

refined and well-ordered Puritan household of the better class. He inherited his father's musical tastes, and during the latter part of his life he spent a part of every afternoon in playing the organ. No poet has written more beautifully of music than Milton. One of his sonnets was addressed to Henry Lawes, the composer, who wrote the airs to the songs in *Comus*. Milton's education was most careful and thorough. He spent seven years at Cambridge, where, from his personal beauty and fastidious habits, he was called "The lady of Christ's." At Horton, in Buckinghamshire, where his father had a country seat, he passed five years more, perfecting himself in his studies, and then traveled for fifteen months, mainly in Italy, visiting Naples and Rome, but residing at Florence. Here he saw Galileo, a prisoner of the Inquisition "for thinking otherwise in astronomy than his Dominican and Franciscan licensers thought." Milton was the most scholarly and the most truly classical of English poets. His Latin verse, for elegance and correctness, ranks with Addison's; and his Italian poems were the admiration of the Tuscan scholars. But his learning appears in his poetry only in the form of a fine and chastened result, and not in laborious allusion and pedantic citation, as too often in Ben Jonson, for instance. "My father," he wrote, "destined me, while yet a little child, for the study of humane letters." He was also destined for the ministry, but, "coming to some maturity of years and perceiving what tyranny had invaded the Church, . . . I thought it better to prefer a blameless silence, before the sacred office of speaking, bought and begun with servitude and forswearing." Other hands than a bishop's were laid upon his head. "He who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter," he says, "ought himself to be a true poem." And he adds that his "natural haughtiness" saved him from all impurity of living. Milton had a sublime self-respect. The dignity and earnestness of the Puritan gentleman blended in his training with the cult-

Sonnet

Pastoral Elegy
Elegy has

ure of the Renaissance. Born into an age of spiritual conflict, he dedicated his gift to the service of Heaven, and he became, like Heine, a valiant soldier in the war for liberation. He was the poet of a cause, and his song was keyed to

the Dorian mood
Of flutes and soft recorders such as raised
To height of noblest temper, heroes old
Arming to battle.

On comparing Milton with Shakspeare, with his universal sympathies and receptive imagination, one perceives a loss in breadth, but a gain in intense personal conviction. He introduced a new note into English poetry: the passion for truth and the feeling of religious sublimity. Milton's was an heroic age, and its song must be lyric rather than dramatic; its singer must be in the fight and of it.

Of the verses which he wrote at Cambridge the most important was his splendid ode *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. At Horton he wrote, among other things, the companion pieces, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, of a kind quite new in English, giving to the landscape an expression in harmony with the two contrasted moods. *Comus*, which belongs to the same period, was the perfection of the Elizabethan court masque, and was presented at Ludlow Castle in 1634, on the occasion of the installation of the Earl of Bridgewater as Lord President of Wales. Under the guise of a skillful addition to the Homeric allegory of Circe, with her cup of enchantment, it was a Puritan song in praise of chastity and temperance. *Lycidas*, in like manner, was the perfection of the Elizabethan pastoral elegy. It was contributed to a volume of memorial verses on the death of Edward King, a Cambridge friend of Milton's, who was drowned in the Irish Channel in 1637. In one stern strain, which is put into the mouth of St. Peter, the author "foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy, then at their height."

But that two-handed engine at the door
Stands ready to smite once and smite no more.

This was Milton's last utterance in English verse before the outbreak of the civil war, and it sounds the alarm of the impending struggle. In technical quality *Lycidas* is the most wonderful of all Milton's poems. The cunningly intricate harmony of the verse, the pressed and packed language, with its fullness of meaning and allusion, make it worthy of the minutest study. In these early poems, Milton, merely as a poet, is at his best. Something of the Elizabethan style still clings to them; but their grave sweetness, their choice wording, their originality in epithet, name, and phrase, were novelties of Milton's own. His English masters were Spenser, Fletcher, and Sylvester, the translator of Du Bartas's *La Semaine*, but nothing of Spenser's prolixity, or Fletcher's effeminacy, or Sylvester's quaintness is found in Milton's pure, energetic diction. He inherited their beauties, but his taste had been tempered to a finer edge by his studies in Greek and Hebrew poetry. He was the last of the Elizabethans, and his style was at once the crown of the old and a departure into the new. In masque, elegy, and sonnet he set the seal to the Elizabethan poetry, said the last word, and closed one great literary era.

In 1639 the breach between Charles I. and his Parliament brought Milton back from Italy. "I thought it base to be traveling at my ease for amusement, while my fellow-countrymen at home were fighting for liberty." For the next twenty years he threw himself into the contest, and poured forth a succession of tracts, in English and Latin, upon the various public questions at issue. As a political thinker, Milton had what Bacon calls "the humor of a scholar." In a country of endowed grammar schools and universities hardly emerged from a mediæval discipline and curriculum, he wanted to set up Greek gymnasia and philosophical schools, after the fashion of the Porch and the Academy. He would have imposed an Athenian democracy upon a people trained in the traditions of monarchy and

episcopacy. At the very moment when England had grown tired of the Protectorate and was preparing to welcome back the Stuarts, he was writing *An Easy and Ready Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*. Milton acknowledged that in prose he had the use of his left hand only. There are passages of fervid eloquence, where the style swells into a kind of lofty chant, with a rhythmical rise and fall to it, as in parts of the English Book of Common Prayer. But in general his sentences are long and involved, full of inversions and latinized constructions. Controversy at that day was conducted on scholastic lines. Each disputant, instead of appealing at once to the arguments of expediency and common sense, began with a formidable display of learning, ransacking Greek and Latin authors and the Fathers of the Church for opinions in support of his own position. These authorities he deployed at tedious length, and followed them up with heavy scurrilities and "excusations," by way of attack and defense. The dispute between Milton and Salmasius over the execution of Charles I. was like a duel between two knights in full armor striking at each other with ponderous maces. The very titles of these pamphlets are enough to frighten off a modern reader: *A Confutation of the Animadversions upon a Defense of a Humble Remonstrance against a Treatise, entitled Of Reformation*. The most interesting of Milton's prose tracts is his *Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing*, 1644. The arguments in this are of permanent force; but if the reader will compare it, or Jeremy Taylor's *Liberty of Prophesying*, with Locke's *Letters on Toleration*, he will see how much clearer and more convincing is the modern method of discussion, introduced by writers like Hobbes and Locke and Dryden. Under the Protectorate Milton was appointed Latin Secretary to the Council of State. In the diplomatic correspondence which was his official duty, and in the composition of his tract, *Defensio pro Populo Anglicano*, he over-

taxed his eyes, and in 1654 became totally blind. The only poetry of Milton's belonging to the years 1640-1660 are a few sonnets of the pure Italian form, mainly called forth by public occasions. By the Elizabethans the sonnets had been used mainly in love poetry. In Milton's hands, said Wordsworth, "the thing became a trumpet." Some of his were addressed to political leaders, like Fairfax, Cromwell, and Sir Henry Vane; and of these the best is, perhaps, the sonnet written on the massacre of the Vaudois Protestants—"a collect in verse," it has been called—which has the fire of a Hebrew prophet invoking the divine wrath upon the oppressors of Israel. Two were on his own blindness, and in these there is not one selfish repining, but only a regret that the value of his service is impaired—

Will God exact day labor, light denied?

After the restoration of the Stuarts, in 1660, Milton was for a while in peril, by reason of the part that he had taken against the king. But

On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues,
In darkness and with dangers compassed round
And solitude,

he bated no jot of heart or hope. Henceforth he becomes the most heroic and affecting figure in English literary history. Years before he had planned an epic poem on the subject of King Arthur, and again a sacred tragedy on man's fall and redemption. These experiments finally took shape in *Paradise Lost*, which was given to the world in 1667. This is the epic of English Puritanism and of Protestant Christianity. It was Milton's purpose to

assert eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to men,

or, in other words, to embody his theological system in verse. This gives a doctrinal rigidity and even dryness to parts of the *Paradise Lost*, which injure its effect as a poem.

His "God the father turns a school divine:" his Christ, as has been wittily said, is "God's good boy:" the discourses of Raphael to Adam are scholastic lectures: Adam himself is too sophisticated for the state of innocence, and Eve is somewhat insipid. The real protagonist of the poem is Satan, upon whose mighty figure Milton unconsciously bestowed something of his own nature, and whose words of defiance might almost have come from some Republican leader when the Good Old Cause went down.

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.

But when all has been said that can be said in disparagement or qualification, *Paradise Lost* remains the foremost of English poems and the sublimest of all epics. Even in those parts where theology encroaches most upon poetry, the diction, though often heavy, is never languid. Milton's blank verse in itself is enough to bear up the most prosaic theme, and so is his epic English, a style more massive and splendid than Shakspeare's, and comparable, like Tertullian's Latin, to a river of molten gold. Of the countless single beauties that sow his page

Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks
In Valombrosa,

there is no room to speak, nor of the astonishing fullness of substance and multitude of thoughts which have caused the *Paradise Lost* to be called the book of universal knowledge. "The heat of Milton's mind," said Dr. Johnson, "might be said to sublimate his learning and throw off into his work the spirit of science, unmingled with its grosser parts." The truth of this remark is clearly seen upon a comparison of Milton's description of the creation, for example, with corresponding passages in Sylvester's *Divine Weeks and Works*

(translated from the Huguenot poet, Du Bartas), which was, in some sense, his original. But the most heroic thing in Milton's heroic poem is Milton. There are no strains in *Paradise Lost* so absorbing as those in which the poet breaks the strict epic bounds and speaks directly of himself, as in the majestic lament over his own blindness, and in the invocation to Urania, which open the third and seventh books. Every-where, too, one reads between the lines. We think of the dissolute cavaliers, as Milton himself undoubtedly was thinking of them, when we read of "the sons of Belial flown with insolence and wine," or when the Puritan turns among the sweet landscapes of Eden, to denounce

court amours
Mixed dance, or wanton mask, or midnight ball,
Or serenade which the starved lover sings
To his proud fair, best quitted with disdain.

And we think of Milton among the triumphant royalists when we read of the Seraph Abdiel "faithful found among the faithless."

Nor number nor example with him wrought
To swerve from truth or change his constant mind,
Though single. From amidst them forth he passed,
Long way through hostile scorn, which he sustained
Superior, nor of violence feared aught:
And with retorted scorn his back he turned
On those proud towers to swift destruction doomed.

Paradise Regained and *Samson Agonistes* were published in 1671. The first of these treated in four books Christ's temptation in the wilderness, a subject that had already been handled in the Spenserian allegorical manner by Giles Fletcher, a brother of the Purple Islander, in his *Christ's Victory and Triumph*, 1610. The superiority of *Paradise Lost* to its sequel is not without significance. The Puritans were Old Testament men. Their God was the Hebrew Jehovah, whose single divinity the Catholic mythology had

overlaid with the figures of the Son, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. They identified themselves in thought with his chosen people, with the militant theocracy of the Jews. Their sword was the sword of the Lord and of Gideon. "To your tents, O Israel," was the cry of the London mob when the bishops were committed to the Tower. And when the fog lifted, on the morning of the battle of Dunbar, Cromwell exclaimed, "Let God arise and let his enemies be scattered: like as the sun riseth, so shalt thou drive them away."

Samson Agonistes, though Hebrew in theme and spirit, was in form a Greek tragedy. It has chorus and semi-chorus, and preserved the so-called dramatic unities; that is, the scene was unchanged, and there were no intervals of time between the acts. In accordance with the rules of the Greek theater, but two speakers appeared upon the stage at once, and there was no violent action. The death of Samson is related by a messenger. Milton's reason for the choice of this subject is obvious. He himself was Samson, shorn of his strength, blind, and alone among enemies; given over

to the unjust tribunals, under change of times,
And condemnation of the ungrateful multitude.

As Milton grew older he discarded more and more the graces of poetry, and relied purely upon the structure and the thought. In *Paradise Lost*, although there is little resemblance to Elizabethan work—such as one notices in *Comus* and the Christmas hymn—yet the style is rich, especially in the earlier books. But in *Paradise Regained* it is severe to bareness, and in *Samson*, even to ruggedness. Like Michelangelo, with whose genius he had much in common, Milton became impatient of finish or of mere beauty. He blocked out his work in masses, left rough places and surfaces not filled in, and inclined to express his meaning by a symbol, rather than work it out in detail. It was a part of his austerity, his increasing preference for structural over

decorative methods, to give up rime for blank verse. His latest poem, *Samson Agonistes*, is a metrical study of the highest interest.

Milton was not quite alone among the poets of his time in espousing the popular cause. Andrew Marvell, who was his assistant in the Latin secretaryship and sat in Parliament for Hull, after the Restoration, was a good Republican, and wrote a fine *Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland*. There is also a rare imaginative quality in his *Song of the Exiles in Bermuda*, *Thoughts in a Garden*, and *The Girl Describes her Fawn*. George Wither, who was imprisoned for his satires, also took the side of the Parliament, but there is little that is distinctively Puritan in his poetry.

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CHAPTER V.

FROM THE RESTORATION TO THE DEATH OF POPE.

1660-1744.

THE Stuart Restoration was a period of descent from poetry to prose, from passion and imagination to wit and the understanding. The serious, exalted mood of the civil war and Commonwealth had spent itself and issued in disillusion. There followed a generation of wits, logical, skeptical, and prosaic, without earnestness, as without principle. The characteristic literature of such a time is criticism, satire, and burlesque, and such, indeed, continued to be the course of English literary history for a century after the return of the Stuarts. The age was not a stupid one, but one of active inquiry. The Royal Society, for the cultivation of the natural sciences, was founded in 1662. There were able divines in the pulpit and at the universities—Barrow, Tillotson, Stillingfleet, South, and others; scholars, like Bentley; historians, like Clarendon and Burnet; scientists, like Boyle and Newton; philosophers, like Hobbes and Locke. But of poetry, in any high sense of the word, there was little between the time of Milton and the time of Goldsmith and Gray.

The English writers of this period were strongly influenced by the contemporary literature of France, by the comedies of Molière, the tragedies of Corneille and Racine, and the satires, epistles, and versified essays of Boileau. Many of the Restoration writers—Waller, Cowley, Davenant, Wycherley, Villiers, and others—had been in France during the exile, and brought back with them French tastes. John