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
Intelligent 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.

*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 withstandingsole 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 unclad 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.