and sock) indued:  
 short fifty years the swan took flight  
 to Avon into mystery's light.

There in a beetling grove with noise  
 of lapsing arms, to hear and wend  
 past Homer's steps, with that same poise  
 of words begun, John singled the end,  
 justified poems as his was penned;

imagined what a time had had  
 the downy man in Paradise,  
 with wakened senses ridden mad  
 to dawning reason, wife of spice,  
 but sifting, angels more than thrice—

unless with judgment slumped, he act  
 to eat whatever could be eat,  
 to know withstanding sole mind's tact,  
 beget himself on joy of feat,  
 and burst the cloth of law he beat;

for which be earth-condoling love,  
 abstract when purest, felt in men  
 by bones' convection as a dove,  
 in bent of thumb on lifting pen,  
 syllabic spokes that wheel to ten;

told how unclothed domestic man,  
 sitting with eye on her, thought-free,  
 dips sole-ripped into history's plan,  
 and treads the local tombs on knee—  
 grave rhetor, loftier poet he.

Ever the reasoned lightning caught,  
 tingled, eloped, or played his hand;  
 he circling up round what he ought  
 for what he saw to say, made stand  
 the garden scenes that lunge to land.

He melts what man he cuts. He moulds  
 and twists the metal like mouth curds.  
 He mollifies the heart's bronze folds,  
 stamps in life-figures, men and birds,  
 and swings the doors away on words.

Until the cloistering lamp of fire  
 lapped him as hunching to its cloak;  
 laureled in light he heard inquire,  
 in the wick's shade where no tongue spoke,  
 "Shall the late workman spend in smoke?"

Then John wreaked eyes on piety's plain—  
 gouty, a crone arose and woke—  
 to wind a raveling yarn at strain;  
 he bowed and gazed through roofs that broke  
 across a hair and swathed foe-folk;

viewed Providence that sometimes fails  
 to hurl the fuming flax to burn  
 in gall. The muse that passes hails—  
 last in three hundred years to turn:  
 fair peace be to his sable urn.