

UNDERGRADUATE DISPARAGEMENT OF MILTON

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THE Second World War, which has challenged so much hitherto accepted as axiomatic, has still further weakened "the humanities" in most North American universities. A trend away from the purely cultural subjects to the sciences—above all to the social and the applied sciences—should arouse the gravest concern. The prospect of a rising generation of cultural Melchizedeks, indifferent to the wisdom and grace of living of the past, is a stark reality that must be apparent to all. True, we have been engaged in meeting an immediate threat to our life and liberty, and one may be criticized for writing about a subject that is purely literary. But if we are to adopt the long view, we must look forward to the years of reconstruction and it is not out of place, surely, to discuss how we may best pass on to posterity our great inheritance from the past.

I choose the problem of teaching Milton, not merely because Milton is a favourite poet of mine and one whom I have been teaching for years, but because he may be taken as symbolic of the past. He lived in the seventeenth century, and is highly typical of that age. But he was one of the most assimilative poets who ever lived, and he embodied not only the Renaissance, which had preceded him by a century or two, but also most that was best in the Greek and Hebraic traditions. He was first of all a poet, but was unique in that he combined in his works his own deep experience of life with the tradition and culture of the past. Hailed as a great poet in his time, he has retained his place as one of the most distinguished of European poets. Like Shakespeare he has been variously regarded, as each century seems to subject him to re-interpretation. Because his longest and greatest poems dealt with religious themes, he was for a while uncritically idolized for his orthodox theology. The eighteenth century modelled its poetic diction, and what little blank verse it wrote, on *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Precursors of romanticism in England overlooked the school of Pope and reverted to Milton, whose early poems they strove to imitate. Romanticism *plus* evangelical piety *plus* Dr. Masson, the diligent and worthy biographer of Milton, kept his laurels green all through the nineteenth century. But in the twentieth some divergence has arisen among critics

as to his exact merits and his true status in English literature.

Criticism is in the melting-pot at the moment. We have strange and disquieting trends, which a curiously perverse type of art criticism is trying to "sell" to the world. At the same time strange things have been happening to our poetry, which, while divesting itself of rhyme, is found to be largely devoid of reason as well. The literary critic is in a difficult dilemma, for if he adopts an intransigent attitude to contemporary literature, he is likely to be termed a pedant or a traditionalist. It is not surprising that Milton, whose style was traditionalist and classical, should have been subjected to derogatory comment by a few vocal and over-estimated men of letters. One or two contemporary writers would like to remove him from his exalted pedestal and elevate Donne or Dryden in his place. These rash critics have been dealt with in a trenchant little volume by Logan Pearsall Smith called *Milton and His Modern Critics*. One gathers that Milton's reputation for great poetry will survive the recent detraction. When the Church of St. Giles, Cripplegate, where he is buried, was blasted by the German bombardment a few years ago, the bust of the poet is said to have been slightly jarred, but to have remained in its place! The event, if true, is likely to be symbolical.

Milton, then, has been regarded as a great poet, but for various reasons. And it is certainly beyond question that we in this day and generation are likely to interpret him in our own way. Already the century has produced a respectable body of Miltonic criticism which aims not at denigration but at elucidation. The names of Sir Walter Raleigh, Denis Saurat, Dr. Tillyard and Sir Herbert Grierson are perhaps outstanding. The criticism of these men has one thing in common: it emphasizes the debt that Milton owed, in the development of his art, to the Renaissance tradition. We had so accustomed ourselves to applying the word *Puritan* to him that we had forgotten what the Puritans were and how hard it would have been for Milton to be a great poet if he had been a Puritan and nothing else. The word, now become obnoxious and distorted from its original meaning, hardly suits the man as artist, the greatest of all masters of English verse on its technical side.

Milton as poet inherited a tradition, through Edmund Spenser (his "original") and other predecessors among the Elizabethan and Jacobean poets. His poetic art springs naturally and normally from the past, and nothing is more fascinating

than to study the gradual development of his genius. He was not a precocious poet: he did not lisp in numbers as a child. He was intellectually keen, it is true, and a hard student from childhood, but the development of his genius was gradual and partly self-conscious. He schooled himself in such models as Ovid (chastened, perhaps, but still Ovid) and the Elizabethans. His early poems remind one of the immature works of a great composer which still show the impress of his models. Like Beethoven, Milton had his Mozart and his Haydn to guide and inspire him.

The poems of Milton's early manhood, although in a sense immature, would alone have sufficed to make him famous. Such perfect things as *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Comus* and *Lycidas* would never be allowed to perish unless our whole scale of literary values were completely abandoned. The sonnets, mostly written in the middle and politically-active part of Milton's life—there are less than a score of them—include some of the greatest in the language. His prose works of this period are among the most important and significant of the time, although in style they do not always appeal to our modern taste. *Paradise Lost* is the one great epic poem in the language, conceived and written in the grand style and concerned with an exalted theme. *Paradise Regained*, less great and not exactly an epic, is nevertheless worthy to keep its place among the poems of Milton's maturity. *Samson Agonistes* closes the canon of his poems with a sublime outpouring of personal emotion under the guise of a Greek drama.

I.

This then is Milton as he appears to the instructor of the present day. And what of the twentieth century student, who, we may suppose, is sojourning in a University and taking various courses in English? Will he be attracted to the one great classical poet in English literature? Or will he find all manner of excuses to study some other subject?

My own experience is derived from a western University, but I have more than a suspicion that Milton is regarded everywhere as an unpopular author. Several reasons may be given for this, each in itself sufficient to render any class in the poet "fit audience, though few". From one end of the country to the other there is the same complaint about the immaturity of our students when they come to the University. The body of

general information which a young man or girl acquired somehow in the old days in passing through the primary and secondary schools seems to be missing in the present generation. Causes of this vacuum are too diverse and complex to enter into here, but the fact remains that our students enter the University with the haziest of ideas about ancient history and literature. They contrive to forget with surprising rapidity whatever has been taught them about these subjects. Mischief has been done, even, if the attempt has been made to teach them a few of the shorter poems of Milton in the secondary schools.

*But come thou goddess fair and free
In heaven yclept Euphrosyne . . .*

The teeth of the immature are set on edge by classical allusions which are difficult to understand, and a bias is immediately formed against Milton which may lead to his permanent neglect. Unless affairs mend very radically, he had better be excluded from all junior text-books.

If our students dislike the classical and mythological elements in Milton, which he absorbed as his direct heritage from the Renaissance, the trouble caused by the poet's theology, whether patristic, Calvinistic or Arminian, is equally great. So long regarded as a sacred poet, he attracts a certain type of earnest student who expects to employ poetry as an adjunct to the Holy Scriptures. In the pre-Darwinian era, when people were blissfully ignorant of the theory of evolution, there was no reason to quarrel with the theological background of *Paradise Lost*. The poem could then be regarded as sacred in a way in which it can scarcely be regarded now. It has been pointed out by a recent critic that the comprehension of the great epic is difficult at the moment, for we have not yet quite arrived at the point where we can totally disregard its theology, or look at it in the same dispassionate way in which we regard the theology of the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*. Canada has been referred to as the last stronghold of Puritanism, and Calvinism and Aestheticism are like oil and water—they do not mix. To teach *Paradise Lost* as a poem pure and simple is to invite the wrath of a powerful section of the community, and there is no escape from the odium in high places or in humble that the unfortunate instructor is certain to incur. *Experto crede*. Even if an attempt is made to deal systematically with the theology, sectarian dif-

ferences in the student body and the *trop de zèle* attitude of the young theologian are likely to be an ever-recurring snare and pitfall for the teacher.

Teaching Milton is difficult and somewhat dangerous. The instructor who desires popularity and large classes would do well to avoid having anything to do with the literature of the mid-seventeenth century, and with Milton in particular. But there are some who enjoy living dangerously, and who do not covet unduly a popularity with the student body. To them the interpretation of Milton may be a matter of enthralling interest, all the more so because the students in the class are few in number and interested in their work.

The effective teaching of any author earlier than the nineteenth century for that matter is becoming more and more difficult as the years go by. An honours student who specializes in one or two closely related subjects is put through his paces and made to study the early literature. But the typical student, left to pick and choose as he likes, shies away from Chaucer, Milton and the Elizabethans, and prefers late nineteenth century or contemporary authors. One should not be too hard on our students. They suffer from the temper of the time, and, not having been trained in habits of reflection, prefer to study what is immediately akin to their own minds. But Oscar Wilde, Samuel Butler, G. B. Shaw, Wells and Aldous Huxley can be read by any adult person of intelligence. Whether the name person is ever likely to grapple with the difficulties of Chaucer, Milton and Shakespeare's contemporaries, alone and unassisted, is highly open to doubt. There is in most cases a permanent loss to those who must go through life ignorant of some of the very greatest masters of English literature.

II.

I think the situation is not by any means desperate, and that means not involving coercion could be found to induce students to study the older poets. Chaucer, certainly, once a few not very difficult rules of grammar and pronunciation are mastered, is full of interest for the average student of to-day. I was once told sardonically by a colleague that students repelled by the subject-matter of Milton were more inclined to like the earthy poetry of Chaucer for the simple reason that they had bodies. This provoked a few comments on my part about the

respective spirituality and earthiness of the two poets under discussion.

Milton *can* be made interesting, but he may be made boring if one is not careful. In spite of a number of new methods of poetic criticism, some based on psychology and some not, I still hold to the old idea, that to vivify the life-work of a poet you must first know something of the age that produced him and a great deal about the poet himself. I do not believe that you can study poetry *in vacuo*, without reference to the forces that gave rise to it. Still less do I believe that the poetic art should be made a sub-branch of the science of psychology, or that it should be butchered to make a philosopher's holiday. The emphasis should be placed on the author, and then the effort made to explain and interpret by every means possible—historic, biographical, sociological and aesthetic—the worth of the poetry itself.

People are interested, normally, in one another. It is easy to awaken a human interest on the student's part if one is dealing with a man of such a complex nature as John Milton. To forestall the inevitable criticism that I am advocating the study of biography instead of literature, I wish to say that the presentation of the author's life must be subordinate and a means to an end—the correct understanding of his works. On the other hand, the presentation of the life of the author must be skilfully done. Slipshod work here may be fatal to the whole course. Above all, the life of the poet must be related to his works in such a way that the law of cause and effect is clearly shown.

Milton lived in one of the most interesting periods of modern history. Born while Shakespeare was still living, he spent his early manhood in the twilight of the Renaissance. His maturity was hectic not only personally, but because he chose to throw in his lot with the parliamentary party and to become the official apologist of the regicides who had executed Charles the First. Smitten by blindness, and with his political and religious aspirations shattered in the dust, he turned once more to poetry—indeed he had never completely abandoned it—and composed his last, greatest, and most majestic works.

What was the Renaissance, and what potent influence did it exercise upon the nascent poetic art of the young John Milton? The instructor would do well to review the origins of this vast movement which ushered in modern civilization. One cannot count on the student coming to one's class with any coherent idea

of the Renaissance, still less an understanding of how it made itself felt on Milton through his education and his literary models. Since many of Milton's poems deal with religious themes and the theological views of the poet, some time must be devoted to the Reformation, and it is here that the instructor is likely to encounter bitter criticism no matter what his view may be. The early life of Milton, his cultivated and devoted parents, his friendship with Charles Diodati, his Cambridge years, his sojourn at Horton and his journey to Italy where he won golden opinions from people of alien race and religion, offer intrinsic interest to the student and have a direct bearing on the poetry of Milton.

One could easily yield to the temptation of making the person or the poet a primary object of study, were it not for the poems themselves. These must be examined carefully, and duly related to the life and character of the artist. Perhaps no poet calls for such careful study of the text as does Milton. It is not merely that even the earliest of the poems abound in recondite allusions to classical mythology and literature, but they often reflect so closely the spirit of antiquity that much time must be devoted to making their real meaning clear. Miss Rose Macaulay has cleverly pointed out that Milton is the least typically English of all our great poets. He writes as a European in the main tradition of humanistic culture, rather than as a citizen of any particular country. Hence to the insular or provincial mind he is difficult. To the modern youth it seems amazing that the lore of classical antiquity should have meant so much to Milton—as it had meant so much to all the great figures of the Renaissance. What the Revival of Learning and classical culture really were must be dinned into the mind of the Miltonic student, or he will be at a loss to know why the pagan deities jostle the Christian saints in the *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity* and *Lycidas*, and why Milton used as his models so many Latin and Greek poets.

The vast erudition of even the young Milton is so intrinsically a part of his poetry that it cannot be "by-passed" or ignored. On the other hand, undue emphasis on this feature will convert the study of the poems into drudgery and blast the interest of the student. Milton is not an easy poet. But what treasures there are for the really earnest enquirer! The fresh and spontaneous beauty of *L'Allegro*, matched by the more serious tone of *Il Penseroso*; the majestic stanzas of the *Ode*,

which foreshadow the stately measures of the great poems of Milton's last period; *Comus*, the finest mask in the language, in which Milton outrivalled his old master Ben Jonson, and *Lycidas*, "the high-water mark of English poesy"—had we not *Paradise Lost*, we would be supremely grateful for these poems alone.

Some idea of the importance which *Lycidas*, for example, may hold in a course in Milton can be gathered from the fact that I have found it necessary to devote five full lecture periods to that one poem alone. No mere superficial analysis will suffice for this stately elegy, the greatest for all its brevity in the language, containing in precipitation as it does all the elegiac poetry of classical antiquity and yet charged with personal emotion as well. How much material there is for comment in its complicated, beautifully cadenced rhythms, rich and suggestive imagery and faultless diction! Better strike from the course half a dozen second-rate poets than neglect to do full justice to a poem so full of concentrated beauty and power as *Lycidas*.

I am not concerned here to take issue with those that find the early poetry of Milton immature and *Lycidas* over-complicated and baroque. There is no disputing about tastes, and those who admire Wordsworthian simplicity may be permitted to disparage Milton, although to Wordsworth himself Milton was a hero whom he invoked in one of his greatest sonnets. It seems to me possible to admire the complexity of Milton and the simplicity of Wordsworth, just as it is possible to admire the paintings of two artists of entirely different schools. The essential thing is to judge the artistic work according to the canons of its own particular type. The world of pictorial art, as well as the world of poetry, would be infinitely the poorer if the zealots—the insane admirers and detractors—had been listened to and obeyed.

It is perhaps in the study of Milton's sonnets, so few and yet so precious, that the direct reflection of the poet's character is most immediately seen. For these brief poems reflect the Milton of the pamphleteering period, and are highly personal in tone. It is to Milton that we owe the re-establishment of the Petrarchan form of sonnet, which has been, since his day, the favourite among English poets, as it lends itself to more concentrated effects than the looser form used by Shakespeare. Milton's sonnets have been edited several times, and there is a

wealth of illuminating data available. These poems, humanized by our knowledge of how they came to be written, gain in significance and interest. The sonnets should be considered in relation to the prose works. Milton, like certain other great figures in literature, is variously estimated as a human being. Puritan, libertine, zealot, materialist, impractical idealist, hero—all these charges, complimentary and uncomplimentary, have been laid against him by more or less recent critics. Let the student, under the direction of his instructor, come to his own conclusion. The chances are, however, that he will not want to read a great many of Milton's treatises. His prose, while characterized by a certain massive grandeur, is not good prose judged by our present-day standards. The subject-matter is usually violently controversial, and is overloaded with citations and allusions. But it is grandly eloquent at times, and especially in the *Divorce Tractates* we see the spectacle of a powerful and sensitive individual baffling tragically against forces too great for him to overcome.

It is safe to say that at the moment no other English poem offers such a problem to the teacher as does *Paradise Lost*. Only the crudest of present-day critics deny the epic's greatness. But now that the aura of theological sanctity has departed, we must base our admiration for the poem on other grounds. We have also to reckon with the fact that Milton's conception of deity as a sort of oriental despot does not appeal to most modern minds, and that certain passages depicting the Almighty in His Heaven are definitely distasteful to the reader. The strength of the poem is not in its theology, for that became obsolete long ago, nor in its cosmological or mythological elements, which are likewise unsound. Milton is not a great philosopher, and *Paradise Lost* will hardly serve any longer as a manual of piety.

But *Paradise Lost* is a great epic poem, conceived on a magnificent scale and with complete mastery of architectonic skill. The character of Satan is of heroic proportions, and the style of the whole work charged with an incomparable majesty and grandeur. Moreover, the story from the human point of view is of dramatic interest, once we divest ourselves of the feeling that it is a divine revelation of truth.

Milton, who fought desperately against the principalities and powers of this world, without realizing what he was doing, lavished his best powers on depicting Satan and Hell. The first and second books of *Paradise Lost* are probably the finest, and

a great deal of the torment and turmoil of Milton's maturity has found its way into these passages of the work. Possibly a key to the superiority of Books I and II is seen in the fact that the long epic similes written in the manner of Homer and Vergil are spangled thick as stars towards the beginning, while in the subsequent books they become less frequent. The poem as a whole is a consistent unity, but the reader now will be tempted to skip certain dry didactic passages and a long paraphrase of the *Book of Genesis* found towards the end.

To me the distinguishing feature of *Paradise Lost*, the outstanding mark of its greatness, is the exalted and beautiful verse medium, a medium capable of infinite variation, from intricate and complicated to simple and direct. Treatises have been written on its prosody, but it is not merely a question of Milton's blank verse formulae; it is a question of his command of language and of imagery. Lord Macaulay has said that the verse acts as an incantation, and in one of his eloquent passages he dwells on the effect produced upon us by Milton's muster-rolls of names. The mastery of technique springs from a mind delicate and powerful at the same time, steeped in the knowledge of all good literature and characterized by reason and imagination in their highest flights. His verse reminds us of a great symphony, from which any harmony or nuance may be obtained at the will of the wielder of the baton.

Certain passages of *Paradise Lost* are of outstanding interest and must always be emphasized. The description of hell, the conference of the fallen angels in Pandemonium, the journey of Satan through chaos, the account of the Garden of Eden and the passages dealing with the Temptation are perhaps outstanding. It is surely idle to deny these portions of *Paradise Lost* the right of being considered supremely great poetry!

The characterization of the work, aside from Satan, is adequate. Adam, Eve and the friendly archangel Raphael are fairly vital figures who sustain our interest. The archangel performs a useful rôle in recounting much that had gone on in Heaven prior to the expulsion of the rebel host, and he discourses with Adam about the nature of the universe. It is here that Milton "hedges" about the cosmos. He was familiar with the heliocentric theory of the universe as enunciated by Copernicus, and he had even met Galileo, who proved Copernicus to be right, at Florence. Nevertheless his poem is conceived in relation to the old Ptolemaic universe which was being discarded right and

left by Milton's contemporaries. The story of the Temptation and the Fall would have been dramatically ineffective if understood with reference to the new theory of the universe. Hence Milton clung to the old system of astronomy that had been enunciated by Ptolemy.

Samson Agonistes has been described as an old man's poem, but I have never seen it fail to appeal to young and thoughtful minds. It is not the classical form of this play, still less its Hebraic theme, that makes it great, but the voice of one Milton uttering a long and poignant lament over the tragedy of his life and finally reconciling himself to the will of Providence. There are certain passages in this poem which lift it to the level of anything Milton ever wrote, and indeed to the level of anything of its kind ever written by the Greek tragedians.

III.

The present tragic age in which we live threatens to lay the axe at the root of our cultural tree. One can scarcely deny with any plausibility that decadence overtook most of the arts, not excluding poetry, in that strange interval between the two wars. And, as if to make matters worse, our manner of life was changing so fast that difficult problems assailed the educationist from every quarter. Are we facing the possibility of being swept, in Canada, from a pioneer age into a machine-dominated era, unblest with a sense of values and owing nothing to the cultural heritage of the past? Fears are being expressed that the age of liberal culture is dead, and that the future will be dominated by aeroplanes, plastics, the marvels of synthetic chemistry and a grossly materialistic outlook on life.

There may well be cause for alarm, and it is not too soon to take stock of the situation. The secularization of life, which has been a continual process since the Renaissance, has placed the onus of preserving the values of civilization on the laity, and especially on the educational and literary professions. It may be maintained that they are powerless against the trend of the time, but before abandoning ship it would be wise to see whether or not the craft can be salvaged.

Civilizations are not manufactured or created: they grow. And our civilization, still essentially European, has its roots in Greece, Rome and the Near East. Apart from our Hebraic heritage, which has perhaps been over-emphasized in the Anglo-

Saxon world, we are mostly indebted to Greece *via* the Renaissance for all that regulates our higher life. Respect for intellect, discrimination, the belief in an ordered universe and a sense of values, are a heritage from the civilized lands of the Mediterranean, as are the arts of painting, architecture, poetry and the drama. Painfully during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Christendom groped its way back to light after a barbaric interval of a thousand years. The advent of science during the succeeding centuries has introduced strange complications. Science is a technique that may make or break us all. It may be used to abolish want, pain and suffering, or it may make life on this planet well-nigh impossible. But one thing is certain, we cannot abandon our heritage from the past and trust to science to save us.

It is time to emphasize the old values again, and I do not see any other way of doing this than by laying stress on what is solid and permanent in the civilization of the past. If we fail to do this, we shall die of spiritual anemia, for our own age has not been very productive of great works in literature and art. We have to contend, in the English-speaking countries against a philistinism which actively opposes the life of the mind. There is a direct relationship between this state of militant nescience and a decadent Calvinism.

The civilization of the past speaks to us in its philosophy, its art and its literature. If there are successors to Shakespeare and Milton, they are mute and inglorious. The great dramatist still holds his appeal in a measure, but one wonders whether he was not more appreciated before the war in Yugoslavia than he was in some of the lands which speak the tongue that Shakespeare spoke. Matthew Arnold, in emphasizing the classical genius of Milton, gave the clue to his essential value to posterity. Greek and Latin poetry have almost ceased to be studied. A direct tie with ancient culture has been broken. But in Milton we have a man of our own race, who in the greatest of his poems embodies all that is best of the classical idea of full-rounded perfection, of imagination and emotion controlled by reason and a sense of form.