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'L'ALLEGRO' AND 'IL PENSEROSO'

The question whether Day or Night is preferable...might seem better suited to a poetical exercise than to a contest of rhetoric.

MILTON, 'First Prolusion'.

Milton, in his character of a Student at Cambridge, *sees the Moon terrified as one led astray in the midst of her path thro' heaven.*

BLAKE, *describing one of his illustrations of* 'Il Penseroso'.

I

HAYLEY, in his life of Milton, first published in 1794, wrote of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, 'it seems probable that these two enchanting pictures of rural life, and of the diversified delights arising from a contemplative mind, were composed at Horton'; and his conjecture has found almost unquestioned acceptance ever since. By their simplicity, their avoidance of politics and religious controversy, their descriptions of rural scenes, they have seemed to fit perfectly into the one period when Milton lived at a long stretch in the country. 'They represent him', wrote Mr John Bailey, 'in his simplest mood, the mood of the quiet years at Horton, spent, more than any other part of his life, in the open air, and among plain folk unlettered and unpolitical.' In these poems at least, people have felt, they can find a Milton who does not disturb them with the qualities they resent in the other poems, a Milton free from the ferocity of *Lycidas*, the heart-searchings of *Paradise Lost*, or the inhospitable bareness of *Paradise Regained*. It has even been possible to throw over them a Rousseauish glamour, to think of them as the reveries into which

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Milton fell as he ruminated down the lanes of Buckinghamshire. Pre-eminent in this fashion is the description in Masson's *Life of Milton*, a passage which deserves to be perpetuated as one of the curiosities of Victorian criticism:

> Look back, reader, and see him as I do! Now, under the elms on his father's lawn, he listens to the rural hum, and marks the branches as they wave, and the birds as they fly; now, in the garden, he notes the annual series of the plants and the daily blooming of the roses. In his walks in the neighbourhood, also, he observes not only the wayside vegetation, but the whole wide face of the landscape, rich in wood and meadow to the royal towers of Windsor and the bounding line of the low Surrey hills. Over this landscape, changing its livery from day to day, fall the varying seasons....And these seasons have each their occupations. Now the plough is afield; now the sower casts the seed; now the sheep are shorn; now the mower whets his scythe....In summer the twilight steals slowly over the lawn, and, seated at the open window, the poet, who has heard the lark's carol abroad by day, will listen, in the stillness, for the first song of the nightingale; and, when the night is farther advanced, may there not be a walk on the lawn, to observe the trembling tops of the poplars, and to drink, ere the soul is done with that day more, the solemnizing glory of the tranquil stars? Look on, thou glorious youth, at stars and trees, at the beauties of day and the beauties of night, at the changing aspects of the seasons, and at all that the seasons bring! No future years of thy life, perchance, will be so happy and calm as these; and a time comes, at all events, when what thine eye shall have already gathered of nature's facts and appearances must suffice thee for ever, and when, judging thy chambers of imagery sufficiently furnished, God will shut thee in!
>
> Not the scenery alone about Horton, but the little society of the village itself, becomes gradually known to

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More information

the scrivener's thoughtful son. As he saunters along the road, handsome and fair-haired, the field-labourers and servants touch their hats to him, and think him a little haughty....Every Sunday, he is one of the little congregation in Horton Church, when all Horton is gathered under his eye; and, as he sits in the pew with his father and mother, and listens to Mr Goodal's sermon, mayhap the presence of the young scholar and critic from Cambridge moves Mr Goodal to a more ingenious strain than need be, and secures for the parish their rector's very best.

I have quoted this as a curiosity and as an instance of how *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* have often been thought of; not to deride Masson's *Life of Milton*. To deride what is at once the best informed and the least informing of all the great literary biographies in English would indeed be easy enough. Masson with his patriarchal manner, his treacly sentiment, and his sabbatical Nonconformity is the very simplest game for modern sophistication. Nor can it be pleaded that he imparts, for all his six enormous volumes, the faintest glow of life to his picture of Milton: his mountain of facts is shapeless and incoherent. And yet Masson was a great man, and, though he has done Milton much harm, not unworthy to be his biographer. His enterprise in undertaking a work on so lavish a scale and his resolution in carrying it out with no abatement of energy and thoroughness to the last page have something of the heroic about them. He never spares himself, exploiting to the utmost every fragment of information that can have the slightest bearing on Milton's life, and in his lavishness throwing in much that cannot possibly have any. He reminds me of

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More information

nothing so much as of those great Victorian kitchen-ranges, which for all their lamentable waste of coal and heat did somehow succeed in warming the bath-water and loading the dining-table with something which however heavy was certainly food. The last word of any one who has picked up a few crumbs from the feast of Masson should be of gratitude and admiration.

Well, Masson or no Masson, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* have been very persistently associated with Horton; and superficially the resemblance between the themes of the poems and Milton's country life is plausible enough. But it does not go very deep. Milton had already spent vacations in the country; and there is no specific reference to Buckinghamshire.[1] And in actual fact, *was* Milton mainly occupied in his Horton days with loitering down the hedgerows? Apparently not, for it was at Horton that he settled down to the most concentrated spell of study he ever undertook. To realize Milton's state of mind there, it is necessary to read the prose composition written shortly before he left the University, the *Seventh Academic Exercise*; for it is here that he gives us his own ambitions and the scheme of universal knowledge which he has set himself to pursue. Written not long before he went to Horton, it looks forward, picturing the dominant state of his mind in the years that followed. His theme is the defence of Learning against Ignorance. He begins by

[1] Dr Mackail has said, 'There is nothing in the "scenery" of either poem which suggests Horton as a background, and nothing which is not easily related to Cambridge and its neighbourhood from the "wide-watered shore" of Ely to the "fallows grey" of the uplands and the "tufted trees" of Audley End.'

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saying that to be competent in the art of rhetoric—and there can be no mediocrity in rhetoric any more than in poetry—a man must 'acquire a thorough knowledge of all the arts and sciences to form a complete background to his own calling'. And he goes on to complain that his present task has broken in on the studious leisure to which he had settled down. As, in the body of his speech, he surveys the fields of knowledge, he grows intensely excited and betrays the ardour of his own ambitions. There is nothing to compare, he cries, with the joys of Learning:

> What a thing it is to grasp the nature of the whole firmament and of its stars, all the movements and changes of the atmosphere, whether it strikes terror into ignorant minds by the majestic roll of thunder or by fiery comets, or whether again it falls softly and gently in showers or dew; then perfectly to understand the shifting winds and all the exhalations and vapours which earth and sea give forth; next to know the hidden virtues of plants and metals and understand the nature and the feelings, if that may be, of every living creature; next the delicate structure of the human body and the art of keeping it in health; and, to crown all, the divine might and power of the soul, and any knowledge we may have gained concerning those beings which we call spirits and genii and daemons. There is an infinite number of subjects besides these, a great part of which might be learnt in less time than it would take to enumerate them all. So at length, gentlemen, when universal learning has once completed its cycle, the spirit of man, no longer confined within this dark prison-house, will reach out far and wide, till it fills the whole world and the space far beyond with the expansion of its divine greatness.

Then he goes on to praise geography and history, history which 'wrests from grudging Fate a kind of

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More information

retrospective immortality', and ends his survey with a hint of what rewards in private life the truly learned man may obtain:

> to be the oracle of many nations, to find one's house regarded as a kind of temple, to be a man whom kings and states invite to come to them, whom men from near and far flock to visit, while to others it is a matter for pride if they have but set eyes on him once. These are the rewards of study, these are the prizes which learning can and often does bestow upon her votaries in private life.

It was the pursuit of these ambitions which had been interrupted and to which at Horton Milton must have returned. Professor J. H. Hanford has shown from his analysis of Milton's notebook that at Horton he settled down, among other things, to a comprehensive study of world history from the original authorities, beginning from the beginning as he conceived it and proceeding in chronological sequence. The conventional picture of the seraphic young 'Lady of Christ's' with his auburn hair, gently admiring the view and yearning over the rustics, must give way to that of a man striving in a concentrated and delighted fury of study to compass the whole circle of human knowledge.

Of course, the more accurate picture of Milton at Horton does not prove that he did *not* write *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* there. It proves that it would not be surprising if he did not write them there. If he did write them there, they are to be considered πάρεργα, not expressing the experiences that mainly held his mind at the time. And such hitherto I have considered them: 'a delightful recreational interlude in the comprehensive studies undertaken at Horton'.

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I have, however, never been very happy in my mind about *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, I mean about where they come in Milton's poetic development. Nor indeed, for all their apparent simplicity, have I been able hitherto to guess what Milton was aiming at when he wrote them. Almost all Milton's early poems were composed for a special occasion, as if he needed some extrinsic persuasion to take him off his main business —even the lines *On Time* were 'set on a clock case': *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* suggest no occasion; without Horton they are in the air, isolated. I now believe there is evidence for relating them to Milton's university days, but before giving it for what it is worth, let me speak of the poems themselves, and of certain difficulties they present.

2

It has been shown that the supposed evidence for connecting the poems and Horton amounts to nothing: first because Milton's main preoccupations at Horton are *not* the main preoccupations of the poems, second because their rusticity would fit equally well with some vacation spent by Milton in the country. Indeed, within the poems there is no evidence for fixing a date: the passages of other authors which Milton undoubtedly imitates or refers to are all too early to affect the issue.[1] Against the poems' belonging to the Horton period is their absence from the Trinity Manuscript,

[1] Professor Grierson, in his introduction to the Florence edition of Milton's poems, cites an analogy with Shirley's masque *The Triumph of Peace*, dated 1634. The analogy seems to me too vague to signify greatly; and even if it did, Shirley might be copying Milton.

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Excerpt
More information

in which the undoubted Horton poems occur. It is an inconclusive piece of evidence but not negligible, and it has encouraged Professor Hanford acutely to conjecture that *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* belong to the very beginning of the Horton period or even 'go back to some vacation interval in Milton's university life'. And some years earlier Dr Mackail had made the same conjecture.[1]

And now, what of the poems themselves?

Hence loathed Melancholy
  Of *Cerberus*, and blackest midnight born,
In *Stygian* Cave forlorn
  'Mongst horrid shapes, and shreiks, and sights unholy,
Find out som uncouth cell,
  Where brooding darknes spreads his jealous wings,
And the night-Raven sings;
  There under *Ebon* shades, and low-brow'd Rocks,
As ragged as thy Locks,
  In dark *Cimmerian* desert ever dwell.

That is the opening of *L'Allegro*, and it is one of the most puzzling passages in the whole of Milton; what possessed him that he should write such bombast? By what strange anticipation did he fall into the manner of the worst kind of eighteenth-century ode? If Milton meant to be noble, he failed dreadfully. If, however, he knew what he was doing, he can only have meant to be funny. And if he meant to be funny, to what end? There is nothing in the rest of the poem that suggests humour—at least of the burlesque sort.

Here, then, at the outset, is a difficulty. But it is isolated, for there is no such obvious shock elsewhere

[1] *Springs of Helicon*, pp. 149–150.

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More information

in either *L'Allegro* or *Il Penseroso*. On the contrary, both poems present a superficial simplicity of structure, of thought, and of language. The structure is one of simple progressions and self-evident contrasts; far less intricate than that of *Lycidas* for instance. There is no thought that is not easily grasped at once. Apart from a couple of minor syntactical difficulties the language is extremely lucid. This does not mean that the poems are shallow. Take the couplet

> Hard by, a Cottage chimney smokes,
> From betwixt two aged Okes.

This is simple language, but as poetry the lines are not negligible. We all know that cottage, but the picture we each make is different from our neighbour's. And it is Milton who makes us make our picture. His outline compels us to fill in the detail. His means—and I doubt whether they can be called simple—are drastic economy of detail and musical suggestion. The heavy beat of the first line has nothing to do with the smoke; it suggests squatness and the quality of being solidly based, in the cottage. Statement and rhythm are doing different jobs of work. The rhythm of the second line rises a little at the end—the oaks are tall—and has something carelessly solid in it—the oaks know their own dignity. (I am well aware of the dangers of talking in this strain; I merely wish to say with some emphasis that the couplet has substance.)

On account of their simplicity the poems give a quick return for any effort expended on them, and hence have attracted a large number of readers. They are the most popular of all Milton's poems. Nor are

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More information

they the worse on this account. The virtue of good poems with a quick return is very great, in that they convey valuable experiences to those who lack the time or the intellect to grapple with the more difficult. The pity is that there are so few of them, compared with the bad simple poems that produce a swift harvest of fraud.

The mood of the poems is one of an even serenity; not one of the ecstatic serenity that can follow the assuaging of a mental upheaval. They are the work of a young man free for the time from the growing-pains and fevers of youth. We like *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* as we like people when they are happy and tolerant; when they stimulate without exacting too much, do not disturb us by wanting sympathy or by springing fresh notions on us, and are content to enjoy the present. And this analogy easily leads to another quality, best explained in terms of what Dr I. A. Richards in his *Practical Criticism* has called *tone*:

> The speaker has ordinarily an attitude to his listener. He chooses and arranges his words differently as his audience varies, in automatic or deliberate recognition of his relations to them. The tone of his utterance reflects his awareness of this relation, his sense of how he stands towards those he is addressing....Tone, as a distinct character in a poem, is less easy to discuss than the others, and its importance may easily be overlooked. Yet poetry, which has no other very remarkable qualities, may sometimes take very high rank simply because the poet's attitude to his listeners—in view of what he has to say—is so perfect. Gray and Dryden are notable examples. Gray's *Elegy*, indeed, might stand as a supreme instance to show how powerful an exquisitely adjusted tone may

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